

Gender Is Essential to Some, But Not All, Individuals

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Abstract

I explore what I call the ‘working view’ of gender and essence: gender properties are essential to some, but not all, individuals. After discussing some benefits of the working view, I give an argument for it. As will become clear, the working view is quite attractive: it offers a way of reconciling (i) motivations for anti-essentialist views about gender, with (ii) numerous reports, provided by among the most marginalized members of society, that gender is essential to who they are.

1. Introduction

Many accounts of gender deny that gender properties are essential (Carby, 1987; Frye, 1996; Haslanger, 2000; Moi, 2002). Essentialist accounts of gender are problematic, since they have been used to marginalize and exclude. For example, they have been used to claim that individuals in certain societies—or individuals at certain points in history—do

not count as women, simply because those individuals do not possess the relevant essences (Butler, 2006). In denying that gender properties are essential, philosophical accounts of gender aim to avoid those problematic implications.

But many people report that they have their gender essentially. Many trans persons,¹ for example, report that gender is an essential part of who they are (Rubin, 2003). Accounts of gender that eschew essences altogether, therefore, conflict with the testimony of among the most marginalized members of society.

In this paper, I explore one possible way of reconciling these conflicting views. In Section 2, I formulate the ‘working view’ of gender and essence: gender properties are essential to some, but not all, individuals.² Then I clarify various aspects of the working view: for example, I explain that it only concerns the essences of particular individuals, not the essences of gender properties or kinds.³ In Section 3, I formulate an argument for the working view: the argument is based on a particular theory of individuals’ reports about their own gender. Finally, in Section 4, I respond to some objections.

2. The Working View

The working view of gender and essence is as follows.

The Working View

Gender properties are essential to some, but not all, individuals.

¹ In this paper, the use of the term ‘trans’ follows the usage described in (Bettcher, 2017). It is a functional placeholder for many different terms that might be used instead: trans*, transgender, and so on.

² I call it the ‘working view’ because I take it to be provisional, and subject to further refinement (or abandonment) in light of any unforeseen, negative implications.

³ In this paper, I tend to focus on gender properties rather than gender kinds. And I remain neutral on the issue of whether properties are kinds or not. All the claims that I make about gender properties, however, apply to gender kinds as well.

For the purposes of this paper, ‘individual’ means ‘person’: individuals, that is, are just people. So the working view implies that some people have their genders essentially, and other people do not.

For example, according to the working view, some individuals are essentially women. Being a woman is part of these individuals’ essence, part of their core identity,⁴ part of who they most deeply are. But this is not so for everyone. For according to the working view, some individuals are women, but not essentially. Being a woman is not part of such an individual’s essence: being a woman is not part of their core identity, not part of who they most deeply are.

The working view has analogous implications for all other gender properties. For instance, the working view has the same implications for the property of being a man. According to the working view, some individuals are essentially men, and some individuals are men but not essentially. And the working view has the same implications for the property of being bigender, the property of being agender, the property of being genderfluid, the property of being genderqueer, and so on.

The working view invokes essences, and essences might seem mysterious or obscure. But they are not: essences, for present purposes, are just privileged collections of facts.⁵ For any individual *i*, there is some privileged collection of facts that comprises the essence

⁴ Throughout this paper, I use phrases like “Having gender *G* is essential to individual *i*’s identity” and “Having gender *G* is essential to individual *i*” interchangeably. That is, my claims about a person’s identity *just are* claims about that very person. Of course, there may be another notion of identity—call some such notion ‘identity*’—such that claims about a person are different from claims about that person’s identity*. Those are not the notions of identity with which I am concerned here, however.

⁵ For more on how essences can be used to account for various aspects of social reality, such as the mind-dependence of social kinds, see (Mason, forthcoming). For more on social essences in general, see (Raven, forthcoming).

of *i*. Some facts about *i* belong to that collection: those facts are part of *i*'s essence. Other facts about *i* do not: those facts are not part of *i*'s essence.

For the purposes of this paper, I take essence to be primitive. I do not analyze essence in terms of necessity, or grounding, or identity over time, or anything else. But this is not a strike against the working view. All theories must posit primitives somewhere or other, and essences are perfectly reasonable primitives to posit. For essences are quite intuitive. The most intuitive explication of essence, I think, goes like this: the essence of a thing is the collection of facts which jointly characterize what it is to be that thing. The essence of a thing is the collection of facts which make that thing the very thing that it is. For instance, suppose that individual *i* has gender *G* essentially. Then the fact “*i* has *G*” is part of what makes *i* who they are. *G* is singularly, deeply, constitutively, fundamentally, part of who *i* is. That is the sense in which facts in an individual's essence are privileged: those facts are privileged insofar as they *make* for that individual.

The working view is compatible with standard accounts of the metaphysics of essence. For instance, it is compatible with Fine's account (1995; 2015). To see how, let *p* and *q* be two different individuals. Then the working view implies facts like the following, which Fine's account can be used to formalize.⁶

- (1) It is part of the essence of individual *p* that *p* is a woman.
- (2) Individual *q* is a woman, but this is not part of the essence of *q*.

⁶ To see exactly how, let 'W' represent the property of being a woman. Following Fine, for each individual *x* and each sentence *s*, let ' $\Box_x s$ ' be a formal regimentation of the following: it is part of the essence of *x* that *s*. Then the two facts implied by the working view can be formalized like this: (1) $\Box_p Wp$; (2) $Wq \ \& \ \sim \Box_q Wq$. Note that as Fine's formalism makes clear, (1) and (2) express facts about the essences of *individuals* rather than properties. That is what the subscript '*p*', in ' \Box_p ', represents; and similarly for the subscript '*q*' in ' \Box_q '. The subscript specifies the item whose essence is being described. Since individuals—not properties—are in the subscripts of the expressions in (1) and (2), it follows that (1) and (2) express facts about individuals' essences rather than properties' essences.

The first line says that the fact “p is a woman” belongs to the privileged collection of facts that comprises the essence of p. The second line says that the fact “q is a woman” does not belong to the privileged collection of facts that comprises q’s essence.

Note that the working view only has implications for the essences of *some particular individuals*; it does not have implications for the essences of gender *properties*, or the essences of gender *kinds*, or the essences of various *groups* of individuals. In other words, the working view only endorses what Witt calls ‘individual essentialism’ (2011, pp. 5–6). According to individual essentialism about an individual i and a property F, F is part of what makes i the individual that they are. That is what line (1) says: being a woman is part of what it is to be p. But the working view does *not* endorse what Witt calls ‘kind essentialism’ (2011, p. 5). According to Witt’s formulation of kind essentialism about a kind K, there is some property F such that F essentially determines membership in K: in other words, part of the essence of K is that its members have property F. The working view says nothing whatsoever about essences like these: it is perfectly compatible with the view that there is no essence of the kind ‘womanhood’, for example.⁷

The working view does not assume any particular account of what gender properties are. So the working view is compatible with, for example, many different accounts of what it is to be a woman.⁸ It is compatible with one reading of the conditions proposed by Haslanger: roughly, S is a woman just in case S is systematically subordinated on the basis of having, or being perceived to have, bodily features which are evidence of a female’s

⁷ The connection between individual essences and kind essences—or really, the lack of a connection—is discussed in more detail in Section 4.

⁸ Some accounts of gender properties contradict the working view. For instance, take Byrne’s account: S is a woman just in case S is an adult human female (2020, p. 2). Byrne’s account is inconsistent with the working view—or at least, the version of the working view with which I am concerned here—because Byrne’s account contradicts the reports of many trans persons. For lack of space, in this paper, I cannot respond to Byrne’s account. For one response, see (Dembroff, forthcoming).

biological role in reproduction (2000, p. 42).⁹ The working view is compatible with the account of gender properties offered by Bettcher: a person can be a woman even if they are not taken to have the sorts of bodily features invoked in Haslanger’s account (2017, p. 127). And the working view is compatible with the account of gender offered by Jenkins: roughly, S has the gender identity of being a woman just in case S has an internal ‘map’ formed to help those classed as women, by helping them navigate the social and material world (2016, p. 410).¹⁰

The working view respects the gender reports of trans persons. Many trans individuals report that their gender is part of their essence, a core part of their identity, part of their deepest selves. For examples, see the quotes below.

- “[The gender presentation of transgender people] is ... an expression of a deep, essential truth” (Stryker, 2006, p. 9).
- “[Gender] is the essentialness of oneself, the psyche, the fragment of unity” (Morris, 1974/2002, p. 20). Morris goes on to write “I had no doubt at all as to [whether being a woman] was my essential self” (1974/2002, p. 43).
- Green quotes his friend Blake as reporting that “I still experience my family’s interpretation [of my gender] as a failure to grasp my essential maleness” (2004, p. 71).

⁹ Note that a gender property may be socially constructed, and yet still be part of a person’s essence. In general, socially constructed properties can feature in the essences of objects: it may be part of the essence of a university U, for instance, that U has the social property of being an educational institution. Similarly for gender properties: gender may be social, and yet still feature in the essence of an individual.

¹⁰ The working view is also neutral with respect to the difference, whatever it might be, between gender and gender identity. In this paper, I generally write in terms of gender properties rather than gender identity properties: for instance, I write things like “This individual has gender G” rather than “This individual has gender identity G.” But nothing hangs on that. The working view could be formulated in terms of gender identity rather than gender. So the reader is welcome to adopt their own preferred account of the distinction between gender and gender identity, and to formulate the working view in terms of whichever of those two—gender or gender identity—they prefer.

- Green quotes his former partner, Samantha, as accurately reporting that she has “known all along that [Green] is essentially a man” (2004, p. 139). And in later work, Green writes that “[a]cademics are afraid of being called essentialists, but I am not afraid of saying that as an artist and as a human being I am motivated to express both the core and essence of my being-ness” (2006, p. 506).
- “I was blindsided by the full realization that I’m transgender ... Finally summoning the courage to act on the essential truth about myself was a deep, dark, and often ugly struggle” (Bono, 2011, p. 6).¹¹

According to the working view, all these reports are straightforwardly, literally, unambiguously true. The people making these reports have their genders essentially.

It is worth briefly comparing the working view to Witt’s account of gender and essence. According to Witt, gender is unessential to all social individuals. Social individuals are different from persons: unlike persons, social individuals are differentiated from one another by the different social positions which they occupy (Witt, 2011, p. 52). And by ‘unessential’, Witt means that gender is what makes a unified social individual out of those otherwise diverse, disunified collections of social positions (2011, p. 18). Without gender, those collections of social positions are like jumbled heaps. With gender, those collections of social positions become organized, coherent, unified entities: namely, social individuals.

The working view differs from Witt’s account in at least two significant ways. First, according to the working view, gender is essential to persons rather than social individuals.

The term ‘individuals’, as I am using it here, refers to people; Witt’s term ‘social

¹¹ For more reports along these lines, see the range of identifications discussed in (Bettcher, 2017) and (Stone, 1992), or the deeply powerful, personal testimonies of interviewees in (Rubin, 2003).

individuals' does not. Second, while Witt's account implies that all individuals of a certain kind—namely, the kind of social individuals—have their genders essentially, the working view has no such implication. The working view only endorses claims about the essences of particular, specific individuals: it makes no claims about the essences of all individuals of any one kind.

I take this to be a significant attraction of the working view. It can be morally risky to make generalizations about the gender essences, or lack of gender essences, of all individuals of any one kind. Such generalizations often prove harmful: they are used to dismiss the gender identities of trans persons, for instance, and to justify transphobic politics. All in all, it is better for theories of gender and essence to avoid implying that all members of a particular group do, or do not, have their gender essentially. The working view avoids that implication: it provides a framework for theorizing about the gender essences of particular individuals only, and not about the gender essences of all individuals in any one group.

Before moving on, it is worth addressing a general worry about using philosophical accounts of essence to capture gender reports. One might think that philosophical accounts of essence are designed to do things—characterize modality, describe asymmetric dependence, and so on—which are irrelevant for the purposes of capturing the reports of people who claim that their gender is, or is not, essential to who they are. Moreover, one might worry that philosophical accounts of essence impose problematic constraints on the gender essences that certain individuals can or cannot have. Those accounts might be too rigid—they might come with too much theoretical baggage—to accommodate the many ways that people describe the relationship between their essence and their gender.

These may indeed be worries, I think, for other approaches to gender and essence. But they are not worries for the working view. Some philosophical accounts of essence place constraints on which individuals can have gender essences. For instance, Witt's account implies that all individuals of a particular sort must have their genders essentially. But other philosophical accounts of essence do not endorse any such constraints: for instance, the account due to Fine (1995; 2015). These accounts—which take essence to be primitive—posit no connection whatsoever between facts about the gender essences of one person and facts about the gender essences of another person.¹² So these accounts allow gender to be essential to some, but not all, individuals; and so the sort of essence invoked in the working view can be understood along the lines of these accounts. Of course, these accounts were designed for other purposes: characterizing modality, describing asymmetric dependence, and so on. But they can still be used to capture people's gender reports. These accounts are not too rigid for that. In fact, because they do not make any claims about the gender essences of individuals or the essences of gender properties, these accounts are extremely—and appropriately—flexible. So they do accommodate a diverse range of different ways in which a person's gender might relate to their essence.

There is another response to the general worry: for the purposes of defending the working view, all this is somewhat beside the point. The working view is not committed to any particular philosophical account of the metaphysics of essence. In fact, I think of the working view as a *desideratum* for those accounts: philosophical accounts of essence ought to allow for the fact that some individuals—but not all individuals—have their

¹² Similarly, these accounts have no implications for whether gender properties have essences or not. These accounts are perfectly compatible with gender properties having essences, and these accounts are perfectly compatible with gender properties lacking essences.

genders essentially. If one account of essence allows for that fact and another does not, then that is a point in favor of the former. So think of the working view as a *constraint* on philosophical theorizing, not a philosophical theory of what essence is: theories of essence ought to be compatible with the working view.

3. The Testimony Argument

In this section, I present and defend the following argument for the working view; call it the ‘testimony argument’.

P1. Many individuals report that their gender is essential to who they are.

P2. Many individuals report that their gender is not essential to who they are.

P3. For any individual *i* and gender *G*, we ought to accept *i*’s report regarding whether *G* is essential to *i*.¹³

C. Therefore, we ought to subscribe to the working view: we ought to endorse the view that gender properties are essential to some, but not all, individuals.

Of course, the conclusion C follows from premises P1, P2, and P3. So to complete the testimony argument, it suffices to establish the premises. The arguments for the first two premises are straightforward: there are many examples of individuals who report that gender is essential to who they are, and there are many examples of individuals who report that gender is not essential to who they are. The third premise is, by far, the most controversial of the three. So I offer three separate arguments in its favor: one concerns

¹³ This assumes that *i* is in their usual, uncompromised epistemic state: *i* is not brainwashed, *i* is not under the influence of a mad scientist, and so on. In other words, this assumes that *i* is in the sort of state that pretty much everybody has been in, when they have discussed whether or not their gender is part of their essence.

first-person perspectives, another concerns the relationship between ‘data’ about gender and gender theories, and another concerns the irrationality of denying gender reports.

To start, consider the following two sources of support for P1. First, there is a general tendency among non-philosophers to think that their gender is an essential part of who they are. Many non-philosophers report that if they were a different gender, then they would be a different individual (Witt, 2011, p. xi).

Second, as mentioned earlier, many trans persons report that their gender is essential to who they are. Gender is a core part of their deepest selves. So many people affirm that gender is part of their essence.

One might object that when people make these claims, they are not talking about the philosophical notion of essence. When non-philosophers and trans persons claim that their gender is part of their essence, they do not mean ‘essence’ in the technical philosophical sense of the term. So P1 is false: though many individuals say things like “my gender is part of my essence”, their term ‘essence’ does not mean what the working view takes it to mean.

For at least two reasons, this is implausible. First, and most problematically, this objection seems like a roundabout way of denying the testimonies of many trans persons. A number of trans persons have said, repeatedly, that their gender is singularly, deeply, constitutively, fundamentally—in a word, *essentially*—part of who they are. The philosophical notion of essence does a perfectly good job of capturing the content of those

reports.¹⁴ So this objection, by not taking the testimonies of trans persons seriously, risks promoting a transphobic attitude towards the reports of trans persons.

Second, even setting all that aside, this objection is not very compelling. Technical philosophical notions are frequently used to capture non-technical notions. Of course, there may be differences between a technical notion and its non-technical counterpart. But those differences need not render the technical notion inapplicable, ineffective, or in some way inappropriate for use in theorizing about the non-technical notion.

For example, the technical philosophical term ‘believes’ is frequently used when describing the belief reports of non-philosophers. Of course, there are differences between technical and non-technical uses of ‘believes’. But in a large range of cases, the technical philosophical term ‘belief’ still does a good job of describing the non-technical notion of belief. In fact, when formulating theories of belief, philosophers often appeal to the non-technical notion of belief—as it appears in non-philosophers’ belief reports—as a guide. So we should expect philosophical theories of belief to do a reasonably good job of capturing non-philosophers’ belief reports.

Similarly for essence. The technical philosophical term ‘essence’ is frequently used when describing the essence reports of non-philosophers. Of course, there are differences between technical and non-technical uses of ‘essence’. But in a large range of cases, the technical philosophical term ‘essence’ still does a good job of describing the non-technical notion of essence. In fact, when formulating theories of essence, philosophers often appeal to the non-technical notion of essence—as it appears in non-philosophers’ reports—as a

¹⁴ To be clear: my claim is not that the philosophical notion of essence *always* does a perfectly good job of capturing the content of those reports. My claim is that the philosophical notion of essence *sometimes* does a perfectly good job of capturing the content of those reports. And that seems clearly right: for instance, see the range of reports discussed in Section 2.

guide. So we should expect philosophical theories of essence to do a reasonably good job of capturing non-philosophers' essence reports.

There is lots of support for P2 as well. One source of support comes from the feminist literature. Consider, for example, Beauvoir's famous remark that "[o]ne is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (1949/2011, p. 330). On one reading, in this passage, Beauvoir denies that her gender is part of her essence.

More generally, there are lots of arguments against essentializing gender (Alcoff, 1988; Butler, 2006; Spelman, 1988).¹⁵ Proponents of those arguments usually deny having gender as an essential feature, as that is the conclusion to which their arguments lead. Anyone who denies that gender is an essential property of individuals in general, in other words, might well also deny that they have their own gender essentially. So these individuals generally report that gender is not essential to who they are.

Now for the crucial premise: P3. This premise is supported by three separate arguments. The first concerns a special kind of first-person access that individuals have to facts about their own gender; call this the 'first-person argument' for P3. The second concerns the relationship between data about gender essence and theories about gender essence; call this the 'data-theoretic argument' for P3. The third concerns the practical rationality of accepting, and the practical irrationality of rejecting, individuals' reports about their own gender; call this the 'practical rationality argument' for P3.

The first-person argument is based on the following 'first-person' view: every individual has special, privileged, first-person access to whether or not gender is an essential part of who they are. No one has that kind of first-person access to the gender

¹⁵ For other endorsements of broadly anti-essentialist approaches, see (Frye, 2011), (Haslanger, 2000), (hooks, 2015), and (Stoljar, 1995).

essence, or lack of gender essence, of others. So if individual *i* reports that their gender is, or is not, essential to who they are, then everyone else should take their word for it. For *i* has a kind of access to that essential state which all others lack.

The first-person view is completely silent with respect to whether individuals have special, privileged, first-person access to other properties which figure—or do not figure—in their essence. For instance, consider the property of being a professor. Plausibly, professors do not have special, privileged, first-person access to whether or not the property of being a professor is an essential part of who they are. There are many reasons to think this, but for starters, here is a simple one: pretty much nobody claims that they are essentially a professor; at least, not in the sense of ‘essence’ which is relevant here.¹⁶ In other words, though many individuals claim to be a particular gender essentially, it is just not the case that many individuals claim to be professors essentially. As a matter of fact, people do not make those sorts of essence claims about their professorial status. The first-person view—which is only a view about gender properties, and not a view about other properties—is perfectly compatible with that.

Nevertheless, one might wonder why individuals (i) have first-person access to essence facts concerning their gender, but (ii) lack first-person access to essence facts concerning other properties which they might have. For instance, why accept that individuals have special, privileged, first-person access to whether or not they have their gender essentially, but reject that those same individuals have special, privileged, first-person access to whether or not they have other properties—like the property of being a

¹⁶ To be clear: I am not claiming that no one has ever said something like “I am essentially a professor.” I am only claiming that no one has ever said something like that while meaning it in the same way—to the same degree, with the same notion of essence in mind, with the intention that it be understood as a claim about their core self, and so on—as individuals who say, for instance, “I am essentially bigender”.

professor—essentially? Why think that gender properties have this special first-personal feature that so many other properties lack? Call this the ‘first-person’ worry.

There are many different ways of answering the first-person worry, each corresponding to a different conception of what facts about gender essences are like. In this paper, I focus on two. First, on one conception, facts about gender essences are like facts about phenomenal states, such as hunger. Just as each individual *i* has first-person access to whether or not *i* is hungry, each individual *i* has first-person access to whether or not *i* has their gender essentially. Call this the ‘phenomenal state’ conception of facts about gender essences.

Other properties are not like this. For instance, take the property of being a professor. Facts about professorial essences are not like facts about phenomenal states, such as hunger. And that is why individuals do not have first-person access to whether or not they are essentially professors: being a professor is not phenomenal in the relevant ways.

Second, on another conception—one which I prefer—facts about the gender essence of an individual are *constituted* by the careful, thoughtful deliberation of that individual; call this the ‘self-constitutive’ conception of facts about gender essences.¹⁷ So according to the self-constitutive conception, to have gender *G* essentially *just is* to have thought deeply about such matters, and to have determined that *G* is an essential, core part of who one is. For instance, suppose that individual *i* has thought deeply, deliberately, and carefully about the relationship between their gender and who they are. Perhaps *i* has realized, since childhood, that they are a particular gender *G*; and perhaps this is a fact which *i*’s community has consistently denied, and thus, which *i* has repeatedly been forced to

¹⁷ This conception is similar to certain views of self-knowledge that Moran (2001, p. 38) discusses.

confront and defend. Then as a result, *i* has thought a great deal about their gender and how it relates to their identity. Eventually, *i* comes to believe that *i* has gender *G* essentially. Then on the current conception, *i* really does have *G* essentially, and this fact obtains *because of i's* careful, thoughtful deliberation. In other words, the process of careful deliberation *constitutes* the fact that *G* is essential to *i*. And that is why *i* has first-person access to whether or not *G* is essential to *i*: by thinking deeply about whether or not *G* is part of *i's* essence, *i* determines the metaphysical fact of the matter, one way or the other.¹⁸

Other properties, of course, are not like this. For instance, once again, take the property of being a professor. Facts about professorial essences are not constituted by the careful, thoughtful deliberation of particular individuals. That is just not how facts about professors, or the essences of professors, work. And that is why individuals do not have first-person access to whether or not they are essentially professors.

It is worth briefly mentioning a bonus of the self-constitutive conception: it implies that the most reliable gender reports are those made by some of the most marginalized members of society. For it implies that people who have thought a great deal about their gender—trans persons, in particular—have thereby made it the case that their gender is (or is not) essential to who they are. And it implies that people who have thought very little about their gender—many cis people, transphobic members of the U.S. government, and so on—have not done enough conceptual work to make it the case that their gender is (or is

¹⁸ A somewhat similar view is developed in detail by Bettcher (2009). The principal difference between this view and Bettcher's view concerns the kind of identity at issue. Bettcher's view concerns existential identity: a kind of identity which one asks about by asking questions like "What am I about? What moves me? What do I stand for? What do I care about the most?" (2009, p. 110). The present view concerns metaphysical identity: a kind of identity determined by facts about metaphysical essences. These views are not incompatible, however. In fact, according to the view presently under consideration, they are closely related: since the careful reflection of an individual *i* determines whether or not gender is essential to who *i* is, *i's* metaphysical identity is constituted by *i's* existential identity. In other words, the existential identity of *i* determines the metaphysical identity of *i*.

not) essential to who they are. So this conception captures one respect in which trans persons are *experts* about gender essence in a way that less reflective cis persons, transphobic persons, and so on, are *not*.

To summarize: both the phenomenal state conception of facts about gender essences, and the self-constitutive conception of facts about gender essences, answer the first-person worry. For both conceptions provide a reason why (i) individuals have special, privileged, first-person access to whether or not they have their gender essentially, even though (ii) individuals do not have special, privileged, first-person access to whether or not they have other properties—like the property of being a professor—essentially. According to the phenomenal state conception, the reason is that gender properties are like phenomenal states; other properties, like the property of being a professor, are not. According to the self-constitutive conception, the reason is that facts about gender essences are constituted by individuals' deliberative activities; facts about other properties, like facts about professors, are not so constituted.

This completes the first-person argument for P3. Individuals have special, privileged, first-person access to whether or not their gender is essential to who they are. The reason: because of what gender properties, and facts about gender properties, are like. And because of all this, for any individual *i*, everyone else should respect *i*'s report regarding whether *i* has gender *G* essentially: for *i* is in a better position than anyone else with respect to whether *G* is part of *i*'s essence.¹⁹

¹⁹ Of course, these reports are not utterly infallible. Later on, *i* might realize that—contrary to what they thought before—*G* is not part of their essence. The present point is simply that when it comes to their own essence and gender, *i*'s report is generally a better, more reliable guide to the fact of the matter than anything else.

The data-theoretic argument for P3 is based on a particular view of how gender reports, and theories about gender, should interact. Suppose individual *i* reports that their gender is, or is not, essential to who they are. Then according to the data-theoretic argument, *i*'s report is a datum which theories of gender should seek to capture. In general, just as theories of physics should capture facts about which charges are essential to which particles, theories of gender should capture facts about which genders are essential to which individuals. The report provided by *i* is precisely the sort of datum that gender theories should account for and explain.

An analogy with a case from science might be helpful here. For centuries, Newton's theory was remarkably successful in explaining celestial motion. But eventually, a discrepancy was discovered between Newton's theory and observations of the motion of Mercury. At first, scientists faulted the data, not the theory. Perhaps the telescopes were miscalibrated, or perhaps the wrong calculations were used to process the raw observations. But after repeated checks, the data were shown to be accurate. And eventually, the best explanation of the discrepancy turned out to be that Newton's theory is false, and that Einstein's theory is true.

The situation is similar with respect to gender reports. Those reports constitute data which theories of gender should capture. If someone's report about their gender contradicts a particular theory, then either the report or the theory is in some way incorrect. But in the case of gender, there is generally no reason to fault the report. Gender reports are not detected using telescopes; they are not processed using calculations. Besides, there are lots of convergent data: many individuals have reported, repeatedly and earnestly, that they have their gender essentially; and many individuals have reported, repeatedly and earnestly,

that they do not have their gender essentially. So those reports should be taken seriously. Those reports should be believed. And if a theory contradicts those reports, then the theory requires replacement.

The practical rationality argument for P3 is as follows. Suppose that according to i's report, i has their gender essentially. Then the value associated with accepting i's report is greater than the value associated with rejecting i's report. Given what stands to be gained, and what stands to be lost, it is rational to accept the report and it is irrational to reject the report. For note that rejecting i's report incurs significant negative value, because rejection harms i: just consider the harm done to trans persons when their claims about their genders are denied or dismissed. And note that accepting i's report incurs positive value, because it treats i as they would like. So there is always greater value in accepting i's report than in rejecting i's report. Therefore, accepting i's report is rational.

This argument for P3 presupposes that moral considerations can be epistemically guiding. It follows Rinard (2018) in supposing that sometimes, practical reasons can motivate rational belief. In particular, the value that stands to be gained from accepting i's report is a practical—yet epistemically respectable—reason to accept that report. So this argument will only persuade those who think that rational belief can be guided by practical reasons.

In summary, P3 has several arguments in its favor. It is supported by the first-person access that each individual has to facts about their gender essence. It coheres with a particularly nice conception of the relationship between gender reports and theories of gender. And there are practical epistemic reasons to adopt it. Therefore, P3 holds: for any

individual *i* and any gender *G*, we ought to accept *i*'s report regarding whether *G* is essential to *i*.

To be clear: the three arguments for P3 establish more than merely that we ought to *believe* peoples' gender reports. They establish that those reports are *true*. For recall the following truth norm for belief: we only ought to believe truths. It follows, of course, that if we ought to believe some proposition, then that proposition must hold. There are no falsehoods, in other words, which we ought to believe. As the three arguments for P3 show, for any individual *i* and gender *G*, we ought to believe *i*'s report regarding whether *G* is essential to *i*. And so given the truth norm, *i*'s report is indeed veridical: in general, if *i* says that their gender is part of their essence, then it is; and in general, if *i* says that their gender is not part of their essence, then it is not.

Hence, we ought to subscribe to the working view. Gender is essential to some, but not all, individuals.

4. Individual Essences and Kind Essences

The working view makes a claim about the essences of individuals rather than the essences of kinds. One might worry, however, that individuals' essences are somehow connected to kinds' essences. In particular, one might worry that if some individuals have their genders essentially, then gender kinds must have essences too. And because of that, one might deny the working view: for the working view might seem to imply some sort of kind essentialism about gender.

This worry is unfounded. Taken on its own, the working view has no implications for the essences—or lack of essences—of gender kinds. For the working view only mentions

the essences of individuals. The working view does not mention the essences of kinds, or properties, or any other such things. So the working view simply cannot imply that gender kinds have essences.

Nevertheless, one might try to propose some principles linking the essences of individuals to the essences of kinds. For instance, one might endorse a principle like the following.

Individual-To-Kind

For each individual i and gender G , if i has G essentially then G has an essence. For any particular gender G , let ‘kind essentialism about G ’ be the following view: G has an essence. So Individual-To-Kind says that if even one person has their gender essentially, then kind essentialism about that gender must be true.

When combined with the working view, Individual-To-Kind implies kind essentialism about some gender G . So those who deny kind essentialism about G might argue against the working view in the following way.

1. Individual-To-Kind is true.
2. If the working view is true and Individual-To-Kind is true, then kind essentialism about some gender G is true.
3. Kind essentialism about G is false.
4. Therefore, the working view is false.

In response to this argument, I reject 1: Individual-To-Kind is false. For at least two reasons, I think that this is quite reasonable. First, and most simply, I see no reason to endorse Individual-To-Kind. Facts about the essences of kinds need not have anything to do with facts about the essences of individuals who belong to those kinds. Plenty of people

are essentially women, for example, but it seems quite plausible that the kind ‘womanhood’ has no essence. Second, the working view strikes me as far more plausible than Individual-To-Kind. So when forced to choose between them, I prefer the working view. Better to allow some individuals to have their genders essentially, I think, than to insist on Individual-To-Kind.

So the working view resolves the tension between (i) those who are suspicious of kind essentialism, and (ii) those who think that they have their gender(s) essentially. The working view resolves that tension by revealing that there is, in fact, no tension at all. Of course, if we accept certain principles linking individuals’ essences to the essences of kinds—principles like Individual-To-Kind, for instance—then that tension returns. But we need not accept principles like that. We can give them up. And so we can subscribe to the working view while also rejecting essentialism about gender kinds.

4. Conclusion

The working view offers a way of reconciling anti-essentialist views of gender with the reports of trans persons. Gender properties, like the property of being a woman, do not have an essence: there is no special collection of features—biological or social—that all women at all times share. Yet gender is still part of the essence of some individuals.

Of course, there may well be reasons—political, metaphysical, or otherwise—to reject the working view. But at the moment, it seems to reconcile some competing desiderata in the literature. So it is worth considering.

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