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Reasoning about Gender

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Abstract: In this paper, I explore two views about gender. I refer to the first as gender dichotomism. I refer to the second as transgenderism. Next, I argue that (1) the burden of proof is on the apologist of transgenderism to show why gender dichotomism is false, and (2) this burden has not been met. Finally, I provide supplementary notes to clarify how certain terms are used in the paper. I forward the points in this paper in the hope that they help to engender further dialogue in the spirit of Socratic elenchus.

Gender Dichotomism and Transgenderism

The topic of gender is controversial in our society. A careful discussion about this topic requires philosophical treatment: thoughtful argumentation, identification of assumptions, the use of clearly defined terms and precise distinctions, and so on. In what follows, I will support two theses: (1) that the burden of proof is on the apologist of transgenderism to show why gender dichotomism is false, and (2) that this burden has not been met.

The philosopher Roderick Chisholm wrote in the introduction to his *Person and Object* that one should be guided in philosophy by those propositions that we all presuppose in our ordinary activity, and that one has an epistemic right to believe such propositions unless there is a sufficient argument to believe otherwise. Such propositions are reasonable to believe. Thus, the burden of proof is on the one who denies them, not on the one who accepts them.¹ This principle has at least four virtues. First, it accords with common sense, the rational capacity actually or potentially available to all human beings. Second, because of its common-sense nature, one can apply it to good effect in the Cave of human affairs; in other words, it is helpful for reasoning in practical matters. Third, it is a prudent starting point for thinking philosophically about the world because it enables one to take propositions that

¹ Roderick Chisholm, *Person and Object: A Metaphysical Study*, (Chicago: Open Court Publishing Company, 1979), 15-18

appear obvious, evaluate them, and use them to understand the world; in other words, it is helpful for philosophical reasoning. Fourth, the principle is a recognition that such propositions pass what might be called the existential road test. We live them out. We presuppose them in practice, even if we accept a theory which denies them. As such, for this paper I will assume the truth of Chisholm's principle in order to reflect on the topic of gender, a topic pertinent to both practical and philosophical matters.

Consider gender dichotomism. This is the position that there are only two genders: masculine and feminine, and only two sexes: male and female; that these genders are distinct from each other (likewise for the sexes); and that these distinctions are based in objective reality. Human beings presuppose these propositions in ordinary activity. One can see this via a careful study of world history, or by thinking about daily human activity. On Chisholm's principle, these propositions are reasonable to believe.

Nevertheless, it has become popular in contemporary Western society to reject gender dichotomism and to assert transgenderism instead.

Transgenderism is the position that one's gender is a construct - either a sociocultural one, a subjective one, or some combination of both - and that this construct has no basis in objective reality. This construct need not align with one's biological sex, which on some versions of transgenderism also has no basis in objective reality. What matters in cases of gender dysphoria is one's emotions, desires, and beliefs. What seem to be the relevant biological facts are held to be malleable relative to individual desires or beliefs, or to sociocultural attitudes and practices.

Regarding transgenderism, there appears to be an absence of cogent argumentation. Instead, there are mere assertions. There are appeals to preference, emotion, and comfort. There are *ad hominem* attacks. And there are more substantive arguments which, upon examination, are also unsuccessful. Such explanatory efforts are insufficient to convince a person of reason, particularly one who agrees with Chisholm. Assuming Chisholm is right, the burden of proof is on the denier of gender dichotomism. It is reasonable to believe that there are only two distinct genders and two distinct sexes, and that these genders and sexes are objectively real. Yet the denier of gender dichotomism has not met the burden. To see this, consider the following.

Evaluating Transgenderism

To evaluate transgenderism, we might focus on three argumentative strategies a transgenderist might take: the popular strategy, the unrefined postmodernist strategy, and the refined postmodernist strategy.

Concerning the popular strategy of mere assertion of transgenderism: *quod gratis asseritur, gratis negatur*. What is asserted without reason can be denied without reason. A mere assertion can be met with a mere counter-assertion; no logical ground is gained on either side. Regarding the popular strategy of appeal to desire, preference, emotion, or comfort: mere pleas to subjectivity do not constitute convincing arguments. If one desires or prefers x, it does not follow that x is true or good. And regarding the popular strategy of *ad hominem*: attacking an honest questioner of transgenderism as intolerant or as phobic does not prove a point.²

Now, one might be inclined to push the line of inquiry further by saying that a human being has the right to define himself as he desires, or that he has the right to choose his gender-identity as he prefers. These claims are more substantial because they include the important concept of *rights*. They are examples of the unrefined postmodernist strategy. Let us conduct a brief examination.

These claims appear to rest on the postmodern antirealist assumption that what one takes as reality is a mere subjective or sociocultural construct. Hence, there are no objective natures, no human nature, no male nature, no female nature, and no such thing as a human flourishing that results from the proper functioning of the essential properties and capacities of a human nature. As Jean-Paul Sartre wrote, existence precedes essence; we are nothing until we invent ourselves as something.³ But there are problems with this assumption. Consider some objections.

First, note two arguments.

If there are no objective natures, then there is no objective human nature.

² It might be noted that the term ‘phobia’ does not apply in a reasonable conversation about gender. A phobia is an irrational fear. But the person of reason speaks neither from irrationality nor from fear. Rather, he strives to articulate and appropriate an honest and rational position on a matter of human significance, a position that corresponds to the way things are. The person of reason is motivated by truth, not by fear. And adopting a justified true belief that is opposed to popular opinion often requires a great deal of courage. Again, a study of history will confirm this point. Moreover, the one who attacks another as intolerant may himself be engaging in intolerance. False and unreasonable views should be rejected as false and unreasonable. But one would do well to avoid abusive language and instead to focus on a levelheaded evaluation of arguments and claims. In a philosophical conversation, to engage in name-calling is to obstruct reasonable dialogue.

³ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Human Emotions*, (New York: Citadel Press, 1987), 15.

If there is no objective human nature, then there is no basis for objective human rights.

Thus, if there are no objective natures, then there is no basis for objective human rights.

But on postmodernism, there are no objective natures, since there is no objective reality.

So, on postmodernism, there is no basis for objective human rights.

Furthermore,

On postmodernism, there are no objective and intrinsic values.

If there are no objective and intrinsic values, then there is nothing about a human being that is of objective and intrinsic value.

Thus, on postmodernism, there is nothing about a human being that is of objective and intrinsic value.

But if there is nothing about a human being that is of objective and intrinsic value, then the objective and intrinsic value of a human being cannot be the ground of objective moral rights or human rights.

Thus, on postmodernism, the objective and intrinsic value of a human being cannot be the ground of objective moral rights or human rights.

Regarding the premises, space prevents a detailed defense. However, a few words might be said. Premise (1) is an analytical truth. For (2), if there is no human nature, then there is nothing that all human beings really have in common that would serve as a basis for objective human rights, or that would serve to distinguish human beings as a kind of being different from other kinds. Aristotle's principle of justice applies here: equals should be treated equally, and unequals should be treated unequally. If human beings are to be treated equally as human beings, there must be something that serves as the basis of this equality. It must be something fundamental and significant and common to all human beings, such as an objective human nature and an objective and intrinsic value. If there are no such things, then there is nothing to serve as a basis for human equality. And if there is no such basis, what sense does it make to say

that human beings should be treated equally? Moreover, if there is no human nature, then how do we really know anything about human beings? How is it that we can know what we are talking about when we discuss human life and human affairs? Premises (4) and (6) are standard assumptions of postmodernism. (7) and (9) are analytically true.

What follows? If there are no objective moral rights or human rights, then gender dichotomist policies do not violate any person's moral or human rights. Furthermore, if there are no such rights, then there is no such right to access a restroom, to define oneself according to one's desire, or to choose one's gender-identity. As Jeremy Bentham (not himself a postmodernist) quipped, the concept of natural human rights is "nonsense upon stilts."⁴ This seems to be the case if reality is nothing but a human construct. If the concept of natural human rights is sensible, then reality is not a mere construct; there must be something objectively real and valuable to serve as the basis of these rights.

Objective rights do not exist on the postmodernist worldview, regardless of how vigorously one believes in them. For a postmodernist, to believe in objective rights is like believing in centaurs (the characters of Greek myth that are half-man and half-horse). One can believe in them, but doing so makes no significant difference in the world. Consequently, the supporter of transgenderism cannot deny human natures and rights but at the same time assert the right to define himself or to use a preferred restroom. Nor can he legitimately claim that his rights are violated by gender dichotomist policies. To do this is intellectually inconsistent, and perhaps an example of a performative contradiction. He might claim that some *legal* right has been violated, depending on the legal system of his time and place, but he cannot claim that an objective *moral* right has been violated. A legal right is not identical to a moral right, since legality is not identical to morality. If an act is legal, it does not follow that the act is morally right. To see this, reflect on the history of morally wrong acts that have been legally permitted: e.g., slavery, apartheid, genocide. If legality is identical to morality, then whatever is legally permitted is morally permitted, and vice versa. But it is not the case that whatever is legally permitted is morally permitted. Slavery has been legally permitted. But slavery is not morally permitted. Thus, legality and morality are not identical.

What the transgenderist can say is that he desires to use the restroom that he desires to use, or that he desires to define himself as he desires to define himself, or that he prefers to avoid doing what he prefers not to do. Expressing

⁴ Jeremy Bentham, "Anarchical Fallacies," accessed at http://english.duke.edu/uploads/media_items/bentham-anarchical-fallacies.original.pdf.

one's desires and preferences is well and good; arguably, freedom of speech is a moral right, and freedom of speech entitles one to express himself, within reason. But a desire is not a moral right, nor does a desire entail a moral right. If one desires to steal his neighbor's car, it does not follow that he has a moral right to do so. And a preference is not a moral right. If one prefers to torture another person, no moral right to do so is entailed. *Mutatis mutandis* for comfort and feeling.

Second, if reality is a subjective construct, and nothing is objectively true or real, then that point applies to transgenderism as well. The idea of transgenderism is itself a construct which is neither true nor real. Nevertheless, even this point is not objectively true because, on postmodernist assumptions, there is no objective truth. But presumably the transgenderist holds that his assertions are true. When the transgenderist pickets outside a local school board meeting to advocate the claim that a human being has the moral right to use the restroom that corresponds to his gender-beliefs, he is advocating what he takes to be true. Thus, a contradiction is exposed: transgenderism is taken to be both true and not true. Such a position does not meet the burden of proof.

Third, take Sartre's dictum: we are nothing until we define ourselves as something. Such claims have a certain Romanticist appeal, something akin to Caspar David Friedrich's *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*. As with Friedrich's painting, Sartre's claim can give one the image of being a Nietzschean overman, standing above a foggy and formless world as a limitless inventor of its form, meaning, purpose, and value. However, these sentiments are open to reasonable doubt. Doing requires being; one must be in order to do. Thus, a nothing cannot do anything. And a nothing cannot make itself something, since making is a kind of doing. Nothingness is the complete absence of properties. No entity can exist, yet be nothing, and yet make itself something. To suggest otherwise seems to be an example of nonsense upon *postmodern* stilts.⁵

Pace Sartre, a human person is not "nothing." Arguably, the existence of a person who can will, invent, structure, and desire in a human manner presupposes the existence of a being with a human nature. For human beings, essence precedes existence and not the other way around. And the existence of a person who can think about the external world presupposes an external world there to think about. The common-sense view is that we do not invent reality. We discover it. According to E. J. Lowe, the view that we invent the world

⁵ I am not claiming that Sartre was a postmodernist. I am only suggesting that his central principle – namely, that existence precedes essence and thus that we invent ourselves – is a tenet of postmodernism insofar as postmodernism can be said to have tenets.

threatens to make the world into an amorphous lump that we construct.⁶ But what is it that does the constructing of the lump if there is only a formless lump with no real individuality or distinctness? Does the lump itself bring order, form, and individuality from the absence of these?

Fourth, if everything is a subjective construct, then the claim that gender dichotomism is wrong is itself a subjective construct, as is the claim that gender dichotomism is not wrong. If both claims are merely subjective, then neither is objectively true. They subjectively neutralize each other, as do the preference claims “Pudding is yummy” and “Pudding is not yummy.” No logical ground is gained either way. Indeed, people do not seriously investigate such matters. One will not find a scholarly debate or an organized protest about the yumminess of pudding. The burden of proof has not been met.

But the supporter of transgenderism might take other approaches to offer a more refined position. For example, he might say “Some gender dichotomists have mistreated or imposed unfair limitations on some transgenderists. What about this? Shouldn’t we empower transgenderists by recognizing their claims as true?” One might grant the point that transgenderists have been mistreated. It does not follow that gender dichotomism is false. *Abusus non tollit usum*. The abuse of a good or of a truth does not prevent its proper use. If one uses a mathematical fact such as “Two plus two equals four” to mistreat another person, it does not follow that “Two plus two equals four” is false, nor does it follow that we should not act on this truth. If one uses the historical fact “Abraham Lincoln was the 16th President of the United States” to cause harm to another person, it does not follow that Lincoln was not the 16th President of the United States, nor does it follow that elementary school teachers should stop teaching this fact. A fact is different from how one applies his knowledge of that fact. Similarly, if one uses a computer to commit fraud, it does not follow that computers are bad or that we should avoid using them. If one abuses an over-the-counter cold medication, that does not mean the medication is bad. A good thing remains good even if someone happens to abuse it.

The supporter might continue: “Look, a human being has the right to form and to hold his own beliefs as he sees fit. We shouldn’t stand against this right.” But one can respond by asking what kind of right is being claimed. Is it a legal right? But a legal right is not a moral right. We have covered this point. Is it an epistemic right? Arguably, one has both an epistemic and a moral *duty* to try to form reasonable beliefs that correspond to fact. But the belief that one’s

⁶ E.J. Lowe, *A Survey of Metaphysics*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 113-114.

gender does not match his biological sex seems neither reasonable nor true. “Sex” refers to certain facts of human biology, reproductive features, and reproductive capacities. “Gender” is used either as a synonym of “sex,” or to refer to one’s accurate appropriation of the fact of his sex, and to the corresponding normative social expectations of that appropriation. In either case, sex and gender align, although one’s beliefs, feelings, or preferences about his gender (i.e., one’s gender-identity) might not align with his sex if those beliefs, etc. are inaccurate. To believe that one’s gender does not match his biological sex is to believe a proposition, namely, “In at least one case, gender does not match biological sex.” Let us call this proposition “b.” Via the law of excluded middle, b is either true or false. And via the law of noncontradiction, b is not both true and false. Thus, b is either true or false, but not both. Arguably, b is true if and only if it corresponds to the relevant facts. If b does not correspond, then it is false. Furthermore, b is either counterbalanced, reasonable to some degree, or unreasonable to some degree.⁷

Upon consideration, the evidence does not support b (e.g., the evidence from the paradigm cases of biological sex aligning with gender, from objective human nature, and from the presuppositions and behaviors of ordinary human activity). Moreover, b does not correspond to the relevant facts (e.g., the facts of human nature, ordinary human activity, and the paradigm cases). Thus, in Chisholm’s terminology, b belongs in a negative epistemic level, such as *probably false*, *reasonable to disbelieve*, or *evidently false*. Does one have an epistemic right to believe b? Arguably, a rational agent does not have an epistemic right to intentionally form or hold a belief that, based on pertinent evidence available to the agent, is false and unreasonable.

Is the supporter claiming a moral right? Either objective moral rights exist or they do not. On postmodernism, they do not. And if they do not, believing in them does not make them exist. If objective moral rights exist, we might grant that one has the moral right to hold false and unreasonable beliefs. But it does not follow that others must accommodate them. If a man believes

⁷ See Chisholm’s *Theory of Knowledge*, Third Edition, (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1989). In Chapter 2, he provided definitions of *counterbalanced*, *probable* and *beyond reasonable doubt*. These definitions can be summarized as follows: Proposition p is counterbalanced for S = Df S is at least as justified in believing p as in believing the negation of p, and vice versa. P is probable for S = Df S is more justified in believing p than in believing the negation of p. If p is probable for S, then the negation of p is probably false for S. P is beyond reasonable doubt for S = Df S is more justified in believing p than in withholding p. If p is beyond reasonable doubt for S, then the negation of p is reasonable to disbelieve for S.

that he is a bird, it does not follow that others ought to treat him as a bird, nor does it follow that society ought to formulate policies that oblige others to accept his false belief as if it were true. If a student fails the test and falsely believes that he earned a perfect score, it does not follow that the teacher is obligated to give him an A.

The supporter might go on: “Listen, some people really do experience gender dysphoric feelings and beliefs. We should recognize this.” Here, it is important to distinguish between a *subjective experience of x* and the *objective fact of x*. Suppose you were to have a subjective experience of a tree in your living room. You could be wrong about the *objective fact* of the tree (i.e., it might not actually be there), but you would not be wrong about the fact that you were having an *experience* of the tree. Similarly, the person who experiences gender dysphoric feelings and beliefs is experiencing those feelings and beliefs. We ought to recognize this. But it does not follow that the beliefs correspond to the objective facts of his anatomy and biology.

But he might proceed: “Alright. You mentioned anatomy and biology. Let’s get down to the science of the matter. What about cases of persons born with anatomy that is neither clearly male nor clearly female?” Gender dichotomism is consistent with such cases. Recall that, according to gender dichotomism, there are only two genders and two sexes. As such, everyone who has a sex is either male or female. Gender dichotomism is open to the possibility that a person has no sex or gender and thus is neither male nor female, although it rules out the idea that one can be both. It also rules out the idea that a male can become a female (or vice versa) via medical or cosmetic procedure.

Nevertheless, it is important to note the distinction between the epistemic and the ontic. The epistemic is about what we *know* or *believe*. The ontic is about what *is*, regardless of our epistemic states. In the case of a person born with anatomy that is neither clearly male nor clearly female, if these are cases in which we do not *know* the sex because the anatomical signs are unclear, it does not follow that the person has no sex. It could be that the objective fact of the matter is that the person has a sex that is either male or female (say, male) but that given the limits of our knowledge of anatomy or biology we cannot draw a clear conclusion about the maleness. Furthermore, recall that transgenderism is the view that gender (and perhaps sex) are human constructs or conventions. If a person is anatomically neither clearly male nor clearly female, it does not follow that gender and sex are mere constructs. Indeed, cases of anatomical ambiguity presuppose a real distinction between male and female. If there were no real distinction, little sense could be made of the claim that a person’s sex is unclear.

Then he might reply: “While I agree that the person with gender dysphoria has beliefs that do not correspond with the facts, this point should be overlooked. The important thing is that we are inclusive. We must include persons with gender dysphoria by making them feel accepted, and thus we must accept their beliefs as if they were true. Inclusiveness is more important than truth.” One might respond here that although proper inclusiveness is important, it is not more important than truth. In fact, properly understood and applied, inclusiveness requires knowledge. One cannot be properly inclusive if one does not know what it means to be inclusive or if one does not know what things should be included and in which way. On the assumption that truth is a necessary condition for knowledge, then truth is needed for proper inclusiveness.

“Wait a minute!”, he might say. “You are begging the question against transgenderism. You are asserting gender dichotomism and the existence of natures without providing supporting reasons.” But this is not so. I am claiming that gender dichotomism is reasonable based on Chisholm’s principle. Thus, the burden of proof is on the transgenderist to show why gender dichotomism is false. This burden has not been met. And I am not merely asserting Chisholm’s principle. I provided four reasons to support it. Moreover, regarding the existence and intelligibility of natures, good defenses are available.⁸

Lastly, the supporter might say: “You talk about postmodern constructs, but you are constructing a straw man. Sure, the transgenderist who uses crude assertions or appeals to emotion is not making a good case. And you are right that the transgenderist presupposes a postmodern antirealism. However, a sophisticated transgenderist will not hold the inconsistent positions that you described. Rather, he will agree with you that there are no objective moral or human rights at all, and thus no objective moral or human rights for the transgenderist. He will also agree that there is no objective truth, and thus that transgenderism is not objectively true. But he will be clear that he is not advocating his position on the basis of reason, truth, or objective morality. Instead, he recognizes that the only way to convince others is on the basis of power. Thus, he is attempting to use the tools of rhetoric to ensure that the zeitgeist is in his favor on this issue. In a world that we invent, a world without

⁸ For example, see E. Jonathan Lowe, “Essentialism, Metaphysical Realism, and the Errors of Conceptualism,” *Philosophia Scientiae*, 12 2008 9-33 and Charlotte Witt, “What is Gender Essentialism?” accessed at http://pubpages.unh.edu/~cewitt/Site/My_Philosophical_Life_files/What%20is%20Gender%20Essentialism%3F.pdf.

objective truth, all we can do is appeal to power. We cannot appeal to truth or to reason. As Thrasymachus put it: “I affirm that the just is nothing else than the advantage of the stronger.”⁹ This is what the sophisticated transgenderist affirms.”

One might respond that on this affirmation, we cannot engage in philosophy. We cannot use reason to seek truth and knowledge. Rather, we can only do what might be called “power-scholarship.” We use the power of language to achieve our desired ends. But this appears to be just another version of making mere assertions, none of which are objectively true on postmodernist assumptions. And if this is the case, the burden of proof still has not been met. Overpowering someone with language is not the same as convincing him with good reasons or proving a point. Rhetoric (the art of persuasive speaking and writing) is not the same as reasoning (the mental process of drawing conclusions from reasons or evidence.) In reasoning, the truth matters and proof must meet certain deductive or inductive conditions. But rhetoric can be employed without regard to truth and without regard to proof.

Concluding Thoughts

The reasonable person is intelligently open-minded and intellectually humble. He is willing to examine arguments, including arguments for views he does not accept. He is willing to change his mind if it is rational to do so. But he is also guided by reason, he thinks for himself, and he has the courage to hold unpopular views if those views are justified and true. He heeds Socrates: follow reason where it leads. At present, reason supports gender dichotomism. The burden of proof is on the transgenderist to show otherwise.

Supplemental Notes

In discussions on this issue, a distinction is sometimes made between ‘sex’ and ‘gender,’ although the terms are often used synonymously. ‘Sex’ refers to biological traits. One’s sex is a matter of human biology, either male or female in category, and is determined by one’s anatomy and reproductive features and capacities. When not used synonymously, ‘gender’ is used to refer to one’s mental states about his sex, and to the normative sociocultural functions and roles regarding his sex. One’s gender is a matter of the accuracy of one’s thoughts, beliefs, desires, emotions, and preferences about his sex.

⁹ Plato, *Republic* from *The Collected Dialogues of Plato* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 588, verse 338b.

One's gender is also a matter of how one functions in society, a functioning that is in some way a result of his sex. The way in which such distinctions are drawn depends on one's metaphysical and epistemological assumptions. For example, the way in which a metaphysical realist would draw such distinctions might differ from how a metaphysical antirealist would do so.

My claim is that it is reasonable to believe the following. (1) The dichotomies of sex and of gender are based in the objectively real natures of human male and human female, since the paradigm cases of human beings (rational animal organisms) are either objectively male or objectively female. (2) This point recognizes the existence of persons born with anatomy that is not clearly male or female, but also recognizes that such cases are not paradigm cases, and that paradigm cases are appropriate for developing essential definitions of terms such as 'male human being.' (3) On the assumption that a true belief is one which corresponds to the relevant facts: one's belief about his sex is true if and only if it corresponds to the biological fact of his sex. Thus, since gender involves one's appropriation of the relevant facts of his biological sex, one's gender-belief, feeling, preference, or identity is accurate if and only if it corresponds to the pertinent biological facts. (4) On the assumption that false beliefs can have harmful consequences: it can be detrimental for a person to have false beliefs about his selfhood and personal identity, including his sexual identity. For more information, four articles are relevant.¹⁰

Philosophical postmodernism is a worldview marked by rejections of the following claims: (1) there is an objective reality (i.e., metaphysical realism); (2) we can know objective reality (i.e., epistemological realism), (3) there are such things as natures or essences (i.e., essentialism); (4) there is objective truth, especially the correspondence theory of truth; (5) reason is reliable, and (6) objective moral values, duties, and rights exist (i.e., moral realism). Not all postmodernists reject these claims. However, postmodernists typically hold that we subjectively construct rather than objectively discover reality, and that power (not truth or reason) is what decides between competing constructs.

¹⁰ Carlos D. Flores, "The Absurdity of Transgenderism," accessed at <http://www.thepublicdiscourse.com/2015/02/14305/>; Paul R. McHugh, M.D., "Transgenderism: A Pathological Meme," accessed at <http://www.thepublicdiscourse.com/2015/06/15145/>; Paul R. McHugh, M.D., "Transgender Surgery Isn't the Solution," accessed at <http://www.wsj.com/articles/paul-mchugh-transgender-surgery-isnt-the-solution-1402615120>; Christopher O. Tollefsen, "Sex Identity," accessed at <http://www.thepublicdiscourse.com/2015/07/15306/>.

According to the postmodernist, things such as ‘reality’ and ‘essence’ and ‘value’ are mere subjective constructs.¹¹

There is an important distinction between philosophical postmodernism and aesthetic postmodernism. Philosophical postmodernism is described above. The term ‘aesthetic postmodernism’ refers to art styles that are culturally linked to philosophical postmodernism, such as dada style or abstract expressionism, but that do not require adopting philosophical postmodernism. One can be an aesthetic postmodernist without being a philosophical postmodernist, and vice versa.

By ‘objective’ I mean existing in a manner independent of human thought, belief, or desire; real or true regardless of whether anyone believes it. By ‘subjective’ I mean existing in a manner completely dependent on the thought, belief, preference, or desire of the human subject. The existence of the sun is an objective fact. My preference for vanilla over chocolate ice cream is subjective. By ‘reality’ I mean everything that exists or whatever is fact. Dallas Willard humorously yet reasonably defined objective reality as “what you run into when you are wrong.” If you believe your gas tank is full when it is empty, you may find yourself stranded on the side of the freeway.¹² More can be said to account for truths about the past and the future, but that would require another essay.

‘Nature’ (or ‘essence’) refers either to an objectively real set of essential properties and capacities a thing possesses which makes that thing itself rather than something else (i.e., individual nature), or to an objectively real set of essential properties and capacities a thing possesses which makes that thing a member of a specific kind rather than a member of some other kind (i.e., general nature).¹³ For example, a human being is a rational animal. In other words, *rationality* and *animality* (i.e., being *animated*: a living, embodied hominid/homo sapiens creature) are essential attributes to being human. One cannot lack these and be human any more than a genuine apple pie can lack apples or a triangle can lack angles. Moreover, given a thing’s nature, that thing cannot be some other thing with a different nature. For example, a human being cannot be a carrot, a cat, or a concrete slab. Objective reality limits a human being by preventing him from being at the same time and in the same way something not human. And objective reality limits a male (or a female)

¹¹ “The Philosophy of Social Science,” section c. ii on *Postmodernism*, accessed at <http://www.iep.utm.edu/soc-sci/#SSH2cii>.

¹² Dallas Willard, “Truth in the Fire,” accessed at <http://www.dwillard.org/articles/artview.asp?artID=68>.

¹³ Here, I am operating on the realist assumption that properties and capacities are real and not mere conventions.

human being by preventing him (or her) from being something that is non-male (or non-female), regardless of what he (or she) believes about himself (or herself). The same is true of any other thing with a nature, such as a horse or a tree. Reality is such that a horse cannot at the same time and in the same way be not-a-horse.

More can be said. For example, on the Judaeo-Christian worldview, human beings are made in God's image. The image of God is an essential aspect of human nature, and the ground for objective human value, purpose, and meaning. J.P. Moreland has developed this point.¹⁴ Indeed, on the Christian view, human nature can "participate in the divine nature." (2 Peter 1:4) In this participation, we do not lose our human nature or literally become divine. Rather, as human beings growing in Christlikeness, we partake in the divine nature. By becoming like Christ, our moral and intellectual standard of excellence, we undergo theosis, a restoration of our proper likeness and harmony with God. Michael Austin has developed this point.¹⁵

Normally, when a postmodernist rejects the concept of 'nature,' he is saying natures are subjective constructs rather than objective aspects of reality. Consider Socrates. Socrates is by nature a human being. If this is an objective fact about Socrates, then he has an objectively real human nature. His essence is *humanness*. Thus, as a human, he cannot not be human. But a postmodernist view would hold that Socrates is not objectively human because he is not objectively anything. Rather, his 'humanness' is a construct, a mere invention for the sake of mentally creating and organizing the world. There are no human beings. There are only constructs we call "human." As such, if one wants to say Socrates is a "carrot" or a "cat" then so be it. After all, if we merely invent these constructs, we can change them like we can change the rules of baseball. As Sartre argued, if there is no human nature then we are free to invent ourselves as we desire. "Thus, there is no human nature... Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself."¹⁶

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¹⁴ J.P. Moreland, *The Recalcitrant Imago Dei: Human Persons and the Failure of Naturalism*, (London: SCM Press, 2009), Chapter 6.

¹⁵ Michael Austin, "For the Sake of Character: A Trinitarian Family Ethic," accessed at <http://epsociety.org/library/articles.asp?pid=292>.

¹⁶ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Human Emotions*, (New York: Citadel Press, 1987), 15.