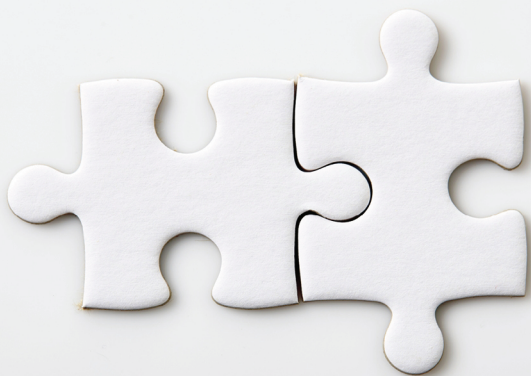


# The Enigma of Gender

Why Identity  
Is Neither Individual  
Nor Essential



Hans-Georg Moeller

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HANS-GEORG MOELLER

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# THE ENIGMA OF GENDER



# INTRODUCTION

## TOWARD A BETTER NARRATIVE ABOUT GENDER

During the process of writing this book, Wendy Lochner, editor at Columbia University Press, suggested I listen to a conversation between the journalists Lydia Polgreen and Masha Gessen on *The Ezra Klein Show*.<sup>1</sup> The title given on YouTube to the recording of the conversation summarizes the main point Gessen tries to get across: “We Need Better Narratives About Gender.” The purpose of the present book is to work toward that goal.

If there is a need for better narratives about gender—and I think there is—we first need some clarity about what’s wrong with the present ones. In the conversation with Polgreen, Gessen addresses a number of flaws that, to me, indicate three major and closely interconnected “epistemic obstacles”—that is, three problematic beliefs about gender identity—stemming from a Western philosophical and theological heritage. These obstacles need to be overcome to arrive at better narratives about gender. All three are tied to the *enigma of the gendered self*.

The first problematic belief is that gender identity is inherently *individual*.

At one point in the dialogue, Polgreen reflects on her experience of growing up as a biracial kid in the United States. She says that as a child she did not think of herself in racial terms and became aware of this “identity” only when confronted with a racist slur at the age of ten. This leads her to question the “nature of identity and the idea that there is some sort of sovereign self that you can anchor yourself to.” Polgreen’s doubts about the existence of an “immutable” racial self prompt Gessen, who is nonbinary, to problematize gender identity. Gessen responds: “Well that’s another problem with the whole ‘born in the wrong body’ discourse. . . . I’ve always felt, and after a certain time was able to put words to it, that gender is something that happens between me and other people. It doesn’t actually happen inside my body. It’s what people see, what I want them to see, what I feel when they see one thing and not the other thing. All of that is my gender.” Polgreen and Gessen realize that racial and gender identity are not unique traits of a person emanating from somewhere deep down in themselves. Instead, our perception of our racial and gender identity—a self-perception virtually everyone develops when growing up—emerges and takes shape in our interactions with others. And yet, our present-day narratives, rooted in philosophical-religious-linguistic traditions, suggest that others ultimately do not matter in questions of identity because true identity—including racial and gender identity—is to be found only in the “sovereign self that you can anchor yourself to.”

At the very end of the conversation, Gessen recommends a book to the listeners: Miquel Missé’s *The Myth of the Wrong Body*.<sup>2</sup> Missé is a Spanish sociologist and transgender activist. The book describes, on the one hand, his political and personal struggles.

On the other hand, in close relation to these struggles, it expounds a profound critique of the individualist concept of gender identity.

The myth of the wrong body bothers Missé, and he sets out to debunk it. It goes along with the belief that gender identity comes from “within.” This belief informs what Missé calls a “cliché metaphor” in current transgender discourses: the claim that “if a trans person had been born on a desert island they’d still want to have surgery regardless.”<sup>3</sup> Missé rejects this claim and points out the “extremely individualist” tendencies in Western neoliberal societies that the desert island scenario betrays.<sup>4</sup> It suggests that gender identity is inherent in a singular, sovereign self—even if no one else is present, a person’s inner gender identity will eventually come to the fore in an imagined complete solitude. And, if this gender identity happens to be trans, a person will inevitably long for gender-affirming procedures. In Missé’s opinion, however, “trans people born on a desert island wouldn’t be trans: our gender expression would not be associated with any fixed gender identity and less still to a concrete social corporality.”<sup>5</sup>

Missé conducts an alternative thought experiment: “If we were to leave a newborn baby on a desert island, with no other humans, to be cared for by a pack of wolves, and we returned to visit after fifteen years, when we asked them if they were a boy or a girl, their most likely response would be to bite us. . . . They wouldn’t identify with other boys or girls, they would most likely identify with wolves.”<sup>6</sup> Missé’s point is not to deny that “feeling like a man or a woman” is “a specific subjective experience”;<sup>7</sup> it certainly is; we all have such inner feelings. What he intends to highlight is that this feeling does not emanate from an elusive inner self irrespective of circumstances but rather that it’s a “collective experience as well.”<sup>8</sup> In reality, we grow up not

on desert islands but alongside other humans. When growing up, we eventually “feel like a man or a woman”—and what that feels like is inevitably influenced by how we interact with one another in a gendered way. A feral child might well develop certain behavioral or emotional traits that scientists can classify as gender-typically “feminine” or “masculine,” but the child could not *identify as* a man or a woman because they wouldn’t even know these words. The child would have to learn from others what it *means* to be a girl or a boy. No one can *feel like* a boy or a girl if there are no other boys or girls around.

Echoing Masha Gessen’s formulation that “gender is something that happens between me and other people,” Missé affirms “the importance of the group and the community,”<sup>9</sup> that “social pressures condition us,” that “what other people think affects us,” and that “we might not be as original as we imagine.”<sup>10</sup> The experiences of Polgreen, Gessen, Missé, and many other people with a “nonconforming” gender identity suggest that *gender identity—that is, a gendered sense of self—does not come about through a mysterious discovery of an inherent, individual, and gendered core self; instead, it is relational.*

The second epistemic obstacle preventing the rise of better narratives about gender is ontological. The premise of a gendered self tends to imply not only that gender identity is individual but also that it is *essential*.

Throughout *The Myth of the Wrong Body*, Missé argues against a current narrative about transgender that suggests that “trans people have a mismatch between their gender identity and their body because of an error in their biological development.”<sup>11</sup> This narrative rests on a premise that, as Missé assumes, a “majority of people” share: namely, that gender is not “something someone simply identifies with, but something that someone *is*.”<sup>12</sup> By emphasizing the word “is” here, Missé indicates

the ontological belief that gender identity is a central aspect of an individual's true "being" rather than a psychological feeling, a social category, or a combination of both. This ontological approach to gender has created, as Missé says, the "monster of gender essentialism."<sup>13</sup>

Gender essentialism is expressed in the popular formula that a transgender person's self is "trapped in the wrong body—i.e., in a body with a different sex. This expression reflects a body–mind dualism related to the history of Western philosophy and theology: "gender identity" is ascribed to the immaterial, spiritual, and essential self, distinct from the material, organic, and inessential body it inhabits. This highly problematic dualism in turn gives rise to, in Missé's words, "a twentieth-century Western concept which assumes that if a person identifies as the 'opposite' gender to the one they were assigned at birth they have to change their body to match."<sup>14</sup> The implicit logic of this assumption is that a person's gendered self is in their consciousness and that, in order for the person to be fully and coherently themselves, their bodily sex has to correspond to the mind's gender. If there's an incongruity between the two, the mind must take the lead and the body must follow and, if necessary, be forced to fit the mind. The mind must, by its own sovereign will, impose a transformative regime onto the body so that it correctly manifests who this person *is*.

The ontological prejudice that gender identity is "something that someone *is*" brings about a third epistemological obstacle plaguing current gender narratives: *the normative expectation that a person ought, or ought to be empowered, to get their identity right*. Almost inevitably, any "is" implies an "ought."

Summarizing the flaws of current (Western) gender narratives, Gessen says to Polgreen: "Well, then, the problem is that we assign such disproportionate importance to both sexuality

and gender. And so, if they are so important, so central to our identities, then how could they be accidental, how could they be chosen, how could they be mutable? We need them to be cores of who we are, and for that we have to invent all sorts of narratives about how they were always there.” Our gender metaphysics, the idea that gender defines each individual’s *being*, leads us to regard gender and sex with the utmost seriousness. Once sex and gender are regarded as the “cores of who we are,” there is little to no room for contingency.

Therefore, our narratives about gender have always had a moralistic dimension: If people truly *are* men or women, they also ought to be *truly* manly or womanly. Accordingly, traditional societies formulated narratives to specify respective roles for women and men. More often than not, these roles were hierarchically organized and typically (although not always) reflected patriarchal orders. And even today, Miquel Missé says, we are “telling kids that there should be a natural concordance between the body, gender identity, and gender expression.”<sup>15</sup> (This formulation, by the way, once more shows how we tend to infer a normative demand—“there should be”—from the ontological claim that something *is* “natural.”) Gender narratives are often not merely descriptive; they tend to promote behavioral, psychological, and physical gender role (or profile) models that can exert an enormous ethical pressure or, in Missé’s words, “symbolic violence.”<sup>16</sup>

The symbolic violence of normative expectations to get one’s gender right did not end with the demise of traditional societies. It extends, Missé claims, to our times. He criticizes, in particular, a capitalist cosmetic industry that has “learned how to monetize trans people’s need for sexual reassignment, mainly women, by creating an expensive catalogue of bodily modifications that go very, very far beyond what could be considered any

form of treatment. . . . If you want to be a woman you will need a pinch of this, a splash of that, and a large dollop of that over there.”<sup>17</sup> In today’s context, the pursuit of gender conformity is, as Missé demonstrates with some poignant examples, often paradoxically dressed in the language of authenticity. According to him, the “dominant narrative” of “trans empowerment” is the “conquest” of the body: it must be “bent to a person’s will,”<sup>18</sup> resulting in a “cult of the individual’s ability to transform” the body.<sup>19</sup> The conquest of the body, Missé says, is “associated with the values” of “authenticity, courage, perseverance, success.” These values express a contemporary gender ethics, particularly when applied to transgender people whose transitioning process is celebrated as making “their body match the gender they identify with.”<sup>20</sup>

Writing *The Myth of the Wrong Body*, Missé says, was “part of an almost therapeutic process of recovering my body, *reconquering* it through love.”<sup>21</sup> To achieve this reconquest, he set out on a journey of “learning to accept [his] body,” with or without modifications, simply to “live a better life.”<sup>22</sup> During this process, he distanced himself from what he calls the “identitarianism” implicit in some gender narratives.<sup>23</sup>

Strong doses of normativity in identity narratives, including the narrative of today, make it difficult to accept the contingencies of selfhood. This is especially the case with regard to sexual and gender identity because, as Masha Gessen said, we assign such “disproportionate importance” to them. But there is, after all, an alternative. Gessen suggests, “What if we just agree to be playful and have fun with the one life each of us is given?”

Based on their own experiences with gender nonconformity, Miquel Missé and Masha Gessen express a deep frustration with the individualist, essentialist, and normative components of current gender narratives. Both realize that the *quest for becoming*

*who you really are* is not the solution to the identity problem but, to the contrary, is its very origin. Eventually, both shift their approach to a *quest of being comfortable with whoever you happen to be*. Such a therapeutic, playful approach to identity and gender was already taken a few thousand years ago in philosophical Daoism.

A core intention of the present book is to show that no other philosophical resource is better equipped than Daoism to deal with the three epistemological obstacles that prevent us from arriving at better narratives about gender. Daoism does not share the premise of an individual and essential self. Instead, it understands identity as relational and contingent. What is more, by understanding that human selfhood is “genuinely pretended,” Daoism has as its main concern not to get identity right, but to be at ease with oneself and others.

## IDENTITY TECHNOLOGIES

If gender identity is indeed relational and contingent rather than individual and essential, we need to ask: Which relations condition gender identity? And how do they change over time?

Another intention of this book is to show that these questions—how do different types of social relations shape different notions of gender identity, and how did notions of gender identity evolve?—can be answered with the theory of identity proposed by Paul D'Ambrosio and me in *You and Your Profile: Identity After Authenticity*.<sup>24</sup> Here is a brief outline of this theory in relation to gender.

The conceptual core of *You and Your Profile* consists in the distinction between three “identity technologies”—that is, social

and psychological practices by which we build our sense of self and ascribe selfhood to others: “sincerity,” “authenticity,” and “proficiency.”<sup>25</sup> These three words are put inside quotation marks because the first and the second are used as technical terms and therefore convey a sense somewhat different from their common meaning. The third has been specifically coined to designate a rather new identity technology for which no proper existing term could be found.

Following Lionel Trilling, sincerity as an identity technology means finding selfhood in *sincere commitment*—behaviorally, emotionally, intellectually, etc.—*to social roles* including, importantly, gender roles.<sup>26</sup> As mentioned, in traditional societies many women internalized and enacted female roles (such as daughter, wife, or mother) in line with social expectations. They identified with such roles and were identified with them by others. This is to say, gender relations were organized along the lines of distinct, and typically hierarchical, gender roles.

Once more following Trilling, authenticity, as an identity technology, arose out of the revolt against a strict commitment to social roles. In modernity, such commitment increasingly appeared not as a good but as a bad thing: as mere *conformity*. In the “age of authenticity” (as Charles Tayler called it), personal identity was supposed to be found in the *pursuit of originality*.<sup>27</sup> “Originality” has several overlapping but also partly contradictory levels of meaning: being unique and special, being creative and innovative, and being unaltered, pure, or original in the sense of “from the beginning.” Accordingly, individualism arose, and relations among humans were increasingly considered as oriented toward the mutual recognition of sovereign and autonomous agents, independent of their respective gender.

As argued in *You and Your Profile*, the age of authenticity is currently coming to an end, however, and a third identity technology is taking hold: the building of selfhood through the *curation of profiles*, or “profificity.”<sup>28</sup> In the case of successful profile curation, we become truly invested in our profilic identity. On social media and in our professional or political lives we tend to “brand” ourselves in certain ways and then hope that our profiles are validated through social feedback loops. Such social validation feedback loops often now characterize our relations with our “general peer”—anonymous larger audiences to whom we present ourselves, and with whom we interact, without meeting them in person.

Identity technologies are formative for making gender what it concretely is at any given time in history for any concrete person. When “sincerity” dominates, people identify with conventional gender roles. In the age of authenticity, rebelling against such gender roles is regarded as indicative of a person’s unique individuality. In an almost dialectical way, profificity combines the contradictions between sincerity and authenticity. On the one hand, the authentic idea of “being true to oneself” is celebrated and, on the other hand, identification with a collective gender identity once again takes on a positive meaning. Profiles tend to affirm gender and to emphasize its display. While the public display of gender identity under conditions of profificity is somewhat reminiscent of the age of sincerity—for instance, by emphasizing gender in how people dress, speak, and move—profificity differs from sincerity by dissociating gender from fixed roles. In profificity, being a woman is no longer tied to being a wife or mother. Profiles can be freely mixed and matched, changed and reinterpreted. Profilic identity, including profilic gender identity, is dynamic, unpredictable, and diverse.

## CHAPTER SUMMARIES

Working toward better narratives around gender is the purpose of this book. This work is undertaken with two philosophical resources that present alternatives to the premise of an essential individual self: Daoism and the theory of identity technologies. In connection with this theoretical endeavor, Daoism also promotes something practical: gender ease.

The first chapter provides an account of a Daoist philosophy of gender and identity. At the core of this philosophy is a critique of the early Chinese sociopolitical regime of sincerity associated with Confucianism. While Daoism shares with Confucianism a thoroughly relational conception of selfhood, it combats the internalization of (hierarchical) roles and regards human identity, including gender identity, as provisional and subject to transformation. The Daoist view on gender is embedded in the much larger and more comprehensive conceptual horizon of yinyang thinking. From a yinyang perspective, an essentialist, individualist pursuit of gender identity is absurd and potentially pathological. Accordingly, the Daoist approach to gender roles is not to *be* them, but to *play* them as enjoyably as possible.

The second chapter attempts to provide a philosophical theory of the self and gender identity. Although the self is scientifically elusive—it's impossible to pin down and define through empirical means—a sense of self is instrumental for individuals and society, enabling them to function. It is a crucial psychological, social, and existential construct, and it includes a personal sense of gender. The Daoist question here is how to be comfortable with one's gendered self despite all its incongruities and the contingencies of life.