

## Being Your Best Self: Authenticity, Morality, and Gender Norms

Abstract: Trans and gender-nonconforming people sometimes say that certain gender norms are *authentic* for them. For example, a trans man might say that abiding by norms of masculinity tracks *who he really is*. Authenticity is sometimes taken to appeal to an essential, pre-social “inner self.” It is also sometimes understood as a moral notion. Authenticity claims about gender norms therefore appear inimical to two key commitments in feminist philosophy: that all gender norms are *socially constructed*, and that many domains of gender norms are both morally and prudentially *bad*. I argue that that this apparent tension is illusory. Concordant with existing trans narratives of authenticity, I articulate an existentialist view that understands authenticity as a socially embedded, constructive project undertaken in a non-ideal social world, rather than a reflective uncovering of a pre-given, essential self. I then show that authenticity and morality can come apart; what is authentic for someone need not be either morally good or good for them. I conclude that the authenticity of gender norms does not cut against the feminist commitments that I identify. This conclusion enables a theoretical space that is both respectful of trans experience and critical of dominant gender norms, an important liberatory goal.

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Of all the options I've got, I like being girl the best.  
- Kate Bornstein

Find out who you are and do it on purpose.  
- Dolly Parton

In his autobiography, *Becoming a Man*, P. Carl describes his experience navigating the demands of masculinity as a transgender man. He writes,

I am in one way “becoming” a man. But in another way, I have always been one, and I’m trying out all the ways to live as one, some good, some bad. One night I was in a Lyft talking to a guy who was a dental technician trying to join the Navy. He told me he was doing it “for his woman.” “I think she’s the one,” he said tentatively. “They only want your money, and I’ve told her I haven’t got any, but I’m making her sign a prenup anyway.”

I heard myself say “Yeah, man, I feel you—all that bullshit about women’s rights.” He laughed and said “Yeah, you know, my man, you know what I’m saying.” I tipped him \$10 and gave him five stars for letting me indulge my inner sexist jerk. (Carl, 2020)

This story will evoke a familiar, complicated feeling for many readers. Most of us find ourselves subject to gender norms which demand that we behave in ways that are *bad*, for us or for other people. Many gender norms are patriarchal, hierarchical, racist, sexist, and cisnormative; they recommend behavior contrary to our moral sensibilities, our self-interest, our preferences or needs. Some people were assigned those norms at birth and navigate them as a result of lifelong training and habit. However, many transgender (trans) and gender-nonconforming (GNC) people find ourselves subject to gender norms which were *not* assigned to us, and which are deeply flawed in ways of which we are (perhaps uniquely, often painfully) aware. Nevertheless, these norms can feel right; they can feel like *ours* in a way that the assigned norms never did. Put differently: many trans and GNC people experience ourselves as caught between normative standards, where morality, self-interest, or social expectations pull in one direction, but a deep and powerful sense of *authenticity* pulls in another.

Most gender norms are poor standards for conduct. Macroscopically, the norms encoded in dominant cultural practices encode a system of racialized gender hierarchy into practical law, and thereby provide guidelines for the enforcement of that hierarchy. Microscopically, the demands of particular gender norms often conflict with what is morally good, or good for us as individuals. For example, many dominant norms of masculinity excuse violence and

misogynistic behavior but discourage healthy emotional development, while corresponding norms of femininity promote passivity and self-abnegation. This creates a “boys will be boys” cultural context where masculinity is bound up with misogyny and poor mental health, while femininity encourages tolerance of bad behavior by privileged men at a cost to oneself. As Carl’s account demonstrates, this context makes it difficult to be masculine and morally good—or to be feminine and maintain a healthy self-interest. For those of us with both feminist commitments and a persistent sense of the authenticity of certain gender norms, navigating this territory is a persistent theoretical, ethical, and practical challenge.

I hold that this felt sense of authenticity tracks something real. Gender norms, including harmful or oppressive gender norms, can be authentic for a person. This is complicated by the following commitment: I hold, concomitant to central commitments in feminist philosophy, that gender norms are *socially constructed*, and that most dominant standards of gender norms are morally or prudentially *bad*. Under these conditions, what does it mean for a gender norm to be experienced as *authentic*? What is the relationship between authenticity and other normative standards such that something morally or prudentially bad could be authentic? If some gender norms are morally or prudentially bad, can they nevertheless give us reasons to act?

These questions arise for anyone who experiences gender norms as authentic, regardless of whether those norms were assigned to them at birth. Trans and GNC people are not “problem cases” here; gender norms affect nearly everyone. However, this inquiry will center trans and GNC people, for two reasons. First, there are certain explanations of felt gender norm authenticity that are available for cis or gender-conforming experience but not trans or GNC experience. For example, Witt (2011) argues that gender norms hold sway over individuals because of habituation and training. One might argue, along these lines, that dominant gender norms aren’t really authentic—they only *feel* that way because we are trained and habituated to follow them. But many trans and GNC people have not been trained and habituated to follow the gender norms which feel authentic for them. The “habituation” account will not work; another

explanation must be found. Second, the need to explain gender norm authenticity is more pertinent for those who do not fit comfortably into dominant gender categories and are brutally punished for it. Attending to our experiences of gendered authenticity can be the difference between finding the social and hermeneutical resources one needs to have a livable life, or not. As a result, trans and GNC communities have engaged in important work towards solving the practical dilemmas created by the authenticity of gender norms, and are important sites of resistance to the harms of dominant norms.

In short, many (though by no means all) trans and GNC people experience some harmful gender norms as authentic for us. However, the nature of this authenticity remains unclear; a better understanding is needed to make sense of these experiences and the prominent role they play in self-understanding and practical deliberation. Moreover, as I will show, certain interpretations of these experiences characterize them as anti-feminist. I will argue that this is a mistake which rests on confusions about the nature of authenticity as well as a mischaracterization of trans subjectivity.

The primary goal of this paper is to get clear about what is being said when trans and GNC people claim that gender norms are authentic for us, in order to demonstrate the *lack of tension* between these claims and certain moral and metaphysical commitments in feminist philosophy. I defend the following central thesis:

**Gender Norm Authenticity.** Gender norms can be authentic for a person, and thereby generate authoritative normative reasons for that person to act, *even though* some gender norms are morally or prudentially bad, and all are socially constructed.

I take Gender Norm Authenticity to be a desirable position for anyone interested in theorizing inclusively about gender liberation. To support this claim while maintaining key commitments from feminist philosophy, I defend the following two claims:

**Social Authenticity.** Authenticity is a project of constructing an intelligible self out of available materials from one's social context.

**Authoritative Authenticity.** Authenticity has *normative authority* over our conduct, but this does not mean the actions it recommends are (morally or prudentially) *good*.

On Social Authenticity, social phenomena can be authentic insofar as they are “owned” and incorporated into one’s self-concept in the right way, an active and constructive process. I draw here from a family of views in existentialist philosophy, such as those defended by Heidegger (1962), Taylor (1991), and Guignon (2004). On Authoritative Authenticity, authenticity gives us powerful reasons to do what is authentic for us, even if there are other powerful reasons (such as moral or prudential reasons) not to do it. Together, these claims capture trans and GNC expressions of authenticity, while allowing that gender norms are socially constructed and that many domains of gender norms conflict with morality or prudence.

In §I, I articulate the apparent tension between commitments in feminist philosophy and Gender Norm Authenticity. I identify two important claims about gender norms in feminist metaphysics, and show how authenticity claims are sometimes taken to challenge both. In §II, I present Social Authenticity as a plausible positive view and show how it is already implicit in many trans and GNC narratives. In §III, I defend Authoritative Authenticity. I outline three ways of thinking about authenticity as a normative standard, and show how, on each view, authenticity need not be always morally good or good for us. In §IV, I defend Gender Norm Authenticity. I synthesize preceding sections to outline the way gender norms can be authentic and thus authoritative over individuals’ conduct, even when those norms are the appropriate target of feminist critique. I articulate the practical dilemmas this can generate. I argue that these dilemmas are faced by all who function in a non-ideal world, and that trans and GNC people regularly do material, epistemic, and discursive work to solve them by creating spaces for agency and self-understanding within trans worlds of sense. In §V I conclude with a brief discussion of authenticity’s role in gender liberation.

## I. Feminist Philosophy and Gender Norms

In this section I articulate the apparent tension between key commitments in feminist philosophy and authenticity claims about gender norms, or “authenticity claims” for short.

While authenticity claims are by no means universal in trans narratives, they are common—particularly when we talk about discovering, exploring, or constructing identities. People might talk of being *real* or *true to themselves*, or of reflecting *who they really are* in body, dress, presentation, comportment, name, pronouns, and so on. Gender norms are often divided into standards of *masculinity* and *femininity*. For example, imagine a black-tie event in New York City, where the feminine norm recommends wearing a gown and the masculine norm recommends wearing a tuxedo. An authenticity claim here might be the following: “I know that I am supposed to wear a gown to this event, but wearing a tuxedo just feels more like *me*.” Or: “I won’t be wearing a dress tonight, because *that’s not who I am*.” Put simply: Authenticity claims hold that some gender norm or set of norms is or is not authentic for you, that the force of that norm is or is not “true” or “real” for you.

Broadly speaking, gender norms are *the evaluative standards associated with gender*: they are the expectations, constraints and enablements, and spoken and unspoken rules which apply to individuals in virtue of their position in gendered social space. Since gender practices vary widely across cultures and contexts, gender norms do as well. However, feminist analysis has paid special attention to what I call *dominant gender norms*. Dominant gender norms are the norms which operate in the mainstream cultural contexts that exert power over the vast majority of social and material resources. That is, they are the gender norms operative in what Lugones (2007) calls the “colonial/modern gender system”—a division of resources and roles according to hierarchical, constructed categories of sex and race. Due to a legacy of imperialism, psychological oppression, and epistemic violence, dominant gender norms infiltrate lives, minds, and practical decision procedures across contexts, even when we work to escape or resist them. As a result, many trans and GNC people are forced to grapple with dominant gender norms in order to make sense of ourselves and our experiences. We are raised in dominant contexts and shaped by them; we may have work, family, or other practical responsibilities

there. In short, although dominant gender norms are not the only game in town, they are often the most powerful and pernicious.

Feminist philosophy has historically criticized dominant gender norms for contributing to the oppression of women. For example, Young (1980) argues that the enforcement of feminine norms in dominant post-industrial societies trains women to treat their body as a “fragile encumbrance” (144), something to be “looked at and acted upon” rather than lived through (148); this creates a restricted and awkward mode of existence and restricts women’s embodied agency. Similarly, Manne (2017) argues that the primary function of feminine norms is to circumscribe and enforce a subordinate social role for women and girls across contexts. Moreover, these standards are racialized. For example, hooks (1982) and Collins (2000) argue that Black women have historically been subjected to strict codes of femininity, while at the same time being systematically represented in stereotypes which fail at those standards, so that it is “extremely difficult and oftentimes impossible for the black female to develop a positive self-concept” (hooks, 1982, 86).

More broadly, feminist philosophers have criticized dominant gender norms for being oppressive *at root*. As Lugones (2007) and others have argued, dominant gender practices are rooted in colonialism, and thus in the subordination of non-white colonized peoples. They also subordinate white women, although the experience of white women is integrated with racial privilege, and thus differs substantially both in kind and in level of brutality from the subordination of colonized peoples. Dominant gender norms maintain racist structures of power by designating heteronormative whiteness as central to good gender performance, and thus to full humanity; non-white peoples are brutally punished for failing to conform to norms from which they are categorically excluded (Lugones, 2007, 205; see also Spillers, 1987; Espiritu, 1997). Within this framework, gender norms function to justify and reify interlocking systems of oppression across the colonized world.

We might conclude here, as many feminist philosophers have done, that we ought to eliminate, or at least change, these norms. But if it's true that we *ought* to change or eliminate them, it must also be true that we *can*. There is a widespread belief that gender-normative behavior is innate or essential to human existence, and thus cannot be changed. This is a version of *gender essentialism*, the view that genders are natural kinds whose members have fixed, innate, natural features. There are therefore excellent feminist reasons to reject gender essentialism.<sup>1</sup> Instead, gender and gendered phenomena are held to be *socially constructed*. Social constructionists about gender norms hold that gender norms are dependent on human ritual and practice, and that much gendered behavior results from conformity to these norms rather than from innate or essential features (see Witt, 2011; Haslanger, 2012; Ásta, 2018).

Feminists are therefore often engaged in what Haslanger calls the *debunking project* (Haslanger, 2012; Ásta, 2018). I take it that this project is not unique to analytic philosophy; however, since this tradition has clearly articulated its key commitments, I primarily draw on that literature here. The *debunking project* arises from a normative position about the badness of dominant gender norms, together with the metaphysical position that they are socially constructed. Debunking social constructionists “argue that the rituals or practices in question are unjust and should not be maintained in their current form and that the supposed metaphysical or natural justification for them is misguided” (Haslanger, 2012, 127). The aim is “to show that certain claims to objectivity are unfounded and that any social organization based on such claims is thus unjustified” (Ásta, 2018, 58). The debunking project therefore makes a normative claim, that dominant gender norms *ought* to be changed or eliminated, because they are both bad in themselves and bad for people who follow them; concordantly, it makes a descriptive claim that gender norms *can* be changed or eliminated, because they are not inescapable facts about human nature.

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<sup>1</sup> For prominent arguments against gender essentialism, see Mill, 1867; Beauvoir, 1948; and Butler, 2007. For discussion see Witt, 2011; Haslanger, 2012; Dembroff, 2018; and Ásta, 2018.



Authenticity claims in dominant contexts appear to raise difficulties for a debunking project for two reasons. Consider, first, the debunkers' descriptive claim that gender norms are socially constructed. The notion of authenticity is sometimes taken to appeal to one's "inner self," and to locate what is authentic for a person within that self. This inner self is understood as innate, immutable, and socially unmediated. If this is right, then authenticity claims about gender norms suggest that those norms are somehow innate, immutable, and socially unmediated. A debunking view, which places gendered phenomena in the external social world, precludes this understanding.

On the other hand, if gender norms are socially constructed, it is hard to make sense of authenticity claims. To see this more clearly, we can reverse the dialectic. A gender essentialist has an easy explanation for claims about gender norm authenticity. They can simply say that people have essentially gendered features, and those features motivate people to respond to gender norms; one's "internal gender" matches up with some external norms. On this view, masculinity and femininity are essential features of the self, and the social aspects of gender, such as gender norms, arise out of a translation of those essential features into socially intelligible characteristics. This need not entail that gendered features are related to biological sex. For example, Serano (2007) holds that there are essential masculine and feminine inclinations which occur irrespective of sex: "While variations in our sex characteristics and gender inclinations may occur naturally, the way we interpret those traits, and the identities and meanings we associate with them, can vary significantly from culture to culture" (101).

This would spell trouble for a debunking project. If individuals across contexts have innate, essential features that *just happen* to match up with socially constructed gender norms, that is either a stunning coincidence, or strong evidence that gender norms are importantly connected to innate, essential features of humans. But social constructionists deny just this. Put this way, it seems the essentialist has a better explanation of gender norm authenticity than the social constructionist does; gender norms feel authentic because they are the social expressions

of deep, essential gendered features of individuals. This objection has been raised by trans theorists such as Serano (2007) and Prosser (1998). If authenticity is wedded to essentialism, and gender norms can be authentic, then something about gender must be essential. Conversely, if authenticity is wedded to essentialism, and gender is *not* essential, authenticity claims about gender norms either point to a truly remarkable pattern of coincidence, or they seem straightforwardly false. Either way, authenticity claims appear inimical to feminist social constructionist claims.

The second apparent tension between the debunking project and authenticity claims is normative. Recall the debunker's normative claim; dominant gender norms ought to be changed or eliminated. Authenticity is often understood as a moral notion. What is authentic is thereby taken to be *good*. To claim that any norm is authentic, then, seems to entail that it doesn't need to be changed or eliminated. Then, if the authenticity claims in question are about dominant gender norms, they are incompatible with the debunker's normative claim.

One immediate answer to this challenge is to point out that not all gender norms are created equal. While dominant gender norms are oppressive and harmful, other domains may escape, or even be constructed specifically to resist, these oppressions and harms. For example, drawing from Lugones' work on *worlds of sense* (1987), Bettcher (2014) argues that there are resistant trans contexts in which we negotiate "alternative gender practices" that center trans experience and subjectivity (389-90). In these worlds of sense, domains of gender norms—masculinities, femininities, or other standards altogether—may arise that are non-coercive, non-hierarchical, and non-oppressive. They may center rather than marginalizing trans experience; they may actively resist norms of whiteness and coloniality; they may prioritize self-understanding and authenticity rather than gendered and racialized hierarchy.<sup>2</sup> Many

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<sup>2</sup> For example, Marion (2011) describes alternative normative practices which arise from *ballroom communities*. According to Marion, gender practices in these communities actively subvert and resist dominant gender norms to create space for queer and trans subjectivity, as well as to prepare participants to move through dominant worlds. I say more about ballroom culture in successive sections.

authenticity claims draw on the gender norms produced in these worlds. To ignore the rich histories of trans and GNC communities and interpretive practices is to actively misunderstand a great deal of trans and GNC subjectivity and self-understanding.

However, not all trans or GNC experience of gender norms is grounded in alternative worlds. Among the most difficult challenges many of us face is the fact that dominant, harmful, cis-centric gender norms have power over us and our choices. Consider, for example, P. Carl's account of responding to the demands of a toxic masculinity (Carl, 2020). Carl describes himself, a feminist with a PhD in gender studies, as nevertheless grappling with the persistent sense that harmful, misogynistic, white American masculinity is a part of him—something he must reckon with to understand and communicate himself as a man.

Similarly, in her autobiography *Redefining Realness*, Janet Mock recounts her early experiences of femininity:

Like most teen girls (whether they're trans or cis), I had a vision board of my ideal, pulled mostly from the pop-culture images that MTV had fed me. I wanted Halle Berry's or Tyra Banks's breasts, Britney Spears's midsection, Beyoncé's curvy silhouette and long hair, and I prayed that I wouldn't grow any taller so I didn't tower over the petite Asian girls who were the barometer of beauty in the [Hawaiian] islands. (Mock, 2014, 122-3)

Insofar as trans and GNC people find that certain gender norms resonate with us, this can sometimes occur in dominant worlds. Most of us are not born and raised in resistant contexts. The gender norms with which we have formative experiences are, very often, not expansive, inclusive, or affirming, but restrictive, exclusionary, and coercive. As such, authentic self-understanding can require reckoning with the power these experiences have over who we are.

Put simply, while many authenticity claims are about gender norms that are not the appropriate subjects of feminist critique, some *are*. As Carl and Mock both demonstrate, it's not as if trans and GNC people don't know this. We are deeply, materially, brutally aware that the dominant gender norms which sometimes shape our choices are harmful. Nevertheless, many of us have had the unsettling experience of feeling as if some dominant gender norm, a piece of a hegemonic and harmful system of which we are often the most prominent victims, is

an authentic part of us. What appears as a theoretical conflict for feminist philosophy is therefore matched by a genuine practical dilemma for many trans and GNC people.

In the next section, I reject popular “inner self” views of authenticity as implausible, and, drawing from existentialist views defended by Heidegger (1962), Taylor (1991), and Guignon (2004), articulate a view of authenticity as socially embedded. I show that what I call *social authenticity* is already implicit in many trans and GNC narratives. This will dissolve a tension I have identified between commitments in feminist philosophy and trans and GNC authenticity claims. Since authenticity is a socially embedded phenomenon, authenticity claims about gender norms do not entail the claim that gender norms are not socially constructed.

## II. Social Authenticity

The intuitive idea of authenticity, in the words of Bernard Williams, is “the idea that some things are in some real sense really you, or express what you [are], and others aren’t” (Jeffries, 2002). Colloquial definitions include “being true to oneself” or “being who one really is.” Terms like “true” and “really” are sometimes taken to suggest the presence of something distinct from one’s outward performances, which are false or façade. According to Guignon (2004), this “modern ideal of authenticity,” as defended by cultural figures such as Oprah and Dr. Phil, relies on a presupposition that “lying within each individual, there is a deep, ‘true self—the ‘Real Me’—in distinction from all that is not really me” (3). This “true self” consists of innate, socially unmediated traits which represent “who you really are”. To live authentically, one must “find” or “get in touch with” oneself—indicating that there is something covered or hidden, with which one can be *out* of touch, and which exists apart from the influence of corrupting external factors such as relationships and social roles.

This picture is unsatisfying. Given humanity’s deeply social nature, philosophers have questioned our epistemic access to this core self—if indeed there would be any recognizable “self” left after all of the “external” factors are stripped away (Adorno, 1973; Rorty, 1989). Others

have argued that the “core self” is not merely a fiction, but a harmful one. Foucault (1983) argues that the myth of the hidden self encourages the individual to waste time trying to find it, rather than engaging in the crucial project of *creating* the self. Taylor (1991) argues that the notion of authenticity as *self-fulfillment*, understood as discovering and satisfying one’s deep desires, is self-indulgent. Furthermore, Guignon (2004) notes themes in art, literature, and philosophy suggesting that humans are not fundamentally good or pure, but that “what lies within is characterized by aggression, cruelty and violence” (54). That is, even if there is a “pre-given self,” perhaps it is something we don’t want to be true to.

What I am calling the “inner-self view” is deeply implausible. As such, I argue that it is uncharitable at best to represent all authenticity claims as presupposing it. Many trans and GNC people understand our relationship to gender and gender norms as deeply embedded in and influenced by our upbringing and culture—and no less authentic or real for it. Consider, for example, Janet Mock’s understanding of her own identity:

I am aware that identifying with what people see versus what’s authentic, meaning who I actually am, involves erasure of parts of myself, my history, my people, my experiences.... When I think of identity, I think of our bodies and souls and the influences of family, culture, and community—the ingredients that make us. (Mock, 2014, 249)

Mock does not understand her authenticity as stripping away her social context in order to uncover a gendered inner self. Rather, she describes her authentic self as in part *made of* social context; her history, people, experiences. This process is not seen as stable or complete, but as ongoing and constructive (230). At the same time, her authenticity is fundamentally in tension with certain social expectations. Mock’s identity as a Black trans woman is a way of representing herself as intelligible to others in dominant contexts; but this process requires obscuring elements of herself, and thus is never fully authentic. Mock’s understanding of authenticity here is consistent with an intuitive understanding of authenticity as distinguishing what is *one’s own* or what is *true to oneself* from what is not, while at the same time reflecting the socially embedded nature of the self.

To make sense of the richness and complexity of gendered experience, our philosophical view of authenticity ought to capture both of these features. I propose, then, that we adopt a view I call “social authenticity,” on which the authentic self is constituted by a certain kind of relationship to one’s social roles, relationships, and commitments. Views like this are defended by many in the existentialist tradition, particularly Heidegger (1962), Taylor (1991), and Guignon (2004). In what follows, I will articulate some common commitments among these views, and show how they satisfy these desiderata.

For Heidegger, humans are constitutively social beings. We do not exist prior to or apart from our situations. Rather, we “always-already” find ourselves embedded in a social context, with a past, a perspective, and roles, tendencies, and traits, all of which come loaded with social meanings. Indeed, the expression “find ourselves” is misleading; we do not *find* our “selves” as pre-given entities, but are constantly making ourselves through our decisions. We must then choose whether to take responsibility for these decisions, or not. As Carman (2003) puts it, “I am handed my existence, but then I have to face up to it or not: ‘To be or not to be’” (289).

Heidegger’s word for “authenticity”, *Eigentlichkeit*, is perhaps best translated as “owning” or “being one’s own” (Varga and Guignon, 2020). For Heidegger, authenticity is constructing oneself in accordance with one’s “that-for-the-sake-of-which”—one’s overarching narrative, or life project. It is easy enough to get lost in the “average everydayness” and to just do “what one does;” this is *inauthentic*, and according to Heidegger, most of us are inauthentic most of the time. But authenticity does not require separating oneself from these concerns. Everyday tasks are done authentically insofar as they are “owned.” I am authentic insofar as I recognize my activities, concerns, relationships, and roles as *mine*, done “for-the-sake-of” my life project, and insofar as I am willing to commit to and defend them as my own. Authenticity is a matter of “owning up to the concrete situation in which one finds oneself and understanding one’s being explicitly *as one’s own*” (Carman, 2003, 297).

In a similar vein, Taylor (1991) argues that human life is fundamentally shared:

We become human agents, capable of understanding ourselves, and hence of defining an identity, through our acquisition of rich human languages of expression... The genesis of the human mind is in this sense not “monological,” not something each accomplishes on his or her own, but dialogical. (33)

Taylor holds that the self is shaped by the background of values and meanings against which it is formed. The authentic self is therefore not an entity, but a process. In this process, one navigates the practical realities of existing as a somewhat disjointed socially embedded first-person perspective with an always-already existing plethora of everyday concerns, while concurrently trying to make sense of that existence. We aren't most like ourselves apart from our social context; rather, we are *made of* context, or, rather, constantly *making ourselves* from context. The “true self” of authenticity is not radically distinguished from the social world. It is a product and a part of the social world.

One might worry that this picture generates what Korsgaard (2009) calls the “paradox of self-constitution.” How can we understand this project of making oneself, unless there is already a “self” there prior to the making to *do* the making? That is, how can one be “a craftsman who is, mysteriously, his own product” (Korsgaard, 2009, 42)? In a post on social media coming out as trans, actor Elliot Page appears to evoke this concern when he writes “I can't begin to express how remarkable it feels to finally love who I am enough to pursue my authentic self” (Page, 2020). Here, Page is describing himself as both *already being* someone—that is, already having a self—and also beginning to *pursue* an authentic self. They do not, however, seem bothered by the paradox of self-constitution, and their phrasing can help us explain why. We can distinguish here between a broad class of facts about oneself, and the authentic subset of those facts. Authenticity is about owning up to and standing up for what may already be facts about oneself. When Page writes that he loves who he *is* (present), we can interpret him as saying that he loves his broader self; his traits, his values, and the other facts that constitute him. When they write that they mean to *pursue their authentic self* (future), we can interpret them as saying that they mean to own parts of themselves which they have previously denied, a process which will help them make sense of themselves.

It is important to recognize that social authenticity does not entail the view that the self is entirely freely chosen or “up to us.” There is certainly an element of choice here—as Heidegger puts it, a “choosing to choose a kind of being-one’s self” (1962, 314). Every choice I make is a choice about what kind of person I want to be. However, these choices are constrained by my *facticity*, or the set of social and psychological facts which constrain my options. I may be able to choose whether to marry Frida or Fred, but I cannot fully choose the implications of this choice, its effect on the world around me, or even what it means for my own emotions and dispositions. Moreover, one’s choices have value only against background conditions of intelligibility—what Taylor (1991) calls “horizons of significance.” For our choices to be meaningful, they must work with existing social meanings that others in our social milieu can understand and interpret. To choose authentically, then, I must be aware: both of the significance of each choice, and that the choice itself is significant; it constitutes me. My choice is free, but not unmoored.

A key feature of the social view, then, is that authenticity requires a relatively clear-eyed understanding of one’s own history, psychology, and relationship to others. One must know one’s situation in order to choose well. Moreover, one be aware of one’s own possibilities and limitations as one always-already finds them to be. Call this the *epistemic condition* on authenticity. You cannot own your facticity unless you know what it is you are owning.

However, an awareness of facticity does not commit us to merely accepting the world we are given. Ortega (2005) points out that our horizons of significance tend to be deeply flawed. We often “inherit certain possibilities that should not be repeated; we are members of communities with a past full of bloodshed, racism, and countless unmentionable acts” (28). Authenticity might therefore require *resisting* or *changing* certain shared social meanings or values. Taylor (1991) argues that the ideal of authenticity is admirable precisely because it enables the original contribution that each individual can, and should, make to the whole. In a democratic society, each of us is called on to contribute to the community of ideas from their own authentic commitments; this is essential to the public good. The ideal of authenticity



therefore encourages each individual to take responsibility for their actions, and to critically evaluate, challenge, or change the norms and values which guide those actions.

This process therefore involves not just recognition of the self as a part of the world, but an active, creative process of engagement with one's world. Authenticity requires a productive originality that can only be realized by the person in question, in their own unique situation. Authentic selves create art, philosophy, scientific inquiry, and social change. The relationship between authentic self and context is a reciprocal one. When the self is fundamentally a part of the world, to paint a picture or compose a symphony or propose an idea or start a movement is to create one's self *by* creating one's world.

This creative process can be crucial for building an intelligible life. The world does not give marginalized people the materials we need; so, we must make the world into what we need it to be. This, I suggest, is constantly ongoing in trans lives and worlds of sense, out of necessity. In *Gender Outlaw*, Kate Bornstein articulates this kind of construction of the self through art and activism that change her social context. Bornstein thoroughly rejects an understanding of her gendered self as "fixed" or "given." Instead, she describes herself and her gender as "patchwork"; she writes, "I learned to live my life like I'm making a collage" (148). The metaphor of "collage" here suggests a creative construction out of available elements. The created image is new, but it does not spring fully formed from the void. It comes together out of existing colors, shapes, and images, cut up and glued back together.

Queer and trans communities have long histories of engaging in this project. Consider the gender practices prevalent in *ballroom cultures*, queer and trans communities of color which have evolved in most major cities in the U.S. Ballroom cultures have their own gender classification system and accordant gender norms. In his study of Detroit's ballrooms, Bailey (2011) argues that these practices "are the result of a considerable amount of work, a form of discursive labor that often goes unnoticed and taken for granted by those outside of the community" (371-2). These identities and norms are created out of two needs: to make oneself

intelligible to oneself and others both within the community and without, and to avoid the violence visited on the visibly queer in the broader world. Thus, constituents of ballroom culture subvert or creatively re-purpose dominant gender norms, at the same time as they prepare one another to function effectively within them.

The creative labor of building alternative gender practices, I argue, grows out of a need to own up to parts of oneself that are not intelligible to others in the dominant context. The process is beholden to shared intelligibility; it must trade on existing social meanings in order to make sense. For example, new pronouns are sensible only in an existing grammatical space, in contrast to existing pronouns. Just as one might compose a piece of music out of existing chords and tones, trans and GNC people historically create intelligible gender terms and identities for themselves, and spaces for cultural exploration, out of existing “gender materials”—terms, practices, categories, and norms.

In sum: On Social Authenticity, a person is given a situation, a set of personal, social, and psychological facts. That person becomes authentic by *owning up to* and *standing up for* themselves, an active, constructive, and often creative process (contrasted with the passive, reflective process of *finding* themselves). This project is not undertaken in a vacuum of value, but rather against a background of shared intelligibility. Social authenticity doesn’t posit a pre-given self, but neither does it mean that we have a radically free choice about what is authentic for us—insofar as we don’t always choose what we believe or care about, or what our context is like. A social view captures the intuitive idea of authenticity without encountering the problems faced by an “inner-self” view. On social authenticity, what is authentic is yours not merely because it is given to you, but because it is *made* yours.

It should be clear from this discussion that, if we adopt Social Authenticity, feminist commitments about the social construction of gender norms are not in conflict with authenticity claims. Gender norms and our responsiveness to them are part of the “raw materials” of our

facticity. We do not need to make any claims about their essential origins to acknowledge that they can be authentic for individuals.

In the next section, I will discuss the *authority* of authenticity as a normative standard. The fact that something is *authentic* for someone gives them a strong reason to do it. But what is the source of this reason? I will give several possible answers, and show how none of them entails that what is authentic must also be, on the whole, prudent or morally good. This will defuse the normative tension between feminist philosophy and trans authenticity claims.

### III. Authenticity and Normative Authority

Metaethicists distinguish between two kinds of normativity. All normative domains have the first kind: *formal normativity*. Something is formally normative just in case it is possible to succeed or fail according to its guidelines. Consider, for example, the normative domain “NCAA basketball rules.” A group of people on a court with a basketball might follow the standard of NCAA basketball rules; they might follow some other standard, such as the norms of the game HORSE; they might make up their own rules; or they might follow no rules at all. The choices are entirely up to preferences and goals of the players in question.

However, certain normative standards, such as morality or prudence (self-interest), appear to have a special power over our choices; they “really” tell us what to do. That is, they give us reasons to act that weigh heavy against other reasons we may have. This is sometimes called “robust” or “authoritative” normativity.<sup>3</sup> As Paakkunainen (2018) puts it,

Formal normativity is cheap: we can create new formally normative standards simply by inventing violable rules. Robust normativity is a seemingly more important phenomenon that many take to be associated with *normative reasons*. (403)

A standard might be authoritative in some cases, but not others. For example, college players during a championship game may have strong reasons to comply with NCAA rules, while

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<sup>3</sup> These terms are roughly interchangeable in the literature. I use the terminology of “authoritative normativity” in this paper to better parallel talk of reasons or standards having *normative authority*.

children playing after school, or those same college players during the off season, may not. However, some normative standards seem to be authoritative *in themselves*. Morality or prudence appear to give us powerful reasons, full stop.

In this section, I hold that authenticity has normative authority, but distinguish this from the claim that this is *moral* authority. If authenticity has moral authority, then claims about authenticity are also claims about morality. This appears to put some claims about gender norm authenticity in tension with feminist commitments. I argue that this tension is illusory. I briefly explore three plausible views on which authenticity has normative authority. On each view, authentic norms can conflict with moral norms. Therefore, even if some gender norms are authentic and thereby provide authoritative reasons to act, this would not mean that they are morally good on the whole.

Authenticity is certainly formally normative. We talk of being more or less authentic, fully authentic, or altogether inauthentic. Moreover, authenticity appears to hold powerful sway over our conduct. The fact that something is authentic for us seems, by itself, to provide us with a powerful reason to pursue it. For example, suppose that I must choose between a career as an accountant and as a professional dancer. Suppose that I have a plethora of good prudential reasons to choose accountancy; it is a lucrative, respectable profession, at which I can anticipate a productive and stable life (all things that I want). Dancing does not have these attributes. However, suppose that being a dancer feels authentic for me, and accountancy doesn't. Intuitively, the choice is a difficult one precisely because authenticity generates strong reasons to act, reasons that weigh heavy against other strong reasons.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> A full discussion of normative authority is beyond the scope of this paper. However, it is worth noting that some prominent existing views would identify authenticity as authoritative. Varieties of *constructivism*, for example, hold that normative force derives from the agents who are bound by it. Roughly, the idea is this: since authoritative reasons are characterized by their power over our practical deliberations, normative authority for agents is importantly related to the practical interests of those agents. If you have an authoritative reason to  $\phi$ , that is because of something about *you* and your relationship to  $\phi$ . As Street (2010) puts it, "the bumper sticker slogan of constructivism is... 'no normative truth independent of the practical point of view'" (367). On constructivist views, prudence and morality are authoritative because (or, depending on one's view, *insofar as*) we care about our own interests and

This is one reason authenticity claims have wielded such rhetorical power in discourse about queer and trans rights. If I say that I am coming out as queer because it is “who I really am” or that I am following some gender norms because they reflect my “true self,” that provides an explanation of my reasons for doing it that calls for no further justification. An understanding of sexuality or gender identity as a part of a person’s authentic self has lent legitimacy to a movement for social acceptance—precisely, I think, because we understand that authenticity gives us powerful normative reasons.

This is sometimes interpreted as equivalent to giving us *moral reasons*. But this needs further argument; not all powerful reasons are moral reasons. How, then, should we understand authenticity’s normative force? Here are three plausible answers. 1) It is in one’s interest to be authentic; authentic norms are prudential norms. 2) It is morally good to be authentic; authentic norms are moral norms. 3) Authenticity’s normative force is not reducible to morality or prudence.<sup>5</sup> In what follows, I will briefly discuss each possibility, and show that none of them entails that authenticity must always be in perfect lockstep with (all) moral norms.

First consider prudence. If the standard of authenticity is about respecting one’s true self, perhaps authenticity generates reasons of *self-interest*, also known as *prudential reasons*. This is plausible enough. Even if this is right, however, authenticity and other reasons of self-interest can conflict. Abandoning a stable career as an accountant to pursue a risky career as a dancer may be deeply imprudent on the whole, *even if* dancing is genuinely authentic. This does not undermine the possibility that authenticity is *pro tanto* prudent. The authentic subset of one’s prudential reasons may recommend a certain action, even if there are other prudential reasons against it. Sometimes different prudential norms simply recommend incompatible actions. Suppose I have a choice between marrying Fred and marrying Frida (and I cannot

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those of other agents. Plausibly, on a constructivist view, authenticity is authoritative because (or insofar as) we care about *being* ourselves—being the kind of agent who has interests that are their own.

<sup>5</sup> Note that (1) and (2) are not incompatible; authenticity may be authoritative because it represents some combination of morality and prudence (a moral duty to do right by oneself, for example).

marry both). Either spouse would be equally good for me, but for different reasons; with Frida I would live a life of excitement and adventure, with Fred I would live a life of comfort and stability. I have prudential reasons in favor of both choices, but choosing either involves foregoing the other.

A second option is that authenticity is normative because it is *morally good*. This view is defended by Rousseau (1953). For Rousseau, the self is the source of goodness, and society is the source of evil; authenticity requires peeling away the distorting effect of society to uncover the pure moral power of the self. The self is imbued with a pure moral sensibility which is debased by society and its conflicting demands. To be authentic, to be good, one must turn inwards. Similarly, Taylor (1991) defends “the moral force of the ideal of authenticity” (17) on the grounds that one has a responsibility to contribute to society from one’s personal convictions. According to Taylor, there is something “noble, courageous, and hence significant to giving shape to my own life” (39). Authenticity is therefore fundamentally about moral value.

Notice, however, that authenticity can conflict with moral goodness even if authenticity is a moral ideal. The argument here runs parallel to the prudential argument above. Different moral norms may recommend incompatible actions; this is the source of moral dilemmas. For example, suppose that I have promised to pick my friend up on time from the airport. However, just as I am about to leave, I encounter a lost child who needs help finding his parents. I have, it seems, a *pro tanto* moral reason to keep my promise *and* a *pro tanto* moral reason to help the child. Assuming I cannot effectively do both, I have conflicting moral reasons; as a moral agent, I must weigh my reasons and choose. Similarly, if authenticity generates moral reasons, these reasons might conflict with other moral reasons. I might have an authentic reason to comply with a norm of masculinity that recommends misogynistic behavior, but a (different) moral reason not to do this. As a moral agent, I must weigh my reasons and choose.

A third option is that authenticity is irreducible to either morality or prudence. On this view, if something is authentic for us, that gives us reason to do it—not because authenticity is

morally or prudentially good, but because authenticity alone is authoritative over us.<sup>6</sup> If this is right, then there is no theoretical issue if the demands of authenticity conflict with the demands of morality or prudence. On this view, then, what would be the source of authenticity's normative authority? If authenticity is moral or prudential, its authority is conferred by the authority of morality or prudence; but if it is neither of these things, then it must be authoritative for a different reason. However, this problem is not unique. Normative authority in general calls out for explanation. There are intuitive reasons to think that morality and prudence are authoritative; the fact that something is *morally good* or *good for us* seems, by itself, to give us a powerful reason to do it. This alone does not explain the source of that authority; a major branch of metaethics exists to tackle this very problem. I take it to be equally intuitive that authenticity is authoritative, for similar reasons; if something is *authentic*, that seems, by itself, to give us a powerful reason to do it.

In short, no matter how we understand the normative force of authenticity, we can conclude the following: To say that a thing is *authentic* for someone, and that this authenticity can generate authentic reasons for that person to act, is *not* to say that it is either prudentially or morally good on the whole. A major element of the normative tension I have identified between feminist philosophy and authenticity claims about gender norms is thus dissolved.

In the next section, I will combine the ideas of *social authenticity* and *authoritative authenticity* to articulate influence of gender norm authenticity on our practical choices as moral agents.

#### IV. Gender Norm Authenticity

One aim of this paper is to show that the authenticity of particular dominant gender norms can produce genuine practical dilemmas, and to show how trans and GNC communities

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<sup>6</sup> Or, perhaps, because authenticity is a subset of some further authoritative normative domain. If this is the case, all of our theoretical problems are solved; authenticity need not be either morally or prudentially good, and it has normative authority.

have done important labor to solve these dilemmas. I have argued that claims about gender norm authenticity are not in tension with either normative or descriptive commitments of feminist philosophy. However, this does not solve the following practical problem: What should we do when gender norms which are authentic for us recommend morally or prudentially bad actions? How do we weigh those reasons?

To address this question, I will first say a bit more about the dilemma itself. While many feminist philosophers have highlighted the issue with *particular* gender norms, such as a masculine norm which recommends misogynistic behavior, I argue that is not the heart of the issue. Notice that it is just as easy to point to particular gender norms that are *not* bad in themselves—a masculine norm which recommends the genuine virtue of *courage*, for example. I contend that the more salient critique is about *entire domains* of gender norms. For example, Lugones' (2007) analysis focuses largely on the structural origins of dominant gender norms as a domain, specifically their construction as bulwarks of the racist, hierarchical “colonial/modern gender system” (187). Relatedly, Manne (2017) argues that dominant feminine norms work in concert to delimit a subordinate role for women across contexts. These are not claims about any particular norm in the set, but rather about what unifies or distinguishes that set.

A normative domain is a set of norms linked by some unifying activity or aim. For example, *formal etiquette* is unified by the aim of maintaining polite society. If the unifying aim of some domain D fails to meet the standard of some other domain E, then D is criticizable *as a domain* by the lights of E. For example, we might criticize the unifying aim of formal etiquette for being *classist*. “Polite society” is deeply racialized and carries undertones of wealth stratification and privilege; compliance with its norms signifies adherence to class hierarchy. Since classism is unjust, formal etiquette as a domain is unjust, and thus morally bad. This will be true even if particular formal etiquette norms on occasion recommend the same actions as particular moral norms, as they almost certainly will.



Many domains of gender norms are analogous to the domain of formal etiquette. For example, following Lugones, we might think that many domains of gender norms are unified by the aim of *maintaining the colonial social order*. Since this social order is unjust, these normative domains are morally bad. Similarly, since the colonial social order is harmful to marginalized people, many such domains will also be *prudentially bad* for those people; it is generally bad for their self-interest to comply. This is distinct from (although consistent with) the claim that individual norms within the domain are morally or prudentially bad.

We can see from this discussion that there are at two ways in which we can evaluate gender norms according to some other domain (such as morality): either the entire domain is evaluated, or individual norms within it are evaluated. Concordantly, there are two ways in which some gender norms can be authentic for someone. First, some entire domain of gender norms can be authentic. For example, a particular domain of masculinity may be authentic for a person if they “own up to” that masculinity, by incorporating it as a standard which they take to be relevant to their behavior. This does not require following every norm in that domain wholesale. On the contrary, it may require that one interact critically with each norm, and balance it with other desires and obligations. Authenticity is difficult and may require negotiating between incommensurable demands. As Jenkins (2016) and Witt (2011) both point out, experiencing a norm as relevant to you is compatible with refusing to comply; in fact, one cannot rebel against a norm unless it applies to them.

Alternatively, individual norms within a domain may be authentic for someone, even if the entire domain is not. Consider, for example, someone who is genderqueer in the sense articulated by Dembroff (2020); they reject some or all domains of gender norms as binding over their conduct. I suggest that rejecting the domain does not entail rejecting each of its norms. Such individuals may, and in my experience often do, still incorporate individual gender norms as a part of their authentic selves. For example, they may take themselves to have strong authentic reasons to *wear suits*. Insofar as the person understands that their local world of

sense recommends *wearing suits* as a masculine norm, and they own up to this fact and understand themselves as masculine, they are incorporating this particular gender norm authentically into their life project.

This kind of authenticity is particularly apparent in the case of people who incorporate multiple gender norms that their world of sense takes to be incompatible. As non-binary model and activist Alok Vaid-Menon writes: “Over time, I learned that where I was taught dissonance, I found harmony. This beard, this skirt, this love: There are no contradictions here, there is just someone trying to figure it out” (Vaid-Menon, 111). Elsewhere, Menon writes that their femininity is an authentic expression of themselves (26), even as they reject the power of dominant, hegemonic gender norms. There are “no contradictions” precisely because the domains which hold that skirts and beards are incompatible are rejected as illegitimate, even as specific norms of masculinity and femininity *within* those domains are understood as their own.

Perhaps most saliently, gender norms can also be *counterfactually authentic* for someone. If authenticity is authoritative over our conduct, we may experience normative pressure to *become* more authentic—that is, to own up to elements of our facticity which we currently do not acknowledge. We can imagine, for example, someone who is persistently responsive to a particular gender norm or set of norms as a matter of psychological fact, but has not yet owned up to this. As Jenkins (2016) points out, experiencing oneself as responsive to certain gender norms is often an impetus for understanding oneself as trans or GNC. This psychological fact alone would not make a norm authentic in the sense I articulate. However, we might say that, *if* the person were to own up to this fact, it would be authentic for them. Moreover, one might find certain alternative norms strongly and persistently *inauthentic*—that is, impossible to make congruent with one’s life project. That person would have authentic reason to *disown* certain gender norms. Often, communicating one’s disownment of the norms assigned by others requires actively abiding by some alternative set of norms; for example,

communicating one's disownment of femininity in dominant contexts may require performances of masculinity.

If dominant gender norms are morally bad, it is sometimes argued that we should disown them all. For example, Dembroff (2018) argues that we should reject all gender norms associated with a harmful binary. They acknowledge, however, that there may be practical reasons to acknowledge the impact of this binary. For some people, using gendered terms "is important for describing how they were socialised as children, how others interpret their bodies, or how they feel about their own bodies" (2018). Dembroff's account is therefore responsive to concerns of practical choice. They acknowledge that we do not always have the luxury of being practically guided by clean theoretical commitments.

This discussion reflects the realities of living authentically in imperfect worlds. Our normative reasons are not born in ideal settings. Dominant gender norms are ubiquitous, and their enforcement begins very early.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, these norms are mandatory; failing to conform exposes one to censure and violence. Recall again the *epistemic condition*: authenticity requires understanding our surroundings and psychological state, including the norms which already move us. If one finds oneself responsive to a certain domain of masculine norms, for example, one might find that owning that domain, or certain norms within it, is the only way to make sense of one's facticity. Put differently: gender norms in various forms are always-already there. One can own them as they are, creatively re-imagine them, reject them, or be inauthentically swept along by them; but one cannot simply avoid them. Gender norms demand our attention, and the question of how to interact with them is not always easy to answer. One may find oneself always-already moved by them in ways that are impossible to ignore. Rejecting or disowning

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<sup>7</sup> Consider, for example, the recent U.S. trend of throwing "gender reveal parties" for unborn children. Gender reveal parties are structured around specific gender norms. The practice typically involves some sort of revelation (cutting a cake, popping a balloon, setting off an explosion) of either *pink* or *blue*—paradigmatically gender-normative colors in the context. Cakes are often decorated with an oppositional gender-normative theme: "baseball or bows," "wheels or heels," "tractors or tiaras" (Incoherent Queer Screaming, 2020).

certain gender norms may be the inauthentic choice; and given high rates of trans suicides, inauthenticity may not be a livable option. If a prisoner faces a choice between complicity in an unjust regime, or a life of suffering escapable only by death, the fact that the regime is morally bad does not soften the difficulty of the choice.<sup>8</sup>

Put simply, understanding dominant gender norms as *bad* does not tell us how to navigate worlds where they have power over us. What, then, should we do?

A major point to make here is that this problem is not unique to the experiences of trans and GNC people. As Watson (2016) and others have noted, the burden of pushing back is often unfairly laid on trans and GNC shoulders, when the vast majority of cis and gender-conforming people are complicit in oppressive norms. What is distinctive about trans and GNC people is not the gendered practical dilemma we face, but rather the work we do to navigate it. As Bailey (2011) points out, the creative labor of constructing and articulating alternative gender practices is undertaken by trans and GNC communities out of dual necessity. First, we need to understand ourselves when dominant standards actively erase us. Second, we need to pass through dominant worlds without being assaulted or murdered. The latter is one reason why many gender practices in these communities do not fully escape the influence of dominant norms; as Bailey notes, such communities may “end up re-inscribing and relying upon those same norms to view and judge each other within the community” (382). However, Bailey explicitly resists the interpretation of gender norms in ball culture as grounded in the mere internalization of

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<sup>8</sup> One might worry that this understanding of authenticity as authoritative, yet embedded in a non-ideal world, might allow too much normative authority. Suppose, for example, that one is authentically bound by an honor code which requires that one brutally murder anyone who has dishonored them. It doesn't seem right to say that such a person would have authoritative normative reasons to take such vengeance. A full discussion of this important metaethical issue is beyond the scope of this paper; however, let me say a little about this worry. First, the above example is, I think, beyond the pale in terms of normative standards. Most domains of gender norms do not recommend brutal murder, and most, I think, can be navigated in a way that is compatible with one's moral commitments. See Zazanis (2019) for more on this point. Second, recall that one can authentically own an entire domain while *refusing to comply* with individual norms. If some individual gender norm recommends a morally horrible action, it might be the case that the incompatible moral reason is strong enough to "cancel out" the reason generated by the gender norm. But this does not mean that other norms in the domain might not generate authoritative authentic reasons for that person to act. (Whether they generate reasons at all will depend on one's metaethical commitments.)

harmful dominant gender practices. Rather, the “gender and sexual performativity of ballroom culture emerges and functions at the interstices of hegemony and transformation to create new forms of self-representation and social relations” (384). Trans and gender-nonconforming people of color in ballroom culture are strategically appropriating, re-imagining, and deploying the norms which are weaponized against them in order to create possibilities for agency, self-expression and authenticity—within their own worlds, but also when they are forced to move through dominant worlds.

I want to close, then, by suggesting two things. First, trans and GNC people are actively and materially aware that dominant gender norms are harmful to us and to others, even as we often must engage with them in our project of authenticity. Trans worlds of sense therefore have a rich history of working towards practical solutions to this problem, through the creative construction of alternative gender standards which provide opportunities for authenticity that move away from dominant norms. Second, as Marion (2011) and Bettcher (2014) both suggest, these alternative practices and norms have great potential as sites of resistance, not only within trans worlds of sense, but through their influence on dominant worlds. Rather than charge trans and GNC people with harming ourselves and others through our authentic engagement with gender norms, theorists should look to those alternative practices as models for how to engage in a project of authenticity in a non-ideal social world.

## V. Conclusion: Authenticity and Liberation

I have argued that the following positions are compatible: 1. Gender norms can be authentic, and as such can give us powerful normative reasons to act. 2. Gender norms are socially constructed, and most of them are morally bad, prudentially bad, or both. Social authenticity tells us that the authentic self is constantly under construction, embedded in a context out of which it must pursue a life project that is uniquely its own. But most social contexts are imperfect. They are full of unjust power relations, material and social

positionalities, and morally and prudentially bad norms. We would certainly be better off if we never had to grapple with this in our project of self-construction. But we do. It is not possible to live authentically without attending to this flawed context. In an ideal world, there might be no conflict between authenticity and morality or prudence. However, the world is non-ideal, and we must build our authentic selves with the materials available.

I have relied throughout, without argument, on the understanding that gender norm authenticity is something worth explaining; that it is both real, and important to inclusive theorizing. For myself, I take the point to be self-evident. I experience certain gender norms as authentic for and authoritative over me, despite belief in their social construction and a theoretical and personal distaste for them. From conversation with other people—trans, GNC, cis, or gender-conforming—I infer that I am not alone in this, and that the practical dilemmas this generates are persistent and challenging. I conclude that making sense of felt gender norm authenticity is crucial to finding the hermeneutical tools to understand our experiences.

Moreover, I believe that this approach can work to ease some tensions in liberatory discourse. Authenticity claims about gender norms are often treated as evidence of either gender essentialism, or of the moral goodness of gender norms. This leads some trans and GNC people to embrace gender essentialism and reject feminist critiques of gender norms, while at the same time encouraging some feminists to reject authenticity claims. I think both moves are a mistake. I have tried to show that authenticity does not entail either moral goodness or essentialism, in the hope that this will help move us towards a more inclusive theoretical space with respect to gender and gender norms.

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