THE ROLE OF A LIFETIME: TRANS EXPERIENCE AND GENDER NORMS

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Abstract: Gender norms can guide our sense of what we feel like we ought to do, even when we don't want them to. Understanding this *norm responsiveness* is an important part of understanding how oppressive gender systems are sustained. According to a social constructionist position, gender norm responsiveness happens as a result of social training, or socialization. It's often assumed that this training depends on our gender categories—that, for example, those who occupy the category "man" will be responsive to masculine norms, and so on. Call this a *category-based view*. But trans and gender-nonconforming people are often responsive to gender norms that *don't* match our gender categories. This is sometimes taken as evidence for the conclusion that normative masculinity and femininity are somehow innate or pre-socialized. I reject this inference. I argue that we should instead dispense with a category-based view, and instead adopt a *traits-based view*. Gender norms apply to individuals on the basis of the gender-coded traits that they express. A traits-based view represents a social constructionist account of gender norms which leaves room for trans and GNC experiences of normative gender, and thus represents an important step towards creating inclusive theory.

0. Introduction

Gender norms are a common target of feminist critique. They arbitrarily restrict our individual possibilities, or recommend harmful behaviors; and compliance with their unequal standards helps to create and sustain gendered oppression. Nevertheless, we tend to respond to their demands. Like other kinds of norms, gender norms can have normative power over us; they can shape our sense of what we "ought" to do, and thus affect our choices and our actions— even when we question their relevance, fit poorly within their prescriptions, or reject their legitimacy altogether. If we want to understand gendered oppression, we need to understand how gender norms can influence us in this way.

Accounts of norm psychology tend to hold that psychological responsiveness to social norms is a result of social training. That is, we find social norms action-guiding because we have taken cues from our social environments about what we are supposed to do (Scott 1971; Maccoby 2000; Sripada and Stich 2007; Davidson and Kelly 2020; Ryle 2020; Westra and

Andrews 2022). In feminist metaphysics, it's often assumed that individuals are trained to follow gender norms based on the gender categories to which they're assigned; boys and men are trained to be masculine, girls and women to be feminine (see Haslanger 2012; Ásta 2018; Dembroff 2018, 2020). In particular, the most prominent view which directly addresses these questions, Witt's Aristotelean *social role account,* holds that membership in a gender category leads to psychological responsiveness to gender norms (Witt 2011, 2020). This leads us to the following conclusion: Individuals will respond to the gender norms that match their gender categories.

However, this does not explain the way that gender norms in fact move us. Many transgender (trans) and gender-nonconforming (GNC) people find themselves responsive to gender norms that do *not* match their assigned categories. Many people trained to be girls and women nevertheless respond to norms of masculinity, just as many people trained to be boys and men respond to norms of femininity.

This is a tension that needs to be addressed. Gender and its various features, including gender norms, are not innate or essential features of human nature, but rather are contingent and depend on our social practices. If this is true, then the power particular gender norms have over us is also contingent and dependent on our social practices. Moreover, trans and GNC people often travel between and across gender assignments and norms, and thus have an epistemically privileged perspective. It is a basic commitment of this project that trans and GNC experience of gender norms is theoretically central to understanding how those norms shape agency and behavior. Taking these two commitments together: how can we make sense of the fact that many trans and GNC people experience gender's normative power as operating *contrary to* what social practices appear to recommend?

I argue that the problem here is the assumption that gender norms apply on the basis of gender categories. Once we identify, challenge, and dispense with this assumption, the tension dissolves. In place of this *category-based view*, I argue that we should adopt a *traits-based*

view. Gender norms apply on the basis of gender-coded *traits*. A traits-based view can accommodate both feminist social constructionist commitments, and patterns of gender norm responsiveness that do not track assigned gender categories.

I proceed as follows. In Section I, I draw on Witt's work on social role normativity to articulate a common presumption about gender norms, which I call the *category-based view*. In section II, I draw from work on norm psychology to argue that individuals become responsive to gender norms through social training. In section III, I outline the phenomenon of *cross-category norm responsiveness*, and argue that it raises problems for a category-based view. In section IV, I argue that we can dissolve these tensions if we adopt a *traits-based view*. In section V, I close by discussing some implications.

I. Feminist Metaphysics and Gender Norms

Gender norms as such have received surprisingly little attention in feminist metaphysics. They are regularly invoked, but usually in passing, in the service of some further thesis. The nature of gender norms, their power over our deliberations, and their relationship to other phenomena such as gender categories, is rarely explored at length. But, as I'll argue, we need more theoretical specificity to make sense of trans and GNC experience. In this section, I'll begin by defining some key terms, after which I'll discuss the most prominent and theoretically elaborate account of gender norms in the feminist metaphysics literature, Witt's *social role normativity* view. I'll draw on Witt's account to articulate a central assumption in this literature, which I call a *category-based view*.

Broadly speaking, gender comes with normative standards. In ethics and metaethics, a *normative standard* is an ideal that one can meet, or fail to meet (Paakkunainen 2018). That is, normative standards involve sets of *norms*; rules, guidelines, or expectations that delineate what "success" or "failure" looks like according to that standard. Gender norms, therefore, are rules, guidelines, and expectations that delineate success or failure at gender standards. But there is

famously more than one gender standard. Gender norms are divided, most commonly into *masculinity* and *femininity*. There are a variety of masculinities and femininities; what counts as masculine or feminine will vary with local gender practices. Moreover, some contexts will have other gendered standards that do not reduce to masculinity and femininity. I will not attempt here to give a comprehensive definition of gender, nor will I make strong positive claims about the relationship between gender itself and gender norms. On the contrary; I will proceed as if there is something independently interesting about gender norms, worthy of attention and discussion without the need for a comprehensive metaphysics of gender itself. My primary metaphysical commitment in this project will be *social constructionism,* understood roughly as the view that gender and its features, including gender norms, are not primarily innate, essential, or biological, but rather are dependent on contingent social practices.

Given social constructionism, the normative character of gender norms calls out for explanation. Gender norms tend to feel like they are inside of us, to shape our sense of what we feel like we should do. How do they do this?

In Charlotte Witt's (2011) monograph *The Metaphysics of Gender,* she gives an answer: *social role normativity*. According to Witt, social norms, including gender norms, apply to a person because of the social position they occupy. For example, norms of femininity apply to someone because she is socially positioned as a woman (Witt 2011, 44-45). A person is positioned as a woman because she is socially *recognized* as a woman, where "social recognition" is "a complex, holistic status comprised of both public, institutional recognition and interpersonal acknowledgment" (45). Being socially recognized as a woman places one in the relevant *social role.* Social roles are "complex sets of social norms" including "explicit rules (e.g., legal provisions like child support payments) and implicit practices (e.g., primary maternal responsibility for child care)" (43). For Witt, if one occupies a particular social role, one is evaluated according to those norms. She may be punished for failing to comply, or rewarded for "good" behavior. Initially, this process will be external. Over time, however, that person will

become used to responding as if she were under evaluation. She will become habituated, in an Aristotelean sense, to respond to feminine norms, and will therefore experience those norms as relevant to her decisions—even if she rejects those norms and refuses to follow them (47).

Witt's view is a prominent and theoretically elaborate example of what I'm calling a *category-based view:*

> **A category-based view:** Gender norms apply to individuals because those individuals belong to the associated gender categories.

I mean *gender category* here to be metaphysically ecumenical. That is, I don't commit myself to a particular metaphysics of gender categories. Rather, I want to call up the general assumption that individuals are divided, classified, or otherwise "categorized" according to gender. Given that assumption, a category-based view posits that, however individuals are so divided, classed, or categorized, that categorization determines which gender norms apply. For example, a category-based view would hold that norms of masculinity apply to men, because they are men; being categorized as a man is what makes one a candidate for evaluation according to norms of masculinity.

Category-based views are often assumed, or gestured at, in gender metaphysics more broadly. For example, Haslanger writes: "Particular traits, norms, and identities, considered in abstraction from social context, have no claim to be classified as masculine or feminine. The classification of features as masculine or feminine is *derivative*, and in particular, depends on prior *social* classifications" (2012, 46). Similarly, Dembroff (2018, 3) writes that "[s]ocial roles, expectations, norms, and practices, not to mention self-conceptions, are imposed on people based on their gender classification." And for Ásta, not only are we assigned sets of norms by others, we also have social identities that determine whether we "take [the associated] norms as applying to us" (2018, 122).

More broadly, category-based analysis is prominent in this literature. When gender metaphysicians ask what gender is, they are often asking what gender *categories* are:

specifically, what is it to be a *woman,* and why? Consider the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy's entry on feminist metaphysics:

> The aim of feminism is, in the most general terms, to end the oppression of women… But what is this group *women*? Whose oppression is the movement aiming to end? For articulating the various ways in which women are oppressed, there is a need for a working definition of what it is to be a woman (Haslanger and Ásta 2018).

Some philosophers have questioned this starting point. Mikkola (2016) has argued that feminist philosophy ought to move away from its laser-focus on the "woman question." According to Mikkola, the complex semantic and ontological puzzles generated by this question are neither illuminating nor necessary. We are capable of talking about "women" as a group without solving these puzzles. Similarly, Antony (2020) defends a deflationary concept of *woman,* one that will allow us to assert generic claims about women without giving a substantive metaphysics of gender categories. She writes that "whatever the inherent philosophical interest of such questions as 'what is it to be a woman,' there is no practical or political need to answer them" because our "most pressing political needs, as feminists, are to challenge injustices and harms" (Antony 2020, 531). Inspired by these challenges, I suggest that we should not assume the centrality or even necessity of category-based analysis.

In the next section, I'll discuss the phenomenon of *norm responsiveness*.

II. Social Construction and Norm Responsiveness

It is key to the perpetuation of hierarchical and unjust social practices like gender that they do not appear to be *perpetuated* at all. Rather, they appear to arise naturally, or at least proceed unproblematically from natural features (Antony 2002, Haslanger 2017). Thus, when gender norms produce or sustain inequality, that inequality itself seems "natural," and thus unavoidable. For this reason, many feminist metaphysicians are engaged in what Haslanger calls the "debunking project," which works to expose hidden mechanisms of social construction in practices that are widely believed to be naturalistic (2012, 127; see also Ásta 2018, 36).

To engage in a debunking project, we need to understand how gender norms guide action. For gendered behavior to seem natural, the mechanisms of its production must be thoroughly obscured. That is, it must appear to arise freely and automatically, so that even (perhaps especially) the person engaging in the behavior cannot see its roots in contingent social practices. How does this work?

To answer this question, feminist philosophers such as Witt (2011) and Jenkins (2016) have articulated the phenomenon of *norm responsiveness*. The norm responsiveness I'm interested in is primarily affective, rather than behavioral or cognitive. One experiences oneself as guided by the norm; one has a sense of doing something wrong when one does not comply; the norms "pull" at one (Witt 2011, 44). That is, the relationship is not about *thinking* or *believing* that one is subject to a norm, but rather *feeling* that one ought to act in accordance. Moreover, as Witt (2011) argues, being responsive to a norm is consistent with a "full range of possible reactions…from compliance to critique" (33). Jenkins (2016) draws this out nicely:

> Consider a woman who feels that having visible body hair on her legs is unattractive, embarrassing, and unacceptable. In a visceral way, having hairy legs feels wrong for her…. Contrast this with the experience of another woman who does not remove hair from her legs. Her awareness of her body includes the awareness that in having hairy legs she is contravening dominant norms of feminine appearance—on some level she knows that people like her are not meant to look like that, according to dominant ideology. This may be so despite the fact that she is perfectly content to have hairy legs and for them to be seen by others. Her experience of social and material reality includes navigating the norm that women should have hairless legs, even though she is not complying with it. (411)[1]

Although these women engage in different behaviors, they are responsive to the same norm. This is not a belief, a preference, or a behavior. It is a bare psychological fact. These women feel that certain actions are right or wrong for them; and while this feeling need not determine their actions, it can weigh heavy among their reasons to act.

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[1] Notice the ambivalent presence of a category-based view in this passage. Jenkins writes of "the norm that *women* should have hairless legs," but she also notes that the second woman "knows that *people like her* are not meant to look like that." More on this later.

Social norm responsiveness is of course not unique to gender. As Davidson and Kelly (2020) put it, people often follow norms "not as a means to gain material reward or avoid external punishment, but just because it seems or feels, from a first-person perspective, like the proverbial right thing to do" (8). How does this work? This is a subject of much discussion in the psychological literature. In their landmark work "A Framework for the Psychology of Norms," Sripada and Stich (2007) articulated the phenomenon of *intrinsic motivation*; individuals come to follow social norms for the norms' own sake, rather than because they fear punishment or anticipate reward. They also write that norms have "independent normativity"—they need not be enforced to be followed (281). For Sripada and Stich, intrinsic motivation is central to the study of norm psychology. It is broadly explained by the *internalization hypothesis,* or the view that individuals "internalize" patterns of social sanction. According to more recent work, internalization is "the process that transforms the motivations of agents for complying with social norms from those of external reward or punishment to that of following norms as an end in themselves" (Villatoro et al. 2015, 1.1). This process will often become invisible. Individuals over time will "lose track" of a norm's punitive origins; they will respond to it automatically, without considering why (Villatoro et al. 2015, 1.3-1.5) That is: when others expect a person to follow a set of norms, they reward them for compliance and/or punish them for failure (sanctions); over time, those sanctions are no longer necessary to produce complaint behavior (internalization); the individual will follow the norm for its own sake (intrinsic motivation). In Witt's terms, they become *habituated* to the norm, and thus *responsive* to it.

Sripada and Stich's influential view, and with it the centrality of intrinsic motivation and the internalization hypothesis in explaining norm compliance, has been complicated and challenged in recent years. For example, both Westra and Andrews (2022) and Heyes (2024) are critical of the tendency in social science to attribute all norm-compliant behavior to a unified, intrinsic psychological process. As Heyes (2024) puts it, normative psychology is not dependent on a single, specialized cognitive tool—what she calls a "Big Special" psychological process—but

rather on a variety of generalized psychological processes that may also do other things, or a set of "Small Ordinary" mechanisms (17). Westra and Andrews give an overview of many such processes posited in the psychology literature, including: direct instruction by social superiors or peers (12); reinforcement learning, or the internalization of patterns of punishment and reward (13); social learning heuristics, such as "copy the majority" (13); and "mentalizing," or "inferring what one is supposed to do based on the normative expectations that we attribute to those around us" (12). These mechanisms can also interact and change over time; for example, a norm might first be internalized through reinforcement learning and then explicitly codified into a cognitive rule later in life (14).

Whatever the relevant mechanisms in play, however, one thing seems to be common ground: *Individual psychological and affective motivation to follow social norms is produced by patterns of social cues, and in particular patterns of social pressure, sanction, or punishment and reward*. For example, for Davidson and Kelly (2020), we have a psychological "acquisition mechanism" that identifies and internalises local norms; it "draws the individual's attention to salient social interactions happening around [them] and makes inferences about the rules governing those interactions" (7), and produces motivations to act that can be "powerfully motivating and perhaps authoritative" (8). These rules are "stabilized" by punishment or sanction (8); and, crucially, the mechanism is also responsible for "identifying types of people to which a norm internalized by the individual might apply" (7). For Westra and Andrews, what makes something a social norm *at all* is the presence of some sanction: "social norms generally consist in patterns of behavioral conformity maintained to some degree by social pressure or sanctions" (6). That is: our responsiveness to social norms is in some key sense caused by the expectations of others and the cues they deliver to us, which are then taken up by us in a variety of ways. Call this the *social source view* of norm responsiveness.

The *social source view* coheres nicely with a feminist debunking project. As anyone who has tried to bring critical feminist consciousness to an ambivalent audience can understand,

gender norm responsiveness is a key mechanism by which gender makes itself appear natural. Many people "just feel" as if they ought to follow gender norms—as if this responsiveness is inextricable from their other normative commitments. To debunk the essentialist conclusions that sometimes follow, we need better explanations of the source of that feeling. The literature in psychology gives us one—or, rather, many. We are rewarded or punished, and repeat or discontinue the behavior; or we are explicitly instructed; or we observe how others are acting and copy them; or we infer what others expect; or we simply do what is easiest. These patterns can become ingrained, until we lose sight of their source, and are left with the feeling that we "should." As Davidson and Kelly argue, Witt's view provides "a psychologically plausible story" of how the internal motivations of norm responsiveness come to be (6).

Here, however, a problem arises. As many in the norm psychology literature have argued, while the mechanisms of norm acquisition may be a general part of human psychology, the norms specific to one's social context are acquired socially (Davidson and Kelly 2020; Westra and Andrews 2022; Heyes 2024). Part of this process is the ability to distinguish "types of people to which a norm…might apply" (Davidson and Kelly 2020, 7). As discussed, in most gendered contexts, there are multiple gender standards; the same norms do not apply to everyone. Accordingly, many people are responsive to masculinity *or* femininity, but not both.[2] How is this differential acquisition mediated? A category-based view gives us a simple answer: those who are categorized as men are expected to be masculine, while those categorized as women are expected to be feminine. If we straightforwardly plug a category-based view into a social source view, we get the following: Individuals will become responsive to the gender norms that are associated with their assigned gender categories.

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[2] This is often not the case for trans and GNC people. I'll discuss this in section IV.

In the next section, I'll argue that certain common experiences among transgender (trans) and gender-nonconforming (GNC) people raise problems that a category-based view struggles to solve.

III. Cross-Category Norm Responsiveness

Trans and GNC people often find ourselves responsive to gender norms that do not match our gender categories. This is true regardless of whether we understand gender categories as assigned or self-identified. For example, some people who haven't been assigned the category "man"—e.g. some trans men and non-binary people—nevertheless find themselves responsive to masculine norms. Moreover, some people who don't *identify with* the category "man"—e.g. some butch women and non-binary people—are also responsive to masculine norms. Since this occurs "across" gender categories, I call it *cross-category norm responsiveness*.

Cross-category norm responsiveness can appear very early, and often happens contrary to one's own desires, expectations, or self-concept. Consider how trans biologist and author Julia Serano recalls her experiences in an elementary school classroom:

> I had an unexplainable feeling that I was doing something wrong every time I walked into the boys' restroom at school; and whenever our class split into groups of boys and girls, I always had a sneaking suspicion that at any moment someone might tap me on the shoulder and say, "Hey, what are you doing here?" (Serano 2007, 78)

Serano's normative phrasing here is telling. She experienced herself as doing something *wrong* when she violated a feminine norm. She knew that others classed her with the boys: "After all, I was obviously a boy—everybody thought so" (79). Serano also notes that she didn't always want to follow feminine norms: "I never really wanted to take part in girlish activities, such as playing house" (79). Nevertheless, she had an "unexplainable feeling" that she *ought* to behave according to feminine norms, and that complying with those norms felt "right" for her (80).

Consider also the following account from Janet Mock:

> 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 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, 122-123)

Like Serano, Mock understood that others were holding her to standards of masculinity. She was "certain I was a boy…. It was the first thing I'd learned about myself as I grew aware that I existed" (15). As a child in her kindergarten classroom, she understood, for example, that boys used blue cubbyholes and girls used red cubbyholes (15). Nevertheless, even as a small child, she experienced a pull "whose origins I can't pinpoint to a pivotal *aha!* moment" to "step across the chasm that separated me from the girls—the one who put their sandals in the red cubbyholes" (16). Mock found herself drawn towards expressions of normative femininity, even those expressions which might seem superficial or contextually unique, like cubbyhole color.

Cross-category norm responsiveness is a relatively common experience among trans and GNC people. It often manifests, not merely as a want or a wish to follow some gender norms or occupy some gender category, but as a felt sense that one *already is* responsive to some norms that don't match one's assigned category; following the norms of that category "seems or feels…like the proverbial right thing to do" (Davidson and Kelly 2020, 8). However, if we start from a category-based view, cross-category norm responsiveness is difficult to explain. Recall that a category-based view leads us to the conclusion that individuals become responsive to gender norms through social cues that are mediated by their gender categories.

How might a category-based view rise to this challenge? I'll consider and reject two possible answers.

First, we might think that a category-based view can explain how gender norms apply to individuals if the view holds that gender categories are *not* assigned by others, but rather are voluntarily adopted. That is, we might try to solve this problem by rejecting what Witt (2011) calls *ascriptivism*: the view that individuals are members of particular gender categories just in case they are assigned to those categories by others. Instead, we might appeal to *voluntarism:* the view that individuals are members of gender categories just in case those individuals choose

or identify with those categories. On a voluntarist category-based view, the assignment of gender norms to individuals is explained by that choice or identification.

However, a voluntarist view doesn't help here. Many people experience cross-category norm responsiveness very early in life, long before they come to choose or identify with a gender category other than the one assigned to them. Consider the following account by P. Carl:

> I had been scrutinizing masculinity my whole life, trying to perfectly replicate it in my gestures and clothes and physiques. I stayed very trim, wore only men's clothes, studied the latest short-hair styles, tried to keep the tenor of my voice low, and always played the roles that I thought men played. I earned. I mowed the lawn. I kept track of the finances. I filed the taxes. I shoveled the snow. I lugged the air conditioners from the basement to the bedroom windows every summer. I always drove. I was grossly deficient at housecleaning. I owned only one bathroom towel when my wife, Lynette, first moved into my bachelor pad. But I insisted that I was not a man. (Carl 2020b, 10)

Carl's responsiveness to norms of masculinity did not result from his self-identification as a man. They were the impetus for it. "As much as I had done every single thing to look like a man and live like one," he writes, "I denied wanting to become one because I didn't want to become my father or lose my lesbian lover or be a failed feminist and intellectual" (2020a). For Carl, the voluntarist view gets the explanation the wrong way around. Often, it is cross-category norm responsiveness that leads to gender category self-identification, rather than the reverse.

Furthermore, not everyone who experiences cross-category norm responsiveness comes to identify with the category associated with those norms. Many people feel responsive to norms not associated with their chosen or self-identified category. Consider, for example, the rich history of butches within queer cultures. Many butches choose and identify with the category of "woman;" many have done this for their entire lives. However, many butches also experience themselves as responsive to norms of masculinity (Andler 2017). A voluntarist category-based view does not explain this.

A second possible explanation rejects elements of social constructionism. This kind of explanation has been defended by some trans theorists. For example, Serano (2007) defends an *intrinsic inclinations model* to explain cross-category norm responsiveness. According to

Serano, the fact that children often demonstrate cross-category masculinity and femininity is evidence that "certain expressions of masculinity and femininity represent deep, subconscious inclinations similar to those of sexual orientation" (98). That is, for Serano, if gender norm responsiveness doesn't match social training, it's because masculinity and femininity are present in the child prior to or apart from that social training (98-100).

An immediate problem with this model is that it assumes that the inclinations or behaviors in question, and the gender norms with which they are associated, are conceptually inseparable. Serano argues that children have deep masculine and feminine tendencies, and that these "gender inclinations are, to some extent, intrinsic to our persons" (99). "Intrinsic" here means something like *acquired without socialization;* she contends that motivations to behave in a masculine or feminine way "occur naturally (i.e. without social influence)" (99). However, Serano's argument only shows that certain *inclinations* occur naturally or without social influence. There is no reason to think that these inclinations are inherently gendered. Feminist philosophers at least as far back as John Stuart Mill (1997 [1865]) have convincingly argued that masculinity and femininity are socially constructed normative standards, rather than natural features of individuals. As Haslanger (2012) puts it, "Particular traits, norms, and identities, considered in abstraction from social context, have no claim to be classified as masculine or feminine" (46). This is evident in the fact that gender norms vary widely across cultures, and even across contexts within the same culture. Here is a plausible, socially constructionist interpretation of the early gender inclinations to which Serano points: children have inclinations, some of which are gender-coded *post hoc*.

Relatedly, there are feminist political reasons to reject a view that treats gender as innate. In particular, it is somewhat at odds with the *debunking project*. If gender norms arise from innate or "pre-socialized" human features, then a major avenue of resistance to the oppression and harm they enable is lost. Any particular gendered behavior can, in principle, be

attributed to some innate and unchangeable feature of human existence. This limits our ability to deconstruct those harms and oppressions.

I want to be clear about the scope of my empirical claim. This is not an argument against the existence of innate characteristics that are gendered. Rather, it is an argument against the metaphysical position on which *gender* is an innate part of individuals. It may be the case that certain inclinations are themselves innate, or arise without or contrary to socialization; I remain neutral on that point. Rather, I am questioning the claim that inclinations come to us already gendered—that their masculine or feminine character is essential. We should resist this. Masculinity and femininity are normative gender standards; gender norms are socially constructed; and gender norm responsiveness is socially sourced.

Nevertheless, Serano raises a crucial question. Cross-category responsiveness to standards of masculinity and femininity points to a tension within social constructionist explanations of norm responsiveness. If individuals internalize gender norms as a response to cues from their social environment, and those cues are mediated by their gender categories, then why do many people experience themselves as responsive to norms which do not match their gender categories?

This is a pressing theoretical issue. Given that these experiences are common among trans and GNC people, who are often marginalized within dominant gender practices, this problem suggests that the view Serano is criticizing has often proceeded from the experiences of those who are *not* marginalized within those practices—i.e. cis and gender-conforming people. That's a problem. A view that aims to end gender oppression ought not exclude the experiences of those who are most harmed by gender norms.

In the next section I argue that the question can be answered if we are willing to jettison a *category-based view* and replace it with what I call a *traits-based view*.

IV. A Traits-Based View

If we want to understand how gender norms guide behavior, we need to understand *differential assignment:* how different gender norms apply to different people. Intuitively, this often has to do with sexed bodies. That is: people who are observed or imagined to have certain sex-coded features are often expected to follow particular gender norms. Capturing this is crucial to understanding gender norms. This, perhaps, motivates the adoption of a category-based view. If gender categories are assigned on the basis of one's observed or imagined sexed body, and gender norms apply on the basis of gender categories, then we can explain the importance of the sexed body in guiding gendered behavior.

At the same time, there are contexts in which the sexed body may be, as Ásta puts it, "highly irrelevant" (2018, 76). She writes that the constraints and enablements to which one is subject may change based on "sexual engagement, bodily presentation, preparation of food at family gatherings, self-identification, and so on" (ibid. 75). The features that Ásta identifies here can clearly contribute to guiding gendered behavior. On a category-based view, this importance is explained as above: If gender categories are assigned on the basis of a given feature, and gender norms apply on the basis of gender categories, then we can explain the importance of this feature in guiding gendered behavior.

But this raises a question: *What explanatory work is the gender category doing in this process?* Why should we think that the gender category is what mediates norm assignment, and not the features themselves?

I suggest that we cut out the middleman. Rather than holding that gender norms apply on the basis of gender categories which in turn are assigned to individuals on the basis of observed features, we can simply hold that gender norms apply to individuals on the basis of those observed features. That is, I propose that we shift focus from gender *categories* to gendered *traits*.

Traits are descriptive features of individuals. My understanding here is indebted to Mari Mikkola's trait/norm covariance model (Mikkola 2011). Mikkola distinguishes between

descriptive traits and *evaluative norms*, where "traits describe 'the way the world is' and include physical and anatomical traits (e.g., chromosomes, ovaries, testes, genitalia, body shape and size), one's appearance (e.g., one's clothing, make-up, haircut, amount of body hair), roles (e.g., whether one undertakes caretaking roles, engages in childrearing tasks) and self-conceptions (calling oneself a woman or a man)" (76-77). My notion of *trait* is very thin. For example, consider a trait like "calling oneself a woman or a man." I don't understand this as a substantive self-categorization. Rather, I mean the bare descriptive fact that the individual in fact calls themself a woman or a man.

Many traits are normatively gender-coded in various contexts, e.g. as *masculine* or *feminine*. As Mikkola points out, some traits, like *being short-sighted*, are rarely if ever gender-coded (2011, 77). Other traits are *globally* gender-coded; *having ovaries*, for example, is coded feminine in a variety of cisnormative contexts worldwide. Still other traits are only *locally* gender-coded. For example, *wearing jewelry* is coded as feminine in some contexts, but not others. That is, "certain evaluations (like being judged to act, be or appear 'feminine') can be seen to covary with particular descriptive traits" (69).

My basic move here is to shift the locus of socially mediated gender norm application from an ontologically substantive gender category to the ontologically thin and maximally variable gendered traits. On a traits-based view, if someone is interpreted as having a particular trait that is gender-coded in their context, they are thereby evaluated under the associated gender norm. For example, in many contexts, a person who is perceived to have the physical trait of *having breasts* is thereby judged to be normatively feminine. The application of feminine gender norms follows, not the assignment of a gender category, but the perception that a person has certain gender-coded traits.

These are the basic commitments of a traits-based view. They are, I take it, consistent with a variety of more substantive positions. In what follows, I'll sketch how such a substantive position might proceed, in order to demonstrate how traits-based thinking can help us capture

crucial desiderata for explaining gender norms. There may be other substantive positions that

do this differently or better. Thus, I don't take the following to be necessary commitments of *any*

traits-based view. The argument up to this point can come apart from the following suggestions.

In general, social norms which are differentially applied will cluster. For example,

consider the normative standard *punk*. Individual traits, such as taste in music, attitude towards

authority, clothing and hairstyle, political commitments, etc., are normatively coded as punk.

However, not everyone is held to the standard of punk. A university professor in a suit and tie is

not typically judged according to whether they are punk or not. However, a person distributing

anti-capitalist literature at a punk music show is more properly judged according to their

punkness, since they are displaying some key features that are coded as punk. Similarly, a

person wearing punk style in public can be properly criticized for failing to exhibit other

elements of punkness, in a way that the university professor cannot be (hence notions of "fake

punk" music or style). Moreover, if the university professor exhibits some elements of punkness,

such as a trait of resistance to authority, it might be less surprising to discover that they also

enjoy punk music and wear patch-covered jean jackets on the weekends. That is, having some

punk traits leads to an expectation that one display other punk traits, because similarly-coded

traits cluster together. The explanation does not start with the individual's classification on the

basis of features, but rather with the features themselves. The difference is in the order of

explanation. A category-based view would tell us that what explains an individual's evaluation

according to standards of punkness is whether they are or are not "a punk". A traits-based view

tells us that what explains an individual's evaluation according to standards of punkness is

whether they have or don't have punk traits. That is: people can be more or less "punk;" the

question of what makes them "a punk" is distinct.

In the case of punk culture, trait clustering doesn't seem obviously problematic. It may

even generate useful social heuristics. However, the case of gender is more pernicious. In

contexts which enforce a strict gender binary, there is a corollary expectation that there are two

clusters which are, for the most part, mutually exclusive and coherent. That is, masculine-coded traits are expected to occur together with only and all other masculine-coded traits, and feminine with only and all feminine. As discussed in Section II, part of the function of gender norms is to naturalize certain behaviors—to make it seem as if gendered inclinations and behavior are natural, or arise spontaneously from supposedly natural facts about the world, such as biological features. For naturalization to work, it must appear that individuals possess innate masculinity or femininity. In principle, naturalization is compatible with individual variation and intermingling of differently-coded traits; it might be held, for example, that some people are naturally both feminine and masculine. (For a view like this, see Serano's (2007) intrinsic inclinations model.) However, contexts which attempt to naturalize a strict gender binary demand that individuals "naturally" express either all and only the traits associated with masculinity, or all and only those associated with femininity. Non-coherence is often called "unnatural" (abnormal or inappropriate) and punished accordingly.

Gender norms will tend to cluster around traits that are considered particularly socially significant. Call these the *core traits* of a particular cluster. Core traits have the most "weight" in determining whether an individual is expected to present the associated traits. For example, if gender norms cluster around core traits related to reproductive function, then the traits which *constitute* reproductive function—such as possessing the ability to reproduce, by bearing or seeding children—will outweigh other, more peripheral traits when determining how to evaluate someone. However, it is not always feasible to measure a particular trait. The contexts at hand may therefore prioritize (actual or purported) markers of these traits, with a built-in defeasibility condition. Those contextual markers are usually taken to reliably and non-accidentally predict the relevant characteristics, and will therefore only be investigated when suspicion is raised—if they can be directly investigated at all. For example, a core trait of *being able to bear children* may be understood to be marked by secondary sex characteristics, such as *having breasts*, or by vaguer, more ambiguously related features, such as *being nurturing*.

Traits related to sexed embodiment will often be central to clusters of gender norms. For example, a masculine-coded trait of *having a penis* may often play a central role in the assignment of other masculine gender norms. People will sometimes speak colloquially in a way that points to this phenomenon. You might, for example, hear the claim that people with a penis ought to do certain masculine-coded things—or the converse, that someone who doesn't express sufficient masculinity might *not* have a penis. It's possible to interpret these statements as positing that people with penises are in a gender category that comes with masculine norms. Instead, I propose that we read these claims at face value: being perceived to have masculine-coded features, such as a penis, leads to the assignment of other masculine norms, while failing at masculine norms suggests failing to have the features.

Gender norm clusters may (or may not) take on further ontological significance, as *gender roles, gender identities,* or even *gender categories*. My aim here is neither to give an account of the nature of gender categories, nor to deny either their existence or their importance to other forms of analysis. Discussion of gender categories is orthogonal. I seek to understand how gender norms shape our normative deliberations and, by extension, our actions. I take this project both to be possible without, and often to be inhibited by, a preoccupation with category-based analysis.

At this point, the empirical commitments of this project require some clarification. My goal is not to give a comprehensive account of the psychological mechanisms by which gender norms come to be internalized by individuals. I leave that to the real psychologists. Rather, it is to suggest a way of thinking about gender norms and their relationship to individuals that, I suggest, is more responsive to the empirical facts than a category-based view. Category-based thinking about gender norms is insufficiently flexible to accommodate cross-category norm responsiveness. Traits-based thinking, on the other hand, is maximally flexible without losing material grounding. The relationship between gender norms and individuals is understood to turn on gender-coded characteristics in a way that captures differential norm assignment, but

still has room for cross-category norm responsiveness. In what follows, I'll return to two examples from section III to demonstrate this.

Let me first note that an individual may be *disposed* to express a trait, whether or not they in fact express it (McKitrick 2015). Again, I am not here engaged in the empirical project of explaining why individuals are disposed to express traits, or, conversely, how the gender-coding of those traits impacts the acquisition of dispositions to express them. The claim is simply that people are sometimes disposed to express traits, some of which are gender-coded.

Consider Julia Serano's experiences of feeling that she was doing something wrong when she went into the boys' restroom (Serano 2007, 78). As discussed, a category-based view struggles to explain these experiences. Serano understood herself and was understood by others as a boy, and not a girl. It is hard to see how her assigned or adopted gender category could influence her internalization of these norms. As Serano suggests, these kinds of experiences raise a *prima facie* problem for social constructionism.

I contend that the problem only arises when social constructionists assume a category-based view. If our acquisition of gender norms is differentiated according to gender category, then those who occupy the category will become responsive to the associated norms, and Serano's experiences make no sense. However, if this acquisition is differentiated according to gender-coded traits—that is, if we assume a traits-based view—then the problem becomes tractable. We can posit that Serano either had, or was disposed to have, traits that were coded as feminine in her context. These might be behavioral traits, traits of appearance, physical traits, and so on. As discussed above, we often expect gender norms to cohere perfectly; feminine-coded traits are expected to occur together with all and only feminine-coded traits. Insofar as someone has or is disposed to have some feminine-coded traits, they may experience normative pressure to "cohere" to the feminine cluster. Perhaps they are punished for not having other feminine-coded traits, and infer that they ought to display them. Perhaps they observe others with similar traits, and infer what is expected of someone with those traits; or perhaps they

develop social heuristics such as "people with trait X do Y" (see Westra and Andrews 2022, 12-13). If we begin with a traits-based view, a variety of explanations are available that are consistent with various empirical proposals about how norm responsiveness develops.

Similarly, recall Janet Mock's experience of judging herself according to feminine norms. Mock felt that her body should look like the bodies of various celebrities, such as Tyra Banks, Britney Spears, and Beyoncé, and she regularly compared herself to the girls that were the "barometer of beauty" in her social environment (Mock 2014, 122-123). However, as Mock also chronicles, she was regularly punished for expressing feminine traits, by her parents, siblings, and peers. How does one become responsive to norms that they are punished for following?

A traits-based view gives us a helpful perspective here. Mock also describes being encouraged by a friend to steal and put on a dress; being included with her feminine relatives at family events; being treated as someone's wife in a childhood game; and being called *mahu,* a Native Hawaiian third gender, by a (trans) peer—all in childhood or adolescence, prior to her self-identification as a woman (Mock 2014). These moments in time suggest that her feminine traits were apparent, not just to her, but to others around her, even when she and everyone else was "certain I was a boy" (15). The social application and internalization of feminine norms makes sense, not when we think in terms of the social categories into which Mock was placed, but the gender-coding of the traits she was perceived to have.

It might be objected here that it is unclear why someone would become responsive to certain norms, rather than others. For example, trans women like Serano or Mock may have expressed or been disposed to express a variety of feminine-coded traits, but they clearly also had *masculine*-coded traits as well—in particular, the physical traits which led to their classification by others as boys. Why, then, would they learn vicariously but not directly, or experience coherence pressure towards femininity rather than masculinity?

In response, I reject the assumption that we are responsive to some gender norms "rather than" others. If gender norms are assigned based on traits, then if one displays a variety

of differently-coded traits, one is indeed likely to be responsive to a variety of different norms. In fact, the flexibility of a traits-based view here is helpfully explanatory. Being responsive to conflicting gender norms is a hallmark of trans and GNC experience. For example, Mock describes her childhood self as being at times drawn towards masculine norms of dress and behavior, specifically because she did not want to disappoint her mother (2014, 98). Many trans and GNC people struggle to figure out who we are and how we want to be, precisely because we are moved by apparently incompatible gender norms. As children, we are rewarded for some behaviors and punished for others, even as we see different sanctions being applied to those who are like us in the ways that seem most important. We learn that non-coherence is unnatural or impossible, even as we experience that non-coherence inside ourselves. It is not surprising, then, that we will experience various norms as exerting force over us. Trans and GNC experience is often marked by the theoretical and practical challenge of determining how we can make sense of these conflicting normative pressures in a hostile world.

In short, a traits-based view can capture the way in which gender norms are regularly applied on the basis of observed physical features, while also explaining the way individuals who are not ostensibly expected to follow them nevertheless experience them as action-guiding. It can do all of this while maintaining the key feminist commitment that masculinity and femininity are socially constructed. It therefore captures core insights from gender metaphysics and norm psychology, while also explaining the lived experience of trans and GNC people—a desideratum which should also be a commitment of feminist theory.

V. Conclusion: Norm Politics

Gender norms function as a normative standard. That is, they work to guide our deliberations and behavior by telling us what we should and should not do. Many, if not most, people are responsive to this standard in some way. This is not unique to trans and GNC people; gender norms affect nearly everyone. However, trans and GNC people often experience gender

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norms which do not match our assigned gender categories as guiding our behavior and providing us with reasons to act. In this paper, I have argued that this phenomenon raises problems for what I have called a *category-based view* about gender norms, I have contended that we should reject a category-based view, and in its place adopt a *traits-based view*. I have given a preliminary sketch of some of the commitments that such a view might have, and concluded that it can capture feminist social constructionist commitments, empirical conclusions from the social sciences, and common trans and GNC experiences.

In closing, let me consider an interesting political implication. A traits-based view has no commitments to the inherent oppressiveness or restrictiveness of gender norms. Gender norms guide us differentially based on the traits we are disposed or perceived to have. Many gender systems are themselves restrictive, harmful, and unequal. However, this is neither a historical and cultural universal, nor a metaphysically necessary feature. Some pernicious elements of gender norms, such as the violent punishment of norm violation, the mutual exclusivity of norm clusters, or the existence of only two gender standards, are contingent, and might be done differently. On a traits-based view, gender norms might look much more like *punk* norms. Punk norms may be non-mandatory (no one *has* to be punk) and non-exclusive (you can have some punk traits and, say, some goth traits at the same time). They can provide intelligibility and community; and they are created and mediated by those who inhabit them. Questions about who is or isn't "really" punk are often questions of value, not just aesthetics. Consider, for example, the Dead Kennedys' insistence that "Nazi Punks Fuck Off" (Dead Kennedys, 1981). Perhaps gender could be this way too.

Luckily for anyone interested in such a project, it is already underway. Talia Bettcher (2009, 2013) points out that within queer and trans subcultures, the question of who occupies a particular gender or which features are normatively gender-coded, are defined by those involved, through practices of community construction; and they are questions of value. In this context, like other social norms, gender norms can be useful heuristics for social intelligibility

and self-understanding. For example, Bailey (2011) describes the normative gender practices at work in *ballroom culture,* queer and trans communities of color which exist in most major cities in the United States. According to Bailey, identities and norms within these cultures are created out of twin needs: to make selves, bodies, and gendered experiences intelligible to one another, and to navigate the possibility of punishment and violence visited on the visibly queer in the broader world. The clusters that emerge are therefore, specifically and by design, tools of *resistance* against oppressive gender norms. But they are also avenues for creative self-understanding and self-construction. They are built by those in the community, and discussions of who counts and who is welcome are live, evolving, and informed by considerations of community needs.

Some views of gender norms suggest that such a project is either impossible or inadvisable. For example, on Haslanger's (2012) view (understood very roughly), gender categories are classifications that create an oppressive hierarchy on the basis of observed or imagined sexed bodies, and gender norms exist exclusively to perpetuate and naturalize these categories. On such a view, at best, all gender norms will force diverse individuals into unnatural boxes for no good reason; at worst, they are fundamentally oppressive and irredeemable as tools of liberation. In fact, Haslanger cautions against "theoretically appropriating" masculinity and femininity, on just these grounds (47).

This is not an uncommon approach in feminist philosophy, for good reason. Dominant, hegemonic masculinities and femininities so thoroughly construct the world we inhabit, that it may be tempting to try to make them work *for* us. But this is dangerous. These normative standards are constructed in unequal ways; they are mandatory and punitive; and they arbitrarily force individuals into exclusionary binaries on the basis of irrelevant features. They are inimical to feminist goals. But this view also tends to ignore the possibility—and historical reality—of alternative, non-dominant, or resistant masculinities and femininities.

In closing, then, I suggest that a traits-based view makes better sense of those possibilities than a category-based view. On a category-based view, gender norms are intimately tied to gender categorization. To understand gender's normative power, we must first understand how individuals are sorted into categories. It can be difficult, on such a view, to see how gender norms can ever be resistant or liberatory. Gender non-conformity—e.g., feminine boys or masculine girls—will always appear as normative abnormality, positioned "incorrectly" relative to the relevant categories (for better or worse). There is something inherently restrictive at best, oppressive at worst, about this. But on a traits-based view, gender norms can "mix and match." What's intelligible as, say, masculine or feminine need not have anything to do with how someone is classed or categorized. These things can be used as tools of self-understanding and intelligibility, even if we want to remove ourselves from, or resist altogether, the categories with which they're associated. I suggest, then, that the better theoretical tactic is to pry gender norms *apart* from gender categories, and build them as standards of intelligibility and self-understanding within a broadly and brutally gendered world.

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