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## **Worries of Transcumb Activism: Genuine but Misguided**

### **I. The Problem**

Arguing for trans rights is difficult. Asking people to be generally pleasant and respecting what trans people ask for isn't enough. However, people do become more motivated to be moral towards trans people when they feel like they've understood what transness is and where it originates. Answering this question has been of central concern for trans activists because they have pragmatic upshots: if trans people can provide a satisfactory account of what transness is, it means the legitimization of the group identity and thus the attainment of long deprived rights to recognition, respect, and healthcare. Furthermore, it would be wrong to say it isn't also an interesting intellectual pursuit for both trans people and non-trans people alike to figure out what being trans means. The first go at finding an answer to what transness is is going by the textbook definition: one is trans if they reject the gender they were assigned to at birth. However, for many people advocating for trans rights and people advocating against trans rights, this isn't a satisfactory answer— it's too surface level and doesn't tell us where a trans person's transness originates, it simply tells us the behavior of a trans person. What people are looking for is a metaphysical account of what transness is.

In answering these questions, one can turn to the field of feminist metaphysics which has traditionally sought to explain what being a woman means. There are two broad positions in the field: gender realism and gender nominalism. I use these terms from a broad analytical philosophical tradition and the two positions can be summed up roughly as follows.

Prominent realists, such as Mari Mikkola and Charlotte Witt, argue that women have a property—a universal— that they all share (Mikkola, Witt). Nominalists such as Natalie Stoljar and Elizabeth Spelman acknowledge that there is a range of features associated with

womanhood, however, they reject there being some property that all women share (Mikkola 78). An analogous set of duos within the context of transness can be seen. In this paper, I will refer to the position that trans people have a property—a universal—that all trans people share to be “being a realist about transness”. The position of rejecting there being a universal that trans people share will be referred to as “being a nominalist about transness”. If realism about transness is true, people need to show they do share the universal property with other trans people to *prove* their transness. If nominalism about transness is true, there would be no need for people to “prove” or “show” their transness. Trans nominalism would entail there being no universal property that transness refers to and as such would mean that trans people are only taking on a new “tag” to describe themselves.

Both arguments, although mutually exclusive, have brought pragmatic value to trans advocacy. In the case of realism, trans activists have managed to use this argument to claim that trans people, beneath their sexual organs, do share some property. Usually, this property would be something along the lines of being “born inside the wrong body.” The realist claim to universals allows trans people to explain their existence in such a manner that the attainment of rights and recognition represents allowing trans bodies to achieve self-actualization. In the case of nominalism, trans activists have argued that since there isn’t a universal, there’s nothing innate about gender. The non-innateness of gender tells us that barring trans people from self-actualization is a mere reflection of our personal biases about what gender means when there isn’t any deep grounding that justifies so. As such, we ought to give trans people rights.

Within trans activism, it isn’t rare to see the same trans activist use both these arguments depending on the context to further progress. However, there is also a clear tension in using both these arguments. A specific subset of trans activists that have been cast aside by mainstream trans discourse, of whom I suspect have noticed this tension and believe

the realist position to be more pragmatically useful, have “bit the bullet,” so to speak, and have abandoned the nominalist position completely. Furthermore, to strengthen their explanatory power in the metaphysics of transness, they claim that the way the universal of “being born into the wrong body” instantiates itself in the real world is gender dysphoria. Gender dysphoria confirms one’s transness and it’s the universal that all trans people share. This subset of activists I’m talking about is the “truscums.”

There are two main goals I have for this paper: firstly, I seek to analyze the origins and the casting away of truscum activists and secondly, I hope to develop a stronger metaphysical framework for what it means to be trans. In the subsequent sections, I sketch a brief history of the truscum community, then I argue why mainstream trans activism’s arguments against the truscum are insufficient. Then I seek to provide a better nominalist argument, borrowing from the works of Natalie Stoljar, against the truscum’s metaphysical account of transness. That’s to say I argue that transness is complex and only entails combinations of properties that may or may not overlap. In the final sections, I argue why my account of transness resolves the pragmatic and metaphysical worries of truscums— I also briefly address concerns from gender abolitionists.

## **II. Origins of Truscum Worries**

The term “truscum” has its origins in the early to mid-2010s from the online social media platform Tumblr (Jacobsen et al. 66, Fink and Miller 611). As Marty Fink and Quinn Miller note, during this period, Tumblr had been a special place for queer people to gather and share experiences online. Furthermore, it became a tool to “refashion straight cisgender norms” (Fink and Miller 611). As time went on, queer people also began to split amongst themselves into various subgroups online— one of which was the transmedicalists— those who believe that gender dysphoria was a necessary condition to being trans. Many people disagreed with this view and gave the transmedicalists the nickname: “truscums” as in true

transexual and scum (Jacobsen et al. 67) Even since, however, transmedicalists have reclaimed this term and have not been afraid to use so describe themselves. The largest online community of transmedicalists on Reddit is under the subreddit<sup>1</sup> “r/truscum.”

My analysis in the remaining parts of this paper will be to answer three questions. Why do truscums adopt this view, what are the arguments mainstream trans activists use against truscums, and are these arguments strong enough.

### **III. The Truscum’s Pragmatic and Metaphysical Worries:**

If one goes onto r/truscum, the title banner of the subreddit says, “r/truscum | Because being trans means something.” It is clear from the get-go that the truscum community believes that being trans has lost its weight, or, at the very least, that the mainstream interpretation of transness by trans activists does not “mean” as much as it ought to. Why is it that truscums adopt such a view? I believe it stems from two types of worries: pragmatic and metaphysical.

In terms of where this pragmatic worry comes from, one can look at the history of transness being pathologized and being medicalized. As Marc-Antoine Crocq notes, “In the DSM-III (1980), there appeared for the first time two psychiatric diagnoses in children, adolescents, and adults: gender identity disorder of childhood (GIDC) and transsexualism.” These diagnoses meant not just tagging transness as a disease but also symbolized a *recognition* of transness within the medical discourse. Recognition by the medical community is a double-edged sword. For one it meant trans people’s own visceral, deep, and interesting experiences be reduced and wrongly called a mental disorder. However, it also entailed a means for some trans people to attain a type of medical care that was desperately missing in their own lives— medical care that was gender-affirming. The medicalization of transness opened the gates for trans people to attain gender-affirming services such as

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<sup>1</sup> Subreddits are massive discussion threads meant to bring people of similar interests together.

hormone replacement therapy and sexual reassignment surgery under *specific conditions*. As such, these specific conditions, i.e., severe gender dysphoria, became the standard for transness. The pragmatic worry within the truscum community, then, is that if we don't medicalize trans experiences via the standard of gender dysphoria, we cannot legitimize trans experiences in such a manner to attain rights. For truscums, letting go of this standard of dysphoria means more people being able to "qualify" as trans; moreover, these people may not feel the desire to access gender-affirming medical care. The logic for truscums is that this, in turn, would delegitimize the genuine medical pleadings of other trans people. I think this belief is misguided and I will address it in later sections where I sketch out my nominalist account of transness. However, for now, let us turn toward what I believe to be the metaphysical worry of truscum activists.

The deep metaphysical worry for truscums is that if we don't have a clear bound of what transness is and what isn't, we would have to include people that aren't *really* trans. For them, the best line to draw in the sand is using dysphoria. In a way, this is analogous to how some conservatives and trans-exclusionary radical feminists seek to define womanhood. In the fear that "women" may include people that are not women, they draw the line at the genitalia individuals are born with. The metaphysical worry of truscums roots itself in a fear that if we do include those that aren't *really* trans within the definition of transness, it delegitimizes the experiences of "real" trans people. I will address this worry in my account as well.

#### **IV. The Mainstream Attempt at Refuting the Truscum**

Two broad arguments have come from mainstream trans activists towards truscums. The first argument is what Kai Jacobsen and their colleagues have observed common amongst many anti-truscum Tumblr users: the only requirement for being transgender is self-identification (Jacobsen et al. 69). The second argument is an argument that goes along the

lines of claiming that dysphoria isn't a necessary condition in being trans because there are trans people that only feel euphoria from being another gender and have no dysphoria. Both arguments stem from a concern for inclusivity, there's a fear that if we use dysphoria as the line in the sand, we will exclude many "real" trans people.

However, despite these two arguments seemingly having some force, I take it to be unreasonable to believe that these arguments are sufficient in convincing many trans people to abandon their positions. The reason behind this is simple: the trans people and the mainstream activists are both question-begging. The former claims that dysphoria is the line between being trans and being not trans and the latter claims that dysphoria isn't. When mainstream trans activists point towards certain trans people without dysphoria and say "See, they're trans!", the trans people need not admit defeat. They can say "No, they don't have dysphoria, so they are not trans." What we need, then, is a plausible account of transness that both sides can accept. What this means is that this account of transness ought to resolve both the metaphysical and pragmatic worries of the trans people and the inclusivity worry coming from the mainstream trans activists. Let us do so now.

### **V. A Nominalist Account of Transness**

First, we can take a brief detour and look at "the argument from complexity" that Natalie Stoljar makes in her paper, "Different Women. Gender and the Realism-Nominalism Debate" which argues that there is no universal that women share. I will apply this argument to the case of transness. Stoljar claims that each woman's experiences are unique, and it is particular to each of them (Stoljar 41). The reason we know so is because we find it very difficult to imagine what it would mean to live the life of another woman while taking into consideration their race, class, and education (Stoljar 41). Stoljar goes on to say that while it is conceivable that women's experiences resemble one another, it's difficult to articulate a universal experience (Stoljar 42). Insofar as womanhood is really a "cluster of different

features,” Stoljar says, being a woman just means satisfying “*enough* of, rather than all and only, the features in the cluster” (Stoljar 42).

With this, we can apply it to the concept of transness. Trans people each have their own particular experiences and it’s difficult to imagine what it would mean to live in another trans person’s body because of the way gender interacts with race, class, and education. As such, it’s hard to articulate what a universal between all trans people can be. As a result, it’s easy to see that dysphoria is not a necessary condition for being trans. The upshot of this argument is that being trans is a cluster of properties and being trans just means satisfying some of these properties that we deem to be sufficient— there is no one universal property that all trans people have.

It may seem like I have fallen into the same question-begging— the truscum can say: “The universal is dysphoria!” However, the nominalist account does pose a challenge to this assertion. Suppose it is the case that all trans people experience dysphoria. The truscum is then committed to one of two claims: either dysphoria is *necessary and sufficient* for someone to be trans or dysphoria is a *necessary* condition to be trans but it *may not be sufficient*. The first claim is an easy one to refute via a thought experiment. Imagine someone one-hundred years ago in a part of the US where trans rights have not been advanced and the concept of transness has yet to surface. However, this person feels that they are uncomfortable with the way their genitals look and wished it was of another gender’s— they have gender dysphoria. Not having been exposed to or even know of gender-reassignment surgery, they do not know it is an option and lives the rest of their life assuming this discomfort is normal. To me, it seems like it would be too strong to claim this person is trans even though they meet the necessary and sufficient conditions of being trans per the truscums commitment. This person may be predisposed to *becoming trans*, but I think it’s incredibly unclear as to whether they are trans in that temporal space. As such, adopting such a

definition of transness would allow for the truscum's very own metaphysical worry to slip through where someone that isn't trans can be called trans! The nominalist account of transness can easily account for this case since it is flexible enough to let go of dysphoria as a necessary condition for transness.

Let's say instead, the truscum opts for the second claim regarding dysphoria's relation to transness—dysphoria is a necessary condition to being trans but may not be sufficient. In this instance then, the truscum can list another series of conditions that seem plausible to be included in the definition of transness. The form of these conditions will either be in a conjunctive form (i.e., a and b and c and d) or a disjunctive form (i.e., in the form of a or b or c or d). To my knowledge, no truscum has ever done either in such a way that it is a list widely adopted by the entire truscum movement. I think from this sociological fact, we can perhaps arrive at a deeper metaphysical one. That's to say that it's very difficult to find a series of conditions that everyone is satisfied with even within the truscum community. The reason it is difficult is because of the reasons highlighted in my nominalist account of transness via Stoljar's argument from complexity—every trans person's experience is so particular that it's difficult to reduce it down to some specific property. So then, the truscum is back at square one: they can only reduce transness to the experience of dysphoria. But as we have seen via the thought experiment above—this is far from enough in encapsulating transness and it may not even cover the experiences of other trans people.

The nominalist sketch of transness then addresses this issue. When we are willing to say that transness is complex we can include all types of experiences while excluding people that aren't trans. To be trans, then, is to satisfy *enough* but perhaps (and probably) not all the conditions within the cluster of the complex concept of transness. What are these things in the cluster of transness then? I think it would be incredibly difficult to write a list because trans people exist in the millions and we all live trans lives in different ways, but here are

some preliminary conditions, which are not necessary. Experiencing gender dysphoria, experiencing gender euphoria when one is a different gender, substantially deviating from gender norms, medically transitioning, to have a desire of having the experiences of another gender...

So far so good: we have sketched an account of transness that is more plausible than the truscum's account and we have an account that is just as inclusive as the account many mainstream trans activists give. The remaining sections of this paper will then be used to explicitly address three concerns: the pragmatic concerns of the truscum, the metaphysical concerns of the truscum, and lastly, the concerns coming from gender abolitionism.

## **VI. Resolving Worries: The Pragmatics**

I will now explain why my nominalist account of transness hold as much pragmatic value as the truscum position. The reason I do so is not because I hope to appease the truscums but because I believe our conceptual analysis, as Sally Haslanger, put it, ought to be "ameliorative" (Haslanger 11). That's to say our conception of transness should assist us in pursuing a particular goal in battling oppression. Just as a reminder, the pragmatic worry coming from the truscum is that if we let go of dysphoria defining transness it would mean that the medical pleadings of many trans people will be delegitimized. However, it's unclear how the nominalist account of transness will necessarily put a dent in trans people's access to healthcare. It remains a fact that without receiving the proper medical care and rights, trans people will suffer. We need not generalize to the entirety of the trans population, we just need to claim that *many* trans people need *x* care. The problem of trans people not accessing healthcare is not a problem that owes itself to us being too "loosey-goosey" with our conception of transness but rather due to a transphobic society that does not deem trans access to healthcare to be worthwhile. Insofar as a significant amount of trans people *need* care, we do not need a stronger and more exclusionary metaphysical thesis to further push for

trans rights. To sacrifice the sense of belonging many trans people may feel in adopting this label for, at best, an infinitesimal better chance at pushing for trans rights is, in my opinion, not a pragmatic choice. With that being said, I think the nominalist account does still hold a lot of the pragmatic ammunition that trans activists claim other accounts of transness do not have.

## **VII. Resolving Worries: The Metaphysical**

The trans worry here is that if there's no clear line in the sand, we would admit people that aren't *really* trans. The intuition is that one can imagine a scenario where we have many individuals lined up such that each differs in slight qualities and that on the very left end, we have an indisputable "non-transgender person" and on the right end an indisputable "transgender person." If we have vague definitions of transness and each person in the line only differs ever so slightly a problem may arise. If we ask someone looking at the line and ask if the 1<sup>st</sup> person is trans, they'd give an answer and they'd also give the same answer regarding the person standing next to the 1<sup>st</sup> person. We can repeat this process infinitely many times such that a definite case of a non-transgender person is called a transgender person. This would be bad for our explanation of transness. However, we need not worry because this scenario would probably never appear in real life. Moreover, I suggest that we adopt an intellectual policy first articulated by Nelson Goodman and later called the "reflective equilibrium" by John Rawls (Goodman 63). The idea is that we can always update our conceptual apparatus in light of new empirical evidence. In the case of transness, we can always look at the borderline cases and alter our definition of transness accordingly if we think said borderline case constitutes transness. If we think said case ought not to be admitted to the class of trans people, we need not do so. The nominalist account of transness offers flexibility such that we don't have to be worried about our definition of transness even if it is vague.

### **VIII. Resolving Worries: The Abolitionist Stance**

It has long been the ambition of many trans activists, feminists, and Marxists to abolish gender. My analysis so far seems to be in tension with this ambition. The abolitionist critic would say that I am unwilling to see that my efforts are futile in the face of a capitalistic structure that has always been more than willing to put trans bodies in harm's way— I am far too focused on the pragmatics when we should be letting gender go entirely. Although I have mixed emotions about gender abolition, I still believe that abolitionists ought to adopt the nominalist account for the time being. This is because the pragmatic question will always remain up until the time of gender abolition. It may not be a question that is interesting in the grand scheme of things (for abolitionists) but to ignore settling it is a loss of opportunity. It gives space for more exclusionary forces such as transphobia to grow. When we advocate for the nominalist account, we can minimize these exclusionary forces that harm trans people *currently*. I do believe that even if we are gender abolitionists, the nominalist account is not mutually exclusive for the time being.

### **Conclusion**

The transphobia's concerns in terms of the pragmatics and metaphysics of transness are genuine but misguided. In this paper, I have sketched an account of transness that resolve these concerns and what I believe to approximate more closely what lived trans experiences are like. More specifically, I have shown why trans experiences are particular to each person to the point that it is very hard to see how it can be reduced to the universal of gender dysphoria. What is perhaps lacking in my account of transness and something that might be of interest for further exploration is how my account fares with the classic account of transness utilizing arguments about social construction. Although both accounts offer flexibility in admitting people into the class of trans people, the route in doing so is different. The comparisons of the two accounts would have implications in terms of trans activism

since the argument from social construction is one that underpins a lot of trans advocacy today. Either way, the truscum has lost.

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