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Gender Identity

Personal identity is the perception of oneself through the course of their lifetime. Personal identity questions how a person at one time can be the same at a different time. The theory of the body states that so long as you are in the same body from birth until death you are the same person. However, the memory or consciousness theory states that because you have the same consciousness and can reflect on past memories, you are the same person. According to philosopher Charlotte Witt, gender is the unifying trait that creates and maintains each role in a person's life, therefore making gender the root of personal identity in Witt's point of view. However, I believe that personal identity is determined by the memories of the individual, therefore making consciousness the root of personal identity in my own point of view.

The metaphysics of gender, as explained by Charlotte Witt, rests on the idea of gender uniessentialism, a form of gender essentialism. In the article *Gender Essences*, gender uniessentialism is defined as the different norms equated with being a man and woman and therefore inherently prioritizes different norms for the two genders. Witt argues that because gendered norms permeate other norms, gender is the root of our "social agency" and personal identity (Witt).

Witt draws on essentialism by arguing that gender have "essences" and that is what makes them an individual. She uses the example of the house to strengthen her argument. When the parts of the house are assembled, they make a whole, but the

essence of the house is to provide shelter. Similarly, if the materials of the house were spread in a junkyard then they would not be unified and the norm of the house (to provide shelter) would not exist. The essence unifies the norms of an individual and in turn creates their personal identity.

An essence, as explained by Aristotle, is known to be universal or a secondary substance of the individual. However, Witt uses an essence as a way to differentiate and categorize different norms and factors that adhere to an individual. Uniessentialism establishes that by virtue of essence, individual norms unify and create personal identity. Witt states that gender is “the essence of the individual so even if someone were to change consciousness their unified norms and personal identity would stay the same” (Jergens 5).

Once someone is understood as a female, she is expected to prioritize parental and maternal norms before professional or even their own needs. Gendered norms, according to Witt, are attributed by the recognition of others. Therefore, “gender is not determined by us” and even if we reject our socialized personal identity, what we are identified as by society is still one gender or another (Witt). So, the gendered norms that are expected of a female become her entire identity (Witt).

I, however, understand personal identity to stem from the sameness in consciousness. Consciousness is the way in which everything is perceived and where the self is prescribed. If the consciousness of any person can be remembered at two different times, then that is the same being and that is the root of personal identity. If, for example, the mind was moved to another body, the norms attributed to that person would be different. However, the person would maintain the same consciousness and

be unchanged because they were able to recollect their memories as the person they once were.

The mind, through consciousness, is the only thing that can award self-identity, so the norms attributed to the new body would not affect how the mind perceives them. Memories, however, can be misinterpreted or forgotten. Memories are simply a way to link a stream of consciousness to one previously. If, for example, an elderly person is experiencing dementia and cannot recollect their childhood, that person still maintains the same consciousness link to their previous self and is therefore the same person that they once were.

“Consciousness becomes self-consciousness where the self in question is the subject of the consciousness” (Ainslie and Ware 249). When norms are inflicted on an individual, how the person occupying the self-conscious interprets them affects how relevant they are to their personal identity. The mind of the person is subjugated to all decisions, so if society is pressing the gender norm of taking care of a sick child over a professional opportunity, how the self-conscious perceives this pressure determines the outcome. The mind is responsible for giving things meaning, so if a professional opportunity is the norm of the individual then that, in turn, will reflect back on society and help to change a societal norm.

Charlotte Witt defines personal identity as gendered norms stemming from gender uniessentialism. She supposes that personal identity is based on how society attributes norms to the individual and is completely out of one's own control. However, personal identity is determined by the individual, therefore making consciousness the root of personal identity. As norms are changed through socialization, how society views

gender will become obsolete. Without gender to determine reactions, consciousness will determine the interpretation of memories, experiences, and outcomes without societal pressure.

Works Cited

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