

Human Identity: the Mirror and the World

Author: Bea Groves-McDaniel

Research Assistant: Gwen

This essay should be read in conjunction with 'Sonata No.1...'

Chapter One: The Lived Reality of Identity and the Hegemony of the Normal

In everyday discourse, identity is frequently treated as a static label, a bureaucratic category, or a biological fact awaiting verification.

This reductive understanding fails **catastrophically** to capture the lived reality of what it means to be a person in the world. Identity, in its truest and most philosophically rigorous sense, is not a fixed essence but a dynamic, ongoing process of becoming. It is shaped through recognition, language, material conditions, and the continuous negotiation between self-understanding and social response.

When people speak of identity in day-to-day usage, they typically refer to markers of belonging such as gender, race, class, nationality, bodily morphology, or sexuality. These markers are treated as **self-evident** categories, yet they are profoundly social constructs whose apparent naturalness is the result of historical sedimentation rather than ontological necessity. As Stuart Hall argued with characteristic clarity, **identity is not a being but a doing**, formed through narrative, memory, and interaction within specific cultural and historical contexts (Hall, 1996). We do not discover who we are; we become who we are through the stories we tell and the ways we are positioned within well-used social symbolic systems.

We identify each other not through direct access to inner essences but through shared frameworks of meaning. I know who you are because we participate in common linguistic, cultural, and institutional structures that make recognition possible. Similarly, I know who I am not through solitary introspection alone but through the ways I am recognised, misrecognised, or refused recognition by others.

This intersubjective dimension is **fundamental and irreducible**. Identity cannot exist in isolation; it requires a social world in which to take shape, a horizon of meaning against which the self can emerge. The philosopher Charles Taylor described this as the dialogical nature of identity, arguing that we define ourselves only in relation to significant others and the broader communities that sustain our sense of worth (Taylor, 1989). Without recognition, identity remains inchoate, unformed, vulnerable to erasure. Misrecognition, conversely, is not merely an insult but a form of oppression that distorts the self and constrains the possibilities of becoming.

The hegemony of the so-called normal operates precisely by concealing its own constructed nature. What passes as normal is presented as natural, inevitable, universal, and morally neutral. Yet this normality is exclusionary by design. It marginalises those whose lives do not conform to its narrow parameters, rendering them aberrant, pathological, unintelligible, or threatening. In a diverse world characterised by infinite variation in human experience, such hegemony is fundamentally irrational. It

demands that complex, multifaceted human realities be forced into inadequate categories, producing violence through erasure, misrepresentation, and systemic neglect.

The enforcement of normality is never neutral; it is always a mechanism of social control that maintains existing hierarchies of power, privilege, and resource distribution. Those who benefit from this arrangement have a vested interest in preserving it, while those who are excluded bear the disproportionate costs of its maintenance.

This hegemonic framework is sustained not merely through explicit coercion but through the subtle, pervasive operation of ideology. As Antonio Gramsci demonstrated, hegemony functions most effectively when dominant values are internalised as **common sense**, making alternative ways of being appear unthinkable or unnatural (Gramsci, 1971). The normal becomes invisible precisely because it is everywhere, embedded in language, institutions, architecture, law, and everyday practice. Challenging it therefore requires not only political mobilisation but also epistemological rupture, a willingness to question the very categories through which reality is organised.

Phenomenology, as we shall explore in the next chapter, provides precisely such a methodological tool, enabling us to bracket taken-for-granted assumptions and return to the richness of lived experience as it actually unfolds.

The question of how we know who and what we are, thus, cannot be answered through individual psychology alone. It demands an account of the social, historical, and material conditions that make certain forms of identity possible while foreclosing others. Identity is always situated, always embodied, always embedded within relations of power. To treat it as a private matter of personal choice or biological destiny is to ignore the vast structural forces that shape every aspect of human existence.

The struggle over identity is therefore always also a struggle over the organisation of society itself, over whose lives matter, whose experiences count as real, and who has the authority to define the boundaries of the human.

Chapter Two: Phenomenology, Embodiment.

To grasp the stakes of this struggle, we must first clarify what we mean by phenomena and phenomenology.

A phenomenon, in the philosophical sense established by Edmund Husserl and developed by his successors, is not merely an object of scientific observation but the full richness of conscious experience as it is given to awareness.

Phenomenology is the disciplined study of these phenomena, insisting on returning to the things themselves before theoretical abstraction, categorisation, or causal explanation (Husserl, 1913). It ‘brackets-out’ preconceived assumptions, including those of natural science, to attend to how things appear to consciousness in their embodied, situated, temporal context. This method is particularly vital when discussing identity, because it centres the first-person perspective that hegemonic frameworks systematically dismiss or pathologise.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty radicalised Husserl’s project by emphasising the primacy of embodiment. For Merleau-Ponty, consciousness is not ‘detached from’ the body but is fundamentally incarnate; we perceive and understand the world through our bodily engagement with it (Merleau-Ponty, 1945). The body is not an object among objects but the very medium through which the world is disclosed.

This insight has profound implications for understanding identity. Gender, race, disability, and other dimensions of identity are not merely mental states or social labels; they are modes of bodily **being-in-the-world**. They shape how space is experienced, how others are encountered, how time unfolds, and how meaning is generated. To ignore embodiment is to reduce identity to abstraction, stripping it

of its existential weight and lived texture.

Simone de Beauvoir extended phenomenological analysis to gender specifically, famously declaring that one is not born but rather becomes a woman (de Beauvoir, 1949). This formulation **rejects** biological determinism while affirming the material reality of gendered existence. Becoming is not voluntary performance but a constrained negotiation with social expectations, institutional arrangements, and bodily capacities. De Beauvoir's work laid the groundwork for later feminist and transgender phenomenologies that explore how gender is lived, resisted, and transformed from within.

Sara Ahmed, building on this tradition, describes how bodies are orientated towards certain objects and away from others through repeated social practices, creating habitual pathways that feel natural even as they are historically produced (Ahmed, 2006). Disorientation, then, is not pathology but a revelation of the contingency of oriented-self.

The phenomenon of experiencing one's identity is irreducibly distinct from the factual matter of human biology. Biology describes bodies as objects of scientific inquiry; phenomenology describes what it is like to be a body in a social world saturated with meaning. These two registers are related but not reducible to one another. Transgender identity emerges not as a denial of biology but as a profound engagement with the conditions of embodied existence. As Sandy Stone and other foundational trans' scholars have demonstrated, trans' experience reveals the contingency of all gender categories, exposing the gap between assigned sex and lived identity, between medical classification and subjective truth (Stone, 1987). Where does transgender identity come from? It arises from the same source as all identity: **the ongoing negotiation between self-understanding and social recognition, between bodily experience and cultural availability.**

In a world increasingly saturated with scientism (which reduces human beings to measurable data points and genetic sequences), the phenomena of self-identity assert the irreducibility of subjective experience. Scientism claims exhaustive knowledge of the human, yet it cannot account for the **qualitative** texture of being, the felt sense of rightness or wrongness in one's embodiment, the anguish of misrecognition, or the joy of authentic expression. This is not a critique of the efficacy of science, but simply an observation that technocracy sometimes misapplies scientific answers to very human questions. The jarring nature of such misapplication creates the sense of 'there is something wrong' often felt by gender-variant individuals.

Transgender lives, in their refusal to be fully captured by biological determinism or psychiatric diagnosis, stand as a testament to the limits of technocratic thinking. They demonstrate that the human exceeds any framework devised to contain it.

The clash over transgender identity in contemporary Britain is frequently mischaracterised as a debate over rights or biology. This framing obscures the deeper epistemological and political struggle at hand. Rights discourse, while strategically useful in certain legal and policy contexts, can inadvertently reinforce the very frameworks it seeks to challenge. Rights are often framed as entitlements granted by authorities, implying that they can also be withheld, conditioned, or revoked. But human dignity is not contingent upon state approval or medical validation. The real conflict is over hegemony: who gets to define what counts as real, valid, legitimate, and intelligible?

Within advanced capitalist societies, hierarchical domination operates through the control of knowledge production, institutional design, and uncritically received cultural narratives. Transgender people challenge these hierarchies not merely by demanding inclusion within existing structures but by exposing the arbitrariness and violence of those structures themselves.

This is why resistance to trans liberation is so fierce and so persistent. It threatens not just particular policies or legal provisions but the entire edifice of normative order upon which existing power relations depend. To accept transgender identity as valid is to accept that gender is not natural, that

categories are contingent, and that authority over identity resides with the subject rather than the state, the clinic, or the academy. This is an existential threat to hegemonic stability, which depends on the appearance of naturalness and inevitability. The backlash against trans people is therefore not merely prejudice, but a defensive reaction to the destabilisation of normative categories. Understanding this dynamic is essential if we are to move beyond superficial debates about rights and towards a genuine transformation of the conditions that make certain lives livable and others unbearable.

Chapter Three: Institutional Contradiction, Political Stasis, and the Necessity of Hope

The Equality and Human Rights Commission Code of Practice for Services, Public Functions and Associations (2026) crystallises this crisis of hegemony in institutional form. On its face, the code aims to provide practical guidance on complying with equality law, particularly the Equality Act 2010. In practice, however, it is a contradictory, vague, and irrational mess that undermines the very protections it purports to uphold.

Key terms such as sex, gender reassignment, and single-sex services are left undefined or defined inconsistently across different sections. Protections for transgender people are hedged with qualifications, exceptions, and balancing tests that effectively nullify them in practice. The code treats gender reassignment as a special case requiring exceptional justification, thereby reinforcing the very stigma and suspicion it claims to combat. Its language oscillates unpredictably between affirmation and restriction, reflecting the unresolved tensions and political compromises within the establishment that produced it.

Rather than clarifying the law, the code amplifies uncertainty, leaving service providers anxious, risk-averse, and confused, while transgender people are rendered vulnerable to arbitrary exclusion and discrimination.

The impact of this failure falls disproportionately on transgender people, who face increased barriers to accessing healthcare, education, employment, housing, and public services. But cisgender people are harmed as well. The code's vagueness creates a chilling effect, discouraging organisations from implementing inclusive practices for fear of legal challenge or reputational damage. It fosters a culture of defensive compliance rather than genuine commitment to equality. Everyone loses when the framework for protecting rights becomes itself a source of oppression and confusion. The code does not resolve conflicts; it institutionalises them, embedding contradiction into the very machinery of governance and making meaningful progress impossible.

Why does the UK government not demand the code's revision? The answer lies in the political function of ambiguity. A clear, robust, and genuinely protective code would require decisive action, adequate resourcing, and genuine accountability. Vagueness, by contrast, allows the government to appear responsive to criticism while avoiding substantive change. It enables ministers to deflect pressure by pointing to the existence of guidance, even as that guidance fails catastrophically in practice. Moreover, revising the code would necessitate confronting uncomfortable truths about the state's complicity in maintaining hegemonic hierarchies and the systematic marginalisation of transgender people.

The current administration benefits politically from the status quo, where transgender rights remain perpetually contested, debated, and uncertain rather than securely established and universally respected. Ambiguity serves power by keeping marginalised communities in a state of precarious uncertainty, exhausting their capacity for resistance and diverting energy into endless defensive struggles.

This stasis is not accidental but structural. Advanced capitalist societies **depend** on the reproduction of normative categories that stabilise labour markets, family structures, consumption patterns, and administrative systems. Transgender existence disrupts these stabilisations, revealing their contingency and opening space for alternative arrangements. The state's reluctance to affirm trans identity is therefore not merely ideological but functional; it preserves the conditions necessary for capital accumulation and social reproduction. Recognising this does not mean abandoning hope but rather grounding hope in a realistic assessment of the forces at play.

Hope, in this context, is not naive optimism or wishful thinking. It is, as Paulo Freire taught, an ontological need, a constitutive feature of human agency that persists even in the face of overwhelming odds (Freire, 1994). Without hope, resistance becomes impossible; with it, even in the darkest moments, the possibility of a more just world remains alive.

What we can all do begins with refusing the terms of the hegemonic debate.

- We must insist on the validity of lived experience against abstracted legalisms, medicalised diagnoses, and political opportunism.
- We must build solidarities across difference, recognising that the struggle against one form of domination is inseparable from the struggle against all forms.
- Cisgender allies must move beyond performative support to confront their own complicity in hegemonic structures and use their privilege to create space for trans voices.
- Trans people must continue to assert their reality unapologetically, creating communities, cultures, and knowledge systems that exist outside official recognition.
- We must hold institutions accountable, not merely for compliance with flawed codes but for genuine transformation of the conditions that produce harm.
- And we must cultivate patience, resilience, and collective care, knowing that the work of dismantling hegemony is generational.

Hope is essential not because victory is guaranteed but because the alternative is surrender. It is rooted in the irrepressible reality of lived experience, in the countless acts of courage, creativity, and solidarity that occur daily despite systemic oppression. It is sustained by the memory of past struggles and the vision of futures yet to be born.

The phenomenology of human identity teaches us that we are never merely victims of circumstance but always also agents of meaning-making, capable of imagining and enacting worlds otherwise. This capacity is the foundation of hope and the condition of possibility for any genuine liberation.

Coda

Identity is not a problem to be solved but a mystery to be honoured.

In attending to the phenomena of our shared humanity, we discover that the boundaries we draw between ourselves are far more permeable than hegemony would have us believe. The task before us is not to eliminate difference but to create conditions in which difference can flourish without fearful domination, where recognition is freely given rather than grudgingly conceded, and where the fullness of human becoming is celebrated rather than policed. This is the work of generations, and it begins with the simple, radical act of listening to one another with openness, humility, and love.

Bibliography

Ahmed, S. (2006) *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*. Durham: Duke University

Press.

de Beauvoir, S. (1949) *The Second Sex*. Translated by H.M. Parshley (1953). London: Jonathan Cape.

Equality and Human Rights Commission (2026) *Code of Practice for Services, Public Functions and Associations*. London: EHRC.

Freire, P. (1994) *Pedagogy of Hope: Reliving Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Translated by R.R. Barr. New York: Continuum.

Gramsci, A. (1971) *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. Edited and translated by Q. Hoare and G. Nowell Smith. London: Lawrence and Wishart.

Hall, S. (1996) 'Introduction: Who needs "identity"?', in S. Hall and P. du Gay (eds.) *Questions of Cultural Identity*. London: Sage, pp. 1–17.

Husserl, E. (1913) *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*. Translated by F. Kersten (1982). The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.

Merleau-Ponty, M. (1945) *Phenomenology of Perception*. Translated by C. Smith (2002). London: Routledge.

Stone, S. (1987) 'The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto', in J. Epstein and K. Straub (eds.) *Body Guards: The Cultural Politics of Gender Ambiguity*. New York: Routledge, pp. 280–304.

Taylor, C. (1989) *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.