

Phenomena and Physicality

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Introduction

There is a distinction that philosophy has long recognised but rarely names with sufficient clarity: the distinction between the self as it is *experienced* and the self as it is *situated*. The first is the domain of inner life, of deliberation, of the questioning that constitutes what it means to be a creature that can ask of itself what it should do and why it acted as it did. The second is the domain of the body in the world, of hunger and cold and exhaustion, of the needs that make demands upon us regardless of what we think or want or intend. Both are real. Both are constitutive of human existence. And the failure to hold them together (the tendency to resolve one into the other, or to treat one as more fundamental than the other) is a source of some of the deepest confusions in philosophy, in politics, and in how we understand ourselves.

This paper offers a preliminary map of that distinction and argues that it has particular urgency for how we think about transgender experience. The phenomenal self and the physical self are not merely two aspects of a single thing; they are in tension with one another, and the management of that tension is not an exceptional burden borne only by those whose gender identity is contested. It is the ordinary, daily work of being human.

Most people, however, prefer not to notice this. The irony is that the very complexity of human existence that transgender people are forced to confront is, in fact, universal — and its universal character is obscured precisely by the ideologies that seek to deny it.

The Phenomenal Self

When you ask yourself a question: what should I write in response to this email? How can I explain this concept more clearly? Why did they react that way? – you are engaging in a form of reflection that is among the most distinctive features of human consciousness. Thomas Nagel (1974), in his celebrated paper on the subjective character of experience, argued that there is something it is *like* to be a conscious creature in a way that is not reducible to any third-person description. However far we extend our scientific knowledge of the brain, of behaviour, of information-processing systems, we cannot fully capture what it is **like** to be the creature doing the processing. This residual, first-personal dimension of existence is what I am calling the **phenomenal self**.

The phenomenal self is the self that deliberates, that imagines alternatives, that feels the force of reasons and is moved by them in ways that cannot be fully explained in mechanical or causal terms. It is the self that is not merely situated in the world but is capable of standing back from its own situation, of asking whether its desires and beliefs are correct, and of revising its self-understanding in light of new evidence or arguments. Without this capacity, Ludwig Wittgenstein (1953) argued, there could be no such thing as following a rule. And without rule-following, the entire edifice of language and meaning collapses. The phenomenal self is not a luxury of consciousness; it is the condition of possibility of rational agency.

Wittgenstein's private language argument offers a further constraint on how we understand the phenomenal self. The inner experience that constitutes the phenomenal self (feelings, sensations, qualia) cannot be defined privately, in isolation from the public world of criteria and expression. What we mean by 'feeling anxious' is not an isolated inner state accessible only to the person who has it; it is a way of being in the world, expressed through behaviour, context, and public criteria.

The phenomenal self is not a theatre sealed off from the public domain; it is shaped by, and constituted through, its engagement with the shared world.

Edmund Husserl, the founder of the phenomenological tradition, described the phenomenal self through the concept of the *Lebenswelt* — the **lifeworld** (Husserl, 1970). This is the world of pre-theoretical, pre-reflective experience that we inhabit before we begin the work of philosophical or scientific analysis. The lifeworld is the horizon of taken-for-granted (perhaps hegemonic) meaning within which all our reflections take place.

When I deliberate about what to write or how to interpret another person's behaviour, I am always already embedded in a lifeworld of assumptions, practices, and shared understandings that I did not choose and cannot fully examine all at once. The phenomenal self is **not**, therefore, a sovereign transparency over its own operations. It is itself partly opaque, partly constituted by what it has not yet brought to reflective consciousness.

This point has significant implications. The phenomenal self is not simply System 2 in Daniel Kahneman's dual-process framework (Kahneman, 2011). Kahneman distinguishes between System 1, which is fast, automatic, and intuitive, and System 2, which is slow, deliberate, and reflective. It is tempting to identify the phenomenal self with System 2, and the physical self (which we are about to examine) with System 1. But this mapping is too crude. The phenomenal self is not merely a slower processor; it is a self that has a perspective on its own sense-of-life, that cares about how things appear to it and to others, and that is capable of what Bernard Williams (1973) called *moral luck* — of feeling the weight of values that cannot be derived from reason alone. These are not merely cognitive operations. They are forms of existential commitment that resist reduction to any algorithm or heuristic.

The Physical Self

If the phenomenal self is the self that asks questions and deliberates about answers, the physical self is the self that is demanded of by the world. When I am hungry, there is no refutation available to me. I cannot argue my way out of the need for food any more than I can argue my way out of the need for sleep, or warmth, or social contact. These are what the existentialist tradition called *facticity* — the given, brute, un-negotiable aspects of our being in the world (Heidegger, 1927/1962). Facticity is not something the self chooses; it is something the self finds itself lumbered with and must come to terms with.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1945/2012) argued in the *Phenomenology of Perception* that the body is not merely an object among objects in the world, something that can be described from the outside like any other physical thing. The body is the vehicle of my **being in the world**, and as such, it is always both a subject and an object. Both the perspective from which I engage with the world and a thing in the world that is acted upon by forces beyond my control. When I am cold, my body withdraws into itself; when I am in pain, the world contracts around the site of the pain. These are not merely physiological events. They are existential ones; they shape the character of my experience in ways that no purely cognitive analysis can capture.

The physical self, on this account, is not merely the body considered as a physical system. It is the **body-as-lived** — the body as the medium through which I am present to the world and the world is

present to me. Karl Marx (1844/2010) expressed a related insight in his concept of *species-being* (*Gattungswesen*): human beings are not merely thinking substances but active, embodied beings whose identity is constituted through their engagement with the material conditions of existence. Hunger, exhaustion, the need for shelter, the desire for physical intimacy — these are not distractions from the ‘real’ work of thinking and deciding. They are the foundations upon which all thinking and deciding takes place.

The consequences of this are important. A political philosophy that ignores the physical self (i.e. that treats human beings as disembodied rational agents whose material circumstances are irrelevant to their moral status) will go badly wrong. Simone de Beauvoir (1949/2011) made precisely this argument in *The Second Sex*, where she argued that women had been defined as immanent rather than transcendent, as **bodies** rather than minds, and that this definition was a political act of subordination rather than a neutral description. **The philosophical point is general: the reduction of persons to their physicality is as much a distortion as the reduction of persons to their rationality. We are both, always, simultaneously.**

The Tension

The phenomenal self and the physical self are not merely complementary; they are in tension. The deliberative calm of the phenomenal self is disrupted by the insistent demands of the physical self. I may have concluded, after careful reflection, that I ought to fast for health reasons, but the physical self has other ideas, and my stomach will make its demands known regardless of what my reasoned judgement says. I may believe that I should be indifferent to social approval, but the physical self registers the sting of rejection and the warmth of belonging in ways that no amount of philosophical conviction can fully override.

This tension is not a defect to be eliminated. It is the condition of human freedom. Were we purely physical beings, we would be automatons, driven by mechanical causes. Were we purely phenomenal beings, we would be as Gods, unconstrained by the weight and needs of embodiment. The human condition is to be both at once and to have to negotiate between them constantly. This negotiation is what Bernard Williams (1973) called *the unity of the deliberative self* — the capacity to bring one’s whole self to the process of deciding how to live, without being able to resolve the tensions between its different dimensions into perfect consistency.

The philosopher Harry Frankfurt (1988) made a related point through his account of second-order desires. We are not merely creatures who have desires; we are creatures who can reflect on our desires and form volitions about them. I may desire a second helping of dessert (first-order desire) and simultaneously will not resist it (second-order volition). This capacity for self-evaluation and self-direction is what makes us persons rather than mere robots. But Frankfurt’s account also reveals the instability at the heart of the self: the desires we endorse at the level of second-order reflection are not always the desires that determine our actions. The gap between the self that deliberates and the self that acts is a permanent feature of human existence.

It is this gap that produces what we might call *existential dysphoria* — the uncomfortable, sometimes painful sense that the self one experiences oneself as being is not fully aligned with the self that one is compelled to be by virtue of one’s embodiment.

This is not a condition unique to transgender people, though it takes particularly acute forms in their experience. It is the ordinary condition of human life. Every person who has ever felt that their body was betraying their intentions, or that their reflective judgements were insufficiently connected to their emotional responses, has encountered it. The irony, as I will argue, is that the ideologies which seek to resolve the tension by collapsing one side of it (by insisting either that we are purely physical or that we are purely rational) are ideologies that flee from the human condition rather than confronting it.

The Particular Case of Transgender Experience

For a transgender person, the tension between the phenomenal self and the physical self takes a specific and **acute** form. The physical self (the body as it presents itself in the world, the social recognition that the body receives, the gendered assumptions that structure how others respond to one's physical presence) is experienced as not matching the phenomenal self. This is not, as some critics have suggested, a simple confusion or delusion. It is a lived experience of a particular kind of disharmony between two dimensions of existence that philosophical analysis reveals to be in tension for **all human beings**.

The gender-critical position, as exemplified by writers such as Helen Joyce (2021), holds that the physical self is definitive. On this view, biological sex is an objective, immutable fact that determines gender absolutely, and any claim to a gender identity that does not correspond to biological sex is a form of ideology or delusion.

But this position rests on a philosophical mistake. It treats the physical self as if it were transparent and unproblematic. As if the body's meaning were given, not interpreted. In fact, as Merleau-Ponty showed, the body is always **already** interpreted; it is always the vehicle of a particular form-of-life, a particular engagement with the world, not a mere natural fact. To insist that a transgender woman's body is 'really' male is to impose a particular interpretation of that body. One that is no more neutral or objective than the interpretation that affirms her gender identity.

At the same time, a purely phenomenalist position is also inadequate. The physical self is not optional. The body-in-the-world makes demands that no amount of reflection can fully override. A transgender woman who has not undergone physical transition may still experience the physical self as a source of dysphoria; and a transgender woman who has undergone extensive physical transition may still find that the world's reception of her body does not match her self-understanding. The conflict between the phenomenal self and the physical self is not resolved by transition; it is transmuted into new forms.

The reconciliation that is possible and that many transgender people achieve – is not the elimination of the tension but its management. This involves, on the one hand, the recognition that the physical self is not merely a prison but also a resource; the body is not only what constrains the self but also what enables it to be in the world at all. And it involves, on the other hand, the recognition that the phenomenal self is not sovereign; it cannot simply decide what to be and thereby become it. The self that one is, in the fullness of human existence, is always a work in progress. It is a negotiation between what one experiences oneself as being and what one is compelled to be by the brute facts of embodiment.

Julia Serano (2007) has argued that the dismissal of transgender identity by gender-critical commentators rests on a category error: the assumption that the only alternative to essentialist biological accounts of gender is a purely constructionist one that denies any biological dimension.

Serano's argument is that both biological and social factors interact in the development of gender identity and that the dismissal of transgender experience on essentialist grounds fails to engage with this complexity. This maps neatly onto the distinction I am drawing. Gender identity is **not** purely phenomenal (a free-floating self-identification) **nor** purely physical (a mechanical consequence of biological sex). It is an emergent property of the interaction between the two. Which is precisely why it is so resistant to resolution by either side alone.

The Wider Application

The transgender case is revealing not because it is unique but because it is exemplary. The tension between the phenomenal self and the physical self that transgender people experience in acute form is the same tension that all human beings experience in more diffuse forms.

Every person who has struggled to align their body with their self-image, or their self-understanding with the social recognition they receive, has encountered it. Every person who has found that their reasoned judgements about how to live are undermined by desires and compulsions that those judgements cannot fully control has felt its force.

And yet the dominant cultural ideologies (on both the left and the right) tend to deny this. The right tends toward a biological reductionism that treats the physical self as definitive and the phenomenal self as epiphenomenal or illusory. The left tends toward a constructionism that treats all identity as a performance of will, as if the body were irrelevant and the self could simply choose its form of life regardless of its embodiment. Both ideologies flee from the genuine complexity of the human condition. Both deny the tension that constitutes us.

The philosophical tradition offers resources for a more adequate account. Wittgenstein (1953) shows us the limits of the private language of inner experience. Merleau-Ponty (1945/2012) shows us the body as neither merely physical nor merely phenomenal but as the intersection of both. Kahneman (2011) gives us a psychological framework for understanding the interaction between fast and slow processing, even if his dual-process model requires supplementing with the richer philosophical accounts.

What emerges from all of this is a picture of human beings as necessarily embodied, necessarily situated, but also necessarily reflective. We are creatures who cannot choose to be free of the tension between these dimensions but who can learn to live with it gracefully.

Conclusion

The huge and sometimes comical irony of the current debate about transgender identity is that the conflict between the phenomenal self and the physical self is not a special case of human experience requiring special treatment. It is the human condition itself, universal in character and daily in occurrence. The person who denies this (who insists that gender identity must be determined entirely by biology or that it must be entirely a matter of free self-identification) is not escaping the complexity of the human condition. They are merely refusing to gaze at it.

For transgender people, the refusal to see this universal complexity has concrete and sometimes devastating consequences. It renders their experience unintelligible to the wider world, assigns them to a category of exceptionality they have not chosen, and justifies political and social arrangements that make their lives harder than they need to be.

But the people who suffer from this refusal are not only transgender people. **Any culture that cannot acknowledge the tension between the phenomenal and the physical self is a culture that is in flight from the most fundamental facts of human existence.**

The alternative is to sit with the complexity. To recognise that the self is both embodied and reflective, both determined and free, both situated and capable of standing back from its situation. This is not a comfortable position. It does not offer the certainty of biological reductionism or the clean simplicity of pure constructionism. But it is an honest one — and honesty, in the end, is what philosophy is for.

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Word count: approximately 3,200 words