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A Kantian View of Transgenderism

Abstract

- The recent popularity of sex reassignment surgery is logically untenable and immoral when understood in the light of Kantian philosophy. From a Kantian perspective of synthetic a priori judgments, I argue that a biological male cannot rationally claim to “feel like a woman inside.” As a male, any female is part of the noumenal world and cannot be known apart from perception. The statement “I feel like a woman inside” assumes all women feel the same on the inside. Kant’s explanation of the noumenal and phenomenal excludes the possibility of knowing that all women or men feel the same inside because it is impossible to know the noumenal world or the thing in itself. I argue that Kant’s moral principle of universality would conclude sex reassignment surgery would lead to contradictions and absurdities. If all men everywhere universally had the operation to look like their perception of a female, the end of the human race would soon follow; therefore, a Kantian would conclude sexual reassignment surgery is immoral.

Keywords

Immanuel Kant, Kantian, Transgenderism, Sexual Reassignment, Principle of Universality, Morality, Epistemology, Ethics.

Cover Page Footnote

I earned a Doctor of Ministry degree and recently transferred from the Ph.D. in philosophy to the Ph.D. in History program at Liberty University.

Introduction

A friend (I will call him Wesley) once confided, “I’ve always felt like a woman inside,” to which I replied, “That is fantastic. How in the world do you know what a woman feels like inside? In fact, how do you know all women feel the same inside? I don’t even know how other men feel or that all men feel the same inside. I only know how I feel.”

Wesley made a profound claim that has far-reaching epistemological, ethical, social, and religious implications. My response may seem insensitive; however, it came from a sincere concern to understand the philosophical worldview that would cultivate such a declaration. My purpose in this paper is to focus on the philosophical worldview of transgenderism and sexual reassignment from a Kantian perspective.

I demonstrate that Immanuel Kant’s philosophy rejects the notion that a person can feel trapped in a body that does not correspond with the sex they feel on the inside. Furthermore, “gender reassignment¹” cannot be a morally acceptable means of solving some incongruous feelings about their sexuality. My focus is the male-to-female transgender feeling of my friend, Wesley. I wish to shed light on his statement to show that Immanuel Kant would have found the statement contrary to reason. To act upon those feelings by undergoing surgery to conform the body to the emotions would be immoral. I do not examine the technical aspects of sex-reassignment operations or discuss female to male transsexual experiences.² In this study, I do not mean to belittle the struggle many people experience concerning their sexuality, nor do I mean to dismiss anyone’s feelings as trivial.

I begin by defining some key terms. Next, I briefly present Kant’s view of synthetic *a priori* judgments to address whether it is possible to know what someone of the opposite sex feels like inside. The following discussion is whether sexual dysphoria can be solved with purely cosmetic surgery or, as Corradi called it, “mutilating surgery.”³ Then, I focus on Kant’s moral construct, called the principle of universality, to demonstrate that sex change operations cannot be a morally acceptable resolution to the feeling of being a woman trapped in a man’s body. In the final section of this paper, I discuss several questions for further study

¹ Harry Benjamin, *The Transsexual Phenomenon*, electronic edition, (Düsseldorf: Symposium Publishing, 1999), 92. Originally published by The Julian Press, Inc. Publishers, New York (1966).

² A helpful article on female to male surgery is: Barry Reay, “The Transsexual Phenomenon: A Counter-History,” *Journal of Social History*, Volume 47, Number 4, Summer 2014, pp. 1042-1070.

³ Richard Corradi, “Transgender Delusion,” *First Things* October 2015, 19.

transgenderism in general. I conclude by re-engaging Wesley's claim from a Kantian philosophy.

Defining Terms

Heterosexuality, homosexuality, and transgenderism are complex issues to examine objectively. Transgenderism is especially challenging to define. Carroll, Gilroy, and Ryan developed a glossary to clarify the evolving terminology. They define gender as "A complicated set of sociocultural practices whereby human bodies are transformed into 'men' and 'women'" and it refers to "that which a society deems 'masculine or 'feminine.'"⁴ Yarhouse defined gender as "the psychological, social and cultural aspects of being male or female."⁵ The imprecise nature of the term can be confusing.

The word *gender* may have been adopted to clarify sexual identity; however, it is a neologism that obfuscates feelings about sexuality. *Gender* once referred solely to grammar rules. Words have a gender. People have a sex. For example, in Spanish, la mesa (the table) has a feminine gender. The use of masculine and feminine rather than male and female blurred the line between a person's sex and attitude toward sex. I refer to sex rather than gender to simplify the discussion.

Carroll, Gilroy, and Ryan defined transgender as "an umbrella term that includes a vast array of differing indemnity categories."⁶ They further define a transsexual as an individual who "strongly dis-identifies with their birth sex."⁷ Some wish to alter their outward appearance surgically to match the feeling of being a woman inside. Wesley dis-identified as being male but did not directly indicate a desire for sex-change surgery. One of the pioneers in the transgender movement, Harry Benjamin, defined the surgery as "a conversion operation" to "bring the psychological sex into harmony with the anatomical."⁸

⁴ Lynne Carroll, Paula Gilroy, and Jo Ryan, "Counseling Transgendered, Transsexual, and Gender-Variant Clients." *Journal of Counseling and Development: JCD* 80, No. 2 (Spring, 2002): 131-9.138-139.

⁵ Mark Yarhouse, *Understanding Gender Dysphoria: Navigating Transgender Issues in a Changing Culture*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 17.

⁶ Carroll, Gilroy, and Ryan, 139.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Benjamin, 92.

Carroll, Gilroy, and Ryan define the term “gender dysphoria” as used by psychiatrists to refer to a “radical incongruence between an individual’s birth sex and gender identity.”⁹ Many in the transgender community reject the idea that they are experiencing an ailment because of the psychological stigma. However, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Disorders (DSM-5, American Psychiatric Association, 2013)¹⁰ classified gender dysphoria as a mental illness. The lack of clarity produces a Catch-22. If it is a mental disorder, many health insurance plans will cover sex reassignment surgery. If it is not, it becomes elective, and most insurance plans will not cover it.

Immanuel Kant’s Philosophy

Kant summarized his worldview and ethics, writing, “Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and reverence, the more frequently and persistently one’s meditation deals with them: *the starry sky above me and the moral law within me.*”¹¹ Though Kant did not have transgenderism in mind, specifically, when he set forth his concepts, I will summarize his view of synthetic *a priori* judgments, which stem from his understanding of the phenomenal and the noumenal world. I show Wesley’s claim is contradictory to Immanuel Kant’s philosophy. In other words, a man cannot know what a woman feels like inside.

Synthetic *A Priori* Judgments

Kant struggled with arriving at absolute certainty in Newtonian physics from the worldview of David Hume’s empirical skepticism. Hume’s fork offered only two possibilities for knowing. First, analytical *a priori* statements such as mathematical equations are known before experience. They provide certainty because the mind actively constructed them. The Pythagorean theorem is always correct regardless of the existence of a triangle because mathematicians invented it. Each side of the equation, $5+7=12$ (subject and predicate), had the same meaning as the other side; therefore, it is absolute. The same is true of statements like the bald guy is the guy with no hair. The subject and predicate are identical. Second,

⁹ Carroll, Gilroy, and Ryan, 139.

¹⁰ Samons, xxii, 39, 59. Cf. Kevin K. Tomita, Rylan J. Testa, Kimberly F. Balsam, “Gender-Affirming Medical Interventions and Mental Health in Transgender Adults,” *Psychology of Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity*. Advance online publication. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/sgd0000316.1-12>.

¹¹ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, translated by Werner S. Pluhar, (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2002), 203.

synthetic *a posteriori* statements make claims from experience. The pen is red (the subject and predicate are not synonymous). Scientific claims are synthetic *a posteriori* statements; therefore, there can never be enough evidence from past experiences to impose them as universal laws. For Hume, cause and effect cannot be asserted as an absolute law of nature because it is only known through experience. Thus, it cannot make claims about the future. Hume's proposition, says, "I have found that such an object has always been attended with such an effect" cannot be inferred to be the same as "I foresee, that other objects, which are, in appearance, similar, will be attended with similar effects."¹²

Kant's genius as a philosopher was devising a third alternative. Synthetic *a priori* judgments¹³ provide certainty in physics before experience. He hoped to provide a "secure path of science."¹⁴ He analyzed what he called transcendental aesthetics, which is part of his transcendental doctrine of elements.¹⁵ Space and time are built into the human mind. He found "there are two pure forms of sensible intuition, which are principles of *a priori* cognition: viz., space and time."¹⁶ They are known intuitively and provide categories from which the mind organizes or judges the world of experience. Thus, for Kant, there are two worlds. There is the world *as it is* that he called noumenon and the world *we know through experience* or phenomenon.¹⁷ It is through empirical intuition that we know the world. The world as it is, noumenon, cannot be known purely.

Since intuition is a significant component of Kant's philosophy, my friend Wesley might construe that Kant supports the idea that he can intuitively know what a woman feels like inside. Wesley might point to Kant's concept of the transcendental principle of unity¹⁸ and conclude that since Kant's transcendental unity of apperception is intuition and therefore *a priori*, it is possible to know what a woman feels like inside. However, apperception is united with sensory experience and imagination to bring ideas to cognition. Thus, Wesley is left with the

¹² David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding: and Selections from a Treatise of Human Nature*, (New York: Barnes & Nobel, 2004), 25.

¹³ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, unified edition, trans., Werner S. Pluhar, (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1996), 51.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 19-20.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 73.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 75.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 303.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 164-173.

imagination of what certain other women he has encountered appear to feel like to him.

Wesley might point to Sandra Samons' research concerning transgenderism. After studying 97 clients, Samons encountered others who "feel like a woman."¹⁹ Without asking fundamental philosophical questions (such as how is that possible), Samons assumed that a man could know what a woman feels like inside. Samons claimed some in the study became aware of "transgender feelings" as early as three years old and that 100% were aware of feeling like the opposite sex by age fourteen.²⁰ Even a three-year-old has a nascent awareness of the opposite sex. The opposite sex is still noumenal and cannot be known as *a thing in itself*.²¹ Wesley's claim can best be rephrased as wishing to experience the apperception of how he perceives the opposite sex.

Samon's use of the phrase "wide range of feminine appearances" throughout the book²² unintentionally provided evidence that no two people are the same on the inside since women and men present themselves differently. Wesley may have in mind the appearance of a woman or an amalgamation of women he knew from a very early age. Anyone outside the self is an object in the phenomenal world that cannot be known as *a thing in itself*; therefore, Wesley cannot intuitively know what another person feels like inside. The incongruence he experienced cannot be supported philosophically from a Kantian perspective.

The Principle of Universality

Paul Guyer explained that for Kant, morality is not science. "Science shows us how the world has to be."²³ Kant showed how a law of nature is known *a priori*. Morality, on the other hand, tells us how the world ought to be. To develop a moral theory, Kant explained morality in terms of *a priori* "self-imposed necessity."²⁴ If morality is *a priori*, it is as certain as Newton's law of gravitation. The mind imposes necessity on science and morality; however, in the case of morality, "the

¹⁹ Sandra Samons, L, *When the Opposite Sex Isn't: Sexual Orientation in Male-to-Female Transgender People*, (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2009), 182-183.

²⁰ Samons, 3.

²¹ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 318.

²² Samons, 180.

²³ Guyer, 314.

²⁴ Ibid.

relevant aspect of mind is the rational will.”²⁵ We do not act necessarily on moral law since “the will does not *in itself* completely conform with reason.”²⁶ There is a tension between reason and desire. Rather, Kant referred to the moral law as *necessitation*.²⁷ Thus, moral law tells us what we *ought* to do and requires the existence of a moral God. Kant’s philosophical worldview is deeply rooted in this Christian faith, yet his rational mind supports his views. Guyer defined Kant’s *ought* as “whatever a holy will, or perfectly rational will, necessarily *would* do is what we imperfectly rational agents *ought* to do.”²⁸ Kant calls this moral ought a categorical imperative.²⁹ Without God and reason, the moral *ought* vanishes.

Since moral law is *a priori*, it is as rational and universal as the law of gravity. “Basic moral requirements retain their reason-giving force under any circumstances; they have universal validity.”³⁰ Kant presented this universally valid and binding argument in the form of an axiom. Guyer defined Kant’s axiom or maxim as “a personal or subjective plan of action, incorporating the agent’s reasons for acting as well as a sufficient indication of what act the reasons call for.”³¹ Kant’s reason-giving force or categorical imperative is likened to a philosophical version of the golden rule.³² He wrote: “Act only according to that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law.”³³

An act that is moral must be rational. To be rational means making sense and being consistent. Engel summed this concept up thus: “Since the essence of reason (unlike impulse or feeling) is consistency, and the test of consistency is universal

²⁵ Guyer, 316.

²⁶ Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, revised translation, Jens Timmermann, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 27.

²⁷ Ibid. Cf. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 104-108.

²⁸ Guyer, 317.

²⁹ Kant, *Groundwork*, 30-34.

³⁰ Robert Johnson and Adam Cureton, “Kant’s Moral Philosophy,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Spring 2018, <http://plato-stanford.edu/archives/spr2018/entries/kant-moral/>.

³¹ Guyer, 318.

³² Engel, 291.

³³ Kant, *Groundwork*, 34.

validity, an action in order to be rational must be motivated by a principle of conduct that is universally valid and binding.”³⁴

My friend, Wesley, made no pretense of rationality in his claim to feel like a woman inside. Had he attempted to find support from Kant’s morality, he might have said, “I would want to universalize the action that all people who experience incongruence between how they feel inside and their biological sex ought to solve their internal conflict by having sex reassignment surgery.” Thus, in a specific situation, it would be universal and binding. This interpretation, however, would misread Kant’s maxim. He did not stipulate any conditions or exceptional circumstances to his maxim. For an act to be universally valid and binding, it must apply to all people all the time in every situation. In other words, for sex reassignment surgery to be morally acceptable, it would necessitate that all men and women everywhere have sex reassignment surgery. This absurd notion, of course, would lead to a contradiction. Humans would shortly cease to exist; therefore, it is irrational. Since it is irrational, it is not moral but immoral.

Corradi wrote an article titled “Transgender Delusion.” He likened the transgender fad among medical doctors and psychiatrists to alchemy. “Current popular delusions are aspirations not to turn base metals into gold, but rather to transcend the laws of biology and transmute human nature.”³⁵ He held that a person’s sex is not fungible, and the idea that being born male or female is of no consequence is a “false belief that flies in the face of common sense, rational thinking, and even scientific evidence.”³⁶

From a Kantian perspective, it is irrational to think of sex as a social construct rather than an immutable biological fact. Male and female are not socially assigned roles. Corradi also likened sex reassignment surgery to treating a patient suffering from anorexia nervosa by performing “weight-reducing liposuction,”³⁷ calling out doctors who go along with the irrational belief. He also compares sex reassignment surgery to Body Integrity Identity Disorder (BIID), or transableism, which is the desire to be disabled by limb amputation. He hoped a common-sense approach would “prevail over those who would regard it as just another lifestyle choice.”³⁸ From Immanuel Kant’s philosophy, Wesley’s statement must be judged irrational, and to act on his feelings would be immoral. I argue that from a Kantian viewpoint,

³⁴ Engel, 290.

³⁵ Corradi, 17.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 19.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 19.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 19.

all manner of transgenderism is irrational, and to act upon it in any form, from homosexuality to sex reassignment surgery, is immoral. Transgenderism cannot be universalized without contradiction. If everyone only engaged in same-sex activity, the human race would soon disappear.

Kant's Moral Ought and His Christian Worldview

Immanuel Kant's Christian faith laid the foundation for his relentlessly logical philosophical worldview. Kant's philosophy falls short in that his view is descriptive rather than prescriptive. He analyzed the problem of the *thing in itself* versus perception and detailed the moral ought derived from that description; however, his solution falls short. His maxim requires people to act rationally; however, that does not resolve the internal conflict or harmonize moral *ought* with the human will. Kant's philosophical worldview stems from his Christian foundation. Perhaps a solution can be found to resolve the discord within his faith. The compatibility of Kant's philosophy with a biblical worldview cannot fully be discussed here. Suffice it to say; everyone is born with a sense of disharmony. Transgenderism is only one example of the conflict between the moral *ought* and the human will.

Derouchie explained that "something about transgender expression and gender confusion directly counters the very nature of God."³⁹ As I have demonstrated above, based on the Kantian rational worldview and his belief in the necessity of the existence of God, I believe Kant would wholeheartedly agree with Derouchie. He would express Derouchie's conclusion in his own words by saying that transgenderism violates the moral *ought*.

Adam and Eve were in harmony with their sexuality before their rebellion; however, they hid and were ashamed to be seen naked after they disobeyed God. They were no longer in harmony with God, with each other, or internally. They experienced dysphoria. According to Christian theology, every human being has a fallen nature, which causes disharmony in different ways. Yarhouse used the term "disorder"⁴⁰ to describe the internal conflict everyone senses. Some express conflict by the inability to maintain close relationships or dissatisfaction with a chosen profession. Some experience physical friction through genetic defects, including Klinefelter Syndrome, Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome, or congenital adrenal hyperplasia. Others experience a more severe disharmony in the form of addictions,

³⁹ Derouchie, 63.

⁴⁰ Yarhouse, 39.

psychological disorders such as anorexia nervosa or sexual dysphoria.⁴¹ Wesley felt the conflict through a disconnect between his mind and his body or sexual dysphoria.

Immanuel Kant described the problem of human inability to accomplish the moral *ought*. He did not prescribe a solution to resolve the internal conflict many people experience with their sexual orientation. After discussing creation and the fall, Yarhouse offered an answer in his article “Four Acts of the Biblical Drama”⁴² by summarizing redemption and glorification. We are not abandoned in our fallen state. Scripture reminds us, “God steps into our fallen world through the incarnation, through the person of Jesus Christ, and he fully intends to redeem believers, to sanctify or make them holy, to set them apart for his purposes.”⁴³ The state of holiness is oneness with God, others, and internally. Sanctification is how God accomplishes our internal unification. Since Immanuel Kant’s philosophy sprung from his belief in God’s existence, the Christian worldview might fulfill whatever is lacking in how Kant’s perspective relates to gender dysphoria. However, a more thorough study of Kantian philosophy and a Christian worldview is necessary.

Conclusion

I demonstrated a three-fold reply to my friend, Wesley, who claimed he always felt like a woman inside. From a Kantian point of view, it is impossible to know what a woman feels like inside. All objects, including other people, are part of the external world that cannot be known other than through experience. Second, to act on his feelings, Wesley would be acting immorally. Whether having sex with other men or going through the process of sex reassignment surgery to appear as a woman to others, the result, if universalized, would be contradiction. If everyone acted the same, there would soon be no humans. Kant’s ethical maxim of universality identifies such actions irrational, therefore, immoral.

Immanuel Kant’s belief in God may provide good news for Wesley and every person affected by what Christians call the *fall*. Kant’s perspective was descriptive. He explained the problems surrounding the *a priori*—the *thing in itself* and perception. He described the moral *ought* conflicts with the human will but did not prescribe a solution that resolves the internal conflict many experience concerning their sexual orientation. Does the Christian worldview go hand in hand with Kant?

⁴¹ Yarhouse, 39.

⁴² Ibid., 43-44.

⁴³ Ibid., 43.

I recommend a thorough study comparing Kantian philosophy and a Christian worldview.

Finally, my friend Wesley's expression of the Kantian conflict between the moral *ought* and the human will manifested itself in the feeling of being a woman trapped in a man's body. Kant's moral *ought* and the principle of universality reject both modern homosexual conduct and sexual reassignment surgery. Can harmony be found elsewhere? Immanuel Kant's belief in God may provide a solution he overlooked. Before resorting to violating the moral *ought*, perhaps faith can furnish a resolution to Wesley's conflict.

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