

“Being” Transphobic in the American Age of Innocence

Anand Atre

Johns Hopkins University

State of the Union on Transphobia

Transgender is the designation given to people who cross the rigid sexual boundaries socially constructed to encapsulate gender.¹ Through crossing these boundaries, transgender people move away from the gender identity society associates with biological sex at birth. Transgender can be contrasted with cisgender, a label for individuals whereby gender identity corresponds to the one society associates with biological sex at birth.²

There are divisive views in society related to transgender people self-identifying their gender as definitive of their sex membership,³ as public policies connected to self-identification of gender impact several spheres of society.⁴ For example, studies reveal that transgender women continue to outperform cisgender women in strength and cardiovascular activities one year after undergoing hormone therapy, thus giving them a competitive advantage in sporting activities.⁵ Additionally, with a long history

¹ Susan Stryker, “Transgender History, Homonormativity, and Disciplinarity,” *Radical History Review* 100 (2008): 1.

² Meredith G. F. Worthen, “Hetero-Cis-Normativity and the Gendering of Transphobia,” *International Journal of Transgenderism* 17, no. 1 (January 2, 2016): 31.

³ Talia Mae Bettcher, “Trapped in the Wrong Theory: Rethinking Trans Oppression and Resistance,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 39, no. 2 (January 2014): 387.

⁴ Kathleen Stock, “What Is a Woman?” *Index on Censorship* 50, no. 2 (July 2021): 70.

⁵ Timothy A. Roberts, Joshua Smalley, and Dale Ahrendt, “Effect of Gender Affirming Hormones on Athletic Performance in Transwomen and Transmen: Implications for Sporting Organisations and Legislators,” *British Journal of Sports Medicine* 55, no. 11 (2021): 582.

of misogyny and sexual violence perpetrated against women, policies that permit self-identification of gender for public bathroom use could conceivably have serious consequences for women, making them skeptical and mistrusting of male-bodied people vis-à-vis self-identity. Another area of contention relates to whether cisgender people referring to transgender people's gender identity as their biological sex at birth contains an implied value judgment, giving the speech act a moralizing perlocutionary effect, or is merely a simple descriptive expression.⁶ These issues are areas in which there needs to be a thorough philosophical debate, but they are not the focus of this essay.

This essay explores the applicability of an intersection of ideas from historical existentialist scholars to the non-trivial⁷ proportion of the public that has transphobia. Transphobia can be defined as legitimizing fear, hatred, disgust, and prejudicial treatment toward transgender people.⁸ The people who have transphobia are transphobes or anti-trans. Transgender people are discriminated against in the U.S. in multiple ways,⁹ including being dehumanized, objectified, described as having a mental illness, subjected to misogyny, and assaulted physically and sexually.¹⁰

Additionally, transgender rights are under attack, as evidenced by the numerous legislative bills introduced that target these rights, restricting transgender individuals' access to healthcare services and banning drag shows, which is exacerbated by the hostile rhetoric used by lawmakers against them.¹¹ The consequences of these

⁶ Stock, 72.

⁷ Philip Edward Jones, Paul R Brewer, Dannagal G Young, Jennifer L Lambe, and Lindsay H Hoffman, "Explaining Public Opinion toward Transgender People, Rights, and Candidates," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 82, no. 2 (June 26, 2018): 270.

⁸ Worthen, 31.

⁹ Lauren Mizock, Ruben Hopwood, Heather Casey, Ellen Duhamel, Alyssa Herrick, Geraldine Puerto, and Jessica Stelmach, "The Transgender Awareness Webinar: Reducing Transphobia among Undergraduates and Mental Health Providers," *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Mental Health* 21, no. 4 (October 2, 2017): 293.

¹⁰ "Tracking Anti-Transgender Rhetoric Online, Offline, and In Our Legislative Chambers," July 2021. <https://www.adl.org/resources/report/tracking-anti-transgender-rhetoric-online-offline-and-our-legislative-chambers>

¹¹ PBS NewsHour, "Trans People Face Hostile Rhetoric from State Lawmakers," February 27, 2023. <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/trans-people-face-hostile-rhetoric-from-state-lawmakers>

manifestations of transphobia can lead to anxiety, depression, substance abuse, and suicidality for transgender individuals.¹² The actualization of these manifestations evinces a power differential that exists in American society and can be seen as American transphobes oppressing transgender people. Moreover, the different ways transgender people are oppressed imply that there are multiple types of transphobes. With such dire consequences for transgender people, it would be remiss not to explore what reasons anti-trans people provide for their transphobia.

It Is Only Natural to Rationalize

There are three reasons transphobes typically bring up when rationalizing their transphobia. First, transgender is contradictory to science.¹³ Second, religious teachings forbid people from being transgender.¹⁴ Third, transgender people offend American culture and family values.¹⁵ Behind these rationalizations are the implicit metaphysical assumptions of the duality of genders, the perfect correlation between gender and biological sex at birth, and the notion that sexual attraction between people having the opposite biological sex at birth is the only possible natural attraction. Together, these metaphysical assumptions form *hetero-cis-normativity*.¹⁶ I shall refer to any socially constructed framework that relies on hetero-cis-normativity as a *hetero-cis-normative faith*. Before critiquing hetero-cis-normativity, we must elucidate the social phenomenon in societies regarding their understanding of what constitutes nature.

As societies evolve with metaphysical assumptions as a foundation, their people become gradually conditioned through socialization. This conditioning results in society associating

¹² Mizock et al., 293.

¹³ Simón(e) D. Sun, “Stop Using Phony Science to Justify Transphobia,” *Scientific American Blog Network*, 2019. <https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/voices/stop-using-phony-science-to-justify-transphobia/>

¹⁴ Deena Pritchep, “Some Christians Are Using Sacred Texts to Embrace a Broader Understanding of Gender,” NPR, September 17, 2022, sec. Religion. <https://www.npr.org/2022/09/17/1123629725/some-christians-are-using-sacred-texts-to-embrace-a-broader-understanding-of-gen>

¹⁵ David Rosenthal, “As a Doctor, I Know Anti-Trans Legislation Isn’t about ‘family Values.’ It Costs Lives,” *USA TODAY*, February 26, 2023. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/voices/2023/02/26/anti-trans-legislation-costs-lives-medical-data-show/11306372002/>

¹⁶ Worthen, 31.

attributes, habits, mannerisms, and people's roles with socially constructed systematized human labels. Expectations then arise that these labels can justifiably categorize people who will continue to conform to the same traits society has historically associated with the label. For example, under a hetero-cis-normative faith, people born as biological males should go on to do the things and act as how biological males have done in the past, and people born as biological females should go on to do the things and act as how biological females have done in the past.

A prolonged socialization results in the traits associated with society's labels being habituated and eventually seen as natural. Anybody who does not conform to the characteristics of the label is seen as unnatural. For example, James Baldwin argued that America's perception of what the person born as a biological male should be is the tough guy.¹⁷ As such, if a person born as a biological male does not conform to being the tough guy, that person is viewed as peculiar and abnormal. Baldwin pointed out that this reasoning is entrenched in the American ideal of sexuality, which has gone on to create a division of males into tough guys and softies.¹⁸ The extent of the habituation of the American essentialized view of the biological male is demonstrated by Baldwin's comment that "it is virtually forbidden as an unpatriotic act that the American boy evolve into complexity of manhood."¹⁹ Using this as context, we can now explicate the rationalizations provided by anti-trans people for their transphobia with more clarity.

Arguing that transgender is contradictory to science is a rationalization that attempts to claim that science has already revealed what nature is and that anything that contradicts this "scientific revelation" is not part of nature. As it turns out, the American transphobe's scientific rationalization comes from the American education system's middle-school biology lessons. These lessons continue to teach children the oversimplified idea that

¹⁷ James Baldwin, "Preservation of Innocence," in *Collected Essays: Notes of a Native Son / Nobody Knows My Name / The Fire Next Time / No Name in the Street / The Devil Finds Work / Other Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York: Library of America, 1998), 597.

¹⁸ James Baldwin, "Freaks and American Ideal of Manhood," in *Collected Essays*, 815.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

females have XX chromosomes and males have XY chromosomes, both set in stone and hence unchangeable.²⁰

Arguing that religious teachings forbid transgender is a rationalization whereby an omniscient, omnipotent, omnibenevolent supernatural being serves as the ultimate authority behind what is a part of nature, with anything contrary to this forbidden and thereby seen as unnatural. This “divine revelation” has gone on to make up religious teachings. Socialized conditioning from a combination of scientific and divine revelations has formed American culture and family values.

In each of these rationalizations, the appeal to nature starts with premises based on time-honored socialization in society, with the underlying metaphysics of hetero-cis-normativity never questioned. As such, any rationalization by anti-trans people for their transphobia is analogous to the appeal to tradition fallacy.

The analysis may perhaps be clarified within a context provided by Friedrich Nietzsche, who argued that whether one’s rationalization for what is natural is based on science or religion, the process still requires asserting a value of truth, which relies on a form of metaphysics. Any notion of unquestionable metaphysics can be considered a covert form of theology and seen as “shadows of God” that “darken our minds.”²¹

According to Nietzsche, “[f]rom every point of view the erroneousness of the world in which we think we live is the surest and firmest fact that we can lay eyes on.”²² As such, Nietzsche claimed that our consciousness gives rise to and incorporates errors.²³ Incorporating hetero-cis-normativity is an example of such an error; therefore, any hetero-cis-normative faith is derived from an erroneous premise. A dependency on hetero-cis-normativity gives the transphobes away as metaphysicians reliant on faith in opposite values, or Manicheanism.²⁴

Nietzsche did propose that these metaphysical errors could be life-preserving.²⁵ One could make a strong case that hetero-cis-normativity was vital in helping our species survive before we

²⁰ Sun.

²¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 2010), 212.

²² Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good & Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 2010), 63.

²³ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 116.

²⁴ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good & Evil*, 24.

²⁵ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 214.

solved the Malthusian Trap. However, despite their historical importance, Nietzsche would not have thought that life-preserving errors should remain unquestioned.

According to Nietzsche, questioning any metaphysical assumption requires honesty, which is the virtue of free spirits.²⁶ Nietzsche emphasized the importance of honesty and intellectual conscience, which he felt were requirements “to become the best learners and discoverers of everything that is lawful and necessary in the world.”²⁷ As such, Nietzsche would have seen a virtuous person as one with the honesty to question hetero-cis-normativity.

It was in the spirit of honesty and the willingness to question metaphysics that led to the discovery of *primordium forms* of genes in the 1990s, a specific version of it known as *SRY*, and the revelation that biological sex is a living system that is *not* set in stone and has the potential for change.²⁸ An actor who epitomizes honesty would see that biological sex as a living system has the grounding to be adopted as an alternative life-preserving error. This alternative life-preserving error could form the basis for metaphysical assumptions behind which a different structure of society could be constructed, one that would be more inclusive of transgender people yet still not all-encompassing of nature.

If the socialization process does not necessarily indicate everything that is a part of nature, how should we think about what is a natural state? Baldwin pointed out that we should be careful to discern between nature and the nature of humans and, at the same time, acknowledge that we know very little about both.²⁹ For Baldwin, “[a] natural state is perversely indefinable outside of the womb or before the grave.”³⁰ In contrast, when we talk of unnatural, Baldwin claimed that we seem to be saying that “we cannot imagine what vexations nature will dream up next.”³¹ An honest view of nature would help us realize that “Nature and revelation are perpetually challenging each other; this relentless tension is one of the keys to human history and what is known as the human condition.”³² The virtue of honesty would lead us to see that nature is not static. Given

²⁶ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good & Evil*, 191.

²⁷ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 322.

²⁸ Sun.

²⁹ Baldwin, “Preservation of Innocence,” 594.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Baldwin, “Freaks and American Ideal of Manhood,” 815.

that the transphobes' rationalizations of hetero-cis-normative faiths are fallacies grounded in misleading metaphysics not accounting for the mercurialness of nature, people should be especially suspicious when they hear this rhetoric because it is dishonest.

Simone de Beauvoir warned that arguing that a situation was natural has been one of the "ruses of oppression."³³ A prominent example she cited was the conservatives attempting to convince the proletariat that they were not oppressed by claiming that the lopsided distribution of wealth was natural.³⁴ Supporting Beauvoir's position, Baldwin pointed out that oppressors would presuppose that their wealth and well-being were a sign of virtue and would thereby give them the high ground to make moral judgments.³⁵ As such, this ruse of oppression can become a self-fulfilling prophecy to justify a vision of the universe grounded in unsubstantiated metaphysics and distort society's sense of virtue. However, this moralized vision of the universe is as "remarkable for what it pretends to include as for what it remorselessly diminishes, demolishes, or leaves totally out of account."³⁶ What is vital to note in Beauvoir's example and the rationalization of transphobia is that the flawed argument relying on a premise invoking nature is used to preserve hegemony.

Because pre-existing hegemony cannot be justified using incontrovertible premises, the powerful actor looks to intimidate and disorient as a means of persuasion.³⁷ Like Jean-Paul Sartre's description of the French Antisemite, the American transphobe must interpret information in their own way to render the transgender person offensive.³⁸ Furthermore, the American transphobe must project intuitive certainty in their rhetoric.³⁹ Moreover, they must disregard intellectual conscience as they rely

³³ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York: Open Road Media, 2018), 83.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 83.

³⁵ James Baldwin, "The Uses of the Blues," in *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*, ed. Randall Kenan (New York: Pantheon Books, 2010), 81.

³⁶ James Baldwin, "On Being White ... and Other Lies," in *The Cross of Redemption*, 166.

³⁷ Jean-Paul Sartre, "Portrait of the Antisemite," in *Existentialism: From Dostoevsky to Sartre*, ed. and trans. Walter Arnold Kaufmann (New York: New American Library, 1989), 334.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 332.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 333.

on their “centuries of ancestral wisdom.”⁴⁰ The Manicheanism of this ancestral logic has caused the American transphobe to operate in bad faith, deciding that the transgender person embodies the spirit of evil and that a peaceful balance will be restored once this evil is quashed. The American transphobe has a clear conscience when discriminating against transgender people. Furthermore, the American transphobe will rationalize these acts as necessary to preserve the order of the hetero-cis-normative faith. The American transphobe will even feel their actions are virtuous, believing that the presence of transgender people among us is “somehow analogous to disease.”⁴¹ This deluded view of what amounts to virtue has American transphobes believing that they know what the country needs to be ordered and are ready and willing to supply it.⁴² Still, whatever virtue American transphobes feel they have, the virtue they *lack* is honesty.

As it is, unquestioned hetero-cis-normativity and prolonged conditioning from socialization have resulted in American society having an essentialized view of what individuals should be feeling. The dismissal of the lived experience of actors who do not experience and feel American society’s idea of what is natural denies these actors human agency. Such a society can be thought of as being in a state of what Baldwin had termed “innocence.”⁴³ In this case, “innocence” refers to a form of bad faith that fails to recognize those who do not conform to the hetero-cis-normative faith and is a refusal to acknowledge the complexity of human existence. Furthermore, those who adopt bad faith face an existential anxiety arising from denying and constantly lying about social realities. The state of American innocence results in the pursuit of happiness precluded for anyone who does not follow a path confined to society’s essentialized characteristics of biological sex. Ultimately, it is not in the spirit of intellectual conscience for the American transphobe to use the hetero-cis-normative faith as a criterion to judge and exhibit prejudice, as any rationalizations using the hetero-cis-normative faith to support actions of transphobia are dishonest and derived from bad faith.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 335.

⁴¹ James Baldwin, “Many Thousands Gone,” in *Notes of a Native Son* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012), 26.

⁴² Baldwin, “Freaks and American Ideal of Manhood,” 827.

⁴³ Baldwin, “Preservation of Innocence,” 597.

An Etiology of Transphobia

Despite the prevalence of transphobia in the U.S., numerous individuals are *not* transphobic, with many Americans opposing the discriminatory treatment of transgender people and the suppression of transgender people's rights. This detail leads one to ponder what is the etiology of transphobia.

When considering the etiology of antisemitism, Sartre argued that the decision to be an antisemite was freely chosen.⁴⁴ Applying this rationale to transphobia would suggest that being a transphobe is a free choice. However, drawing from Beauvoir, our upbringing in childhood plays a vital role in just how free this choice is. According to Beauvoir, we have been thrown into a universe, and during our formative years, we are conditioned to think in absolutes.⁴⁵ Once we reach adolescence, we discover our ontological freedom and the ambiguity of human existence.⁴⁶ However, we are not free to use this ontological freedom in the way of our choosing because there have been lasting influences left on us from our childhoods.⁴⁷ As such, Beauvoir has argued that adults must navigate the ambiguity of their existence, with this navigation disadvantaged by their ontological freedom hamstrung by childhood influences predisposing them to act in bad faith. This argument resonates with Baldwin's claim that "[w]e cannot escape our origins, however hard we try, those origins which contain the key—could we but find it—to all that we later become."⁴⁸ According to Baldwin, how our ontological freedom interacts with the factors predisposing us to bad faith is complex; "there are many elements at work."⁴⁹ Considering the numerous elements that constitute our choices tempers the idea that a decision to be a transphobe is made freely. Still, even if transphobia is not chosen freely, the numerous individuals who are not transphobic growing up in the same innocent society inculcated with the hetero-cis-normative faith does indicate that a choice can be made.

Invoking Nietzsche, Baldwin argued, "I stand before my highest mountain, and before my longest journey, and, therefore,

⁴⁴ Sartre, "Portrait of the Antisemite," 332.

⁴⁵ Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 35.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 39–40.

⁴⁸ Baldwin, "Many Thousands Gone," 27.

⁴⁹ James Baldwin, "On Language, Race and the Black Writer," in *The Cross of Redemption*, 89.

must I descend deeper than I have ever before descended.”⁵⁰ Applying this metaphor to the topic at hand, the highest mountain symbolizes the challenge that must be overcome when faced with the realization of living in a world of complexity and ambiguity. The longest journey represents one’s life. The descent is the process of self-investigation that requires asking oneself difficult questions that arise from squaring up to the collision between one’s own terms of absolutes and those of life; the deeper the descent, the more intense the self-investigation. Baldwin viewed this self-investigation as recognizing the ambiguities and complexities of our existence, which he saw as necessary to affirm life.⁵¹ Baldwin argued that avoiding the descent is “opting for safety instead of life.”⁵² Acknowledging the numerous elements that influence choices but still having the capacity to make a choice can be thought of, to use Baldwin’s term, as having the ability to *create*.⁵³

For Beauvoir, by ignoring the subjectivity of one’s own ability to create, one also ignores the subjectivity and freedom of others.⁵⁴ An attitude derived from this ignorance produces people who shut their eyes to reality. According to Beauvoir, acting like this is akin to remaining in a childlike state and seeking safety by living in a world where absolute values have already been provided.⁵⁵ At its core, denying human complexity by looking for safety entails being morally immature.⁵⁶ Although this denial would suggest that the American transphobe lacks the courage to create, it is vital to recognize what is peculiar about the American psyche that contributes to this moral immaturity.

We’ve seen above (see the section “It Is Only Natural to Rationalize”) how a socialization process can be justified as natural by affluent actors in societies operating from the assumption that virtue is indicated by the wealth one has. Because no country in history has had the exorbitant level of wealth enjoyed by the U.S., Americans think of themselves as standing on a moral high ground and being a beacon of virtue. Believing that wealth is a virtue leads to an additional element in the psyche of the American

⁵⁰ Ibid., 89.

⁵¹ Ibid., 95.

⁵² Baldwin, “On Being White ... and Other Lies,” 169.

⁵³ Baldwin, *No Name in the Street*, 128.

⁵⁴ Beauvoir, 49.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 47.

⁵⁶ James Baldwin, “Everybody’s Protest Novel,” in *Notes of a Native Son*, 15.

transphobe: they suffer from the pathology of thinking they are great. This pathology results in many Americans being unable to question the myths they have been told about their country. To quote Baldwin, this American myth has made a “legend out of massacre.”⁵⁷ Baldwin argued that many Americans believe the myth about their country’s past, indicating a denial of the past and, at its core, a denial of reality.⁵⁸ This element also hinders the American transphobe from making the descent because an actor who believes themselves to be great is filled with hubris, making them too blind to see the mountain in front of them.

Nietzsche provided additional insight into this denial of human complexity. For Nietzsche, a psychology that remains immanent in moral prejudice would not dare to attempt the descent.⁵⁹ According to Nietzsche, noble morality can only grow from the affirmation of life, whereas the denial of life can only generate a slave morality.⁶⁰ An actor who engages in this denial succumbs to what Nietzsche termed *ressentiment*, which can be thought of as “a stored resentment that has poisoned the soul and migrated to places where it is hidden and denied.”⁶¹

Resorting to safety and developing *ressentiment* stems from a desire for certainty, and, as such, Nietzsche saw *ressentiment* as a sign of weakness.⁶² Actors fueled with *ressentiment* “always need an opposite and external world; [they] need, psychologically speaking, external stimuli in order to be able to act at all,—[their] action is, from the ground up, reaction.”⁶³ The external stimuli the American transphobe directs their *ressentiment* toward are transgender people.

Notably, by not affirming life, Baldwin would have argued that the transphobe’s innocence causes them to fail to see that the real object of their hatred is actually “seated in [their own] lap stirring in one’s bowels and dictating the beat of [their own] heart.”⁶⁴ Baldwin would have argued that transphobes discriminate against transgender

⁵⁷ Baldwin, “The White Problem,” in *The Cross of Redemption*, 92.

⁵⁸ Baldwin, “On Language, Race and the Black Writer,” 91.

⁵⁹ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good & Evil*, 46.

⁶⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, trans. Maudemarie Clark and Alan J. Swensen (New York: Hackett Publishing Co., 2011), 19.

⁶¹ William E. Connolly, *The Ethos of Pluralization. Borderlines, v. 1* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 213.

⁶² Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 351.

⁶³ Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, 19.

⁶⁴ Baldwin, “Freaks and American Ideal of Manhood,” 824.

people because they “cause to echo, deep within [the transphobe], [their] most profound terrors and desires.”⁶⁵

Rather than considering the etiology of transphobia as a completely free choice, we are compelled to see transphobia as originating from the non-affirmation of life. As such, the transphobe being immanent in a state of innocence entails failing to face reality, rejecting one’s ability to create, denying the affectivity of the self, finding refuge in the world of hetero-cis-normative faith, and making it one’s mission to ensure that this faith is the only version of *authorized facticity*. The parallel between being in a state of innocence and the Beauvoirian childlike state suggests that the American transphobe has grown up having not attained moral maturity.

The Heterogeneity of Transphobes

Simone de Beauvoir’s explication of the reasons leading to the formation of the “sub-man” has remarkable similarities with the transphobe opting for safety instead of affirming life. Described as the lowest in her hierarchy of men, Beauvoir described the sub-man as “hav[ing] eyes and ears, but from their childhood on they make themselves blind and deaf, without love and without desire.”⁶⁶ Additionally, Beauvoir pointed out that the sub-man exhibits a “fundamental fear in the face of existence, in the face of the risks and tensions.”⁶⁷ Through the Beauvoirian lens, the transphobe’s non-affirmation of life is comparable with making themselves blind and deaf from childhood. The transphobe’s fundamental fears in the face of existence can be thought of as facing up to the uncertainty lingering behind the hetero-cis-normative faith and understanding the most profound terrors that lurk within them. Both the sub-man and the transphobe’s inability to attain moral maturity results in them longing for their childhood days of living in a world without ambiguity. As such, we can regard one type of transphobe as the sub-man.

The manifestation of the transphobic sub-men’s pathological symptoms stemming from *ressentiment* is not innocuous, with Beauvoir having argued that the sub-man “realizes himself in the world as a blind uncontrolled force which anybody can get control of ... those who do the actual dirty work are recruited from among

⁶⁵ Ibid., 828.

⁶⁶ Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 42.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 42.

the sub-men.”⁶⁸ Developing this claim further, Beauvoir alluded to the sub-man being ripe for manipulation, which can result in them becoming the actual actors who commit the acts of lynching and the violence committed during pogroms.⁶⁹ Extending Beauvoir’s analysis suggests that the transphobic sub-man’s pathological symptoms cause them to be easily manipulated into being a perpetrator of physical and sexual assault of transgender people. Still, this claim infers that other types of transphobes manipulate the transphobic sub-men to do their bidding.

An argument can also be made that a transphobe can fall into the category of Beauvoir’s “serious man.” As Beauvoir pointed out, “[t]he attitude of the sub-man passes logically over into that of the serious man.”⁷⁰ The serious men’s goals are based on externals they accept from society.⁷¹ In the American state of innocence, a prestigious and esteemed version of externalities are goals leading to wealth and power, which American society has socialized as benchmarks that a person should achieve to be considered successful. The serious men lose themselves in achieving these goals and, in doing so, suppress their freedom.⁷² The serious men are a danger to society because of their view regarding the usefulness of actions. For serious men, an action is useful if it advances or sustains an absolute complement that should not be questioned.⁷³ The unwillingness to question this absolutism means that serious men are prepared to sacrifice others for a cause and persuade themselves that they have not sacrificed anything.⁷⁴

The serious transphobic man’s pathological symptoms stemming from *ressentiment* cause them to use their position of power in society to restrict transgender people’s rights and introduce bills to deprive them of freedom, which the serious transphobic man self-justifies as being done in the name of protecting the absolutism of the hetero-cis-normative faith. Another telling feature of the serious man is their cultivation of what Beauvoir termed an expedient levity or a fascist sense of

⁶⁸ Ibid., 44.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 44.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 45.

⁷¹ Ibid., 51.

⁷² Ibid., 45.

⁷³ Ibid., 48.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 48.

humor.⁷⁵ For the serious transphobic man, this manifests through the misogynistic hostile rhetoric used to demean, humiliate, dehumanize, and objectify transgender people. Moreover, it becomes easy for the serious transphobic men who have acquired wealth and political power from pursuing their external goals to exploit the transphobic sub-men in the American state of innocence, where wealth and political power are viewed as measures of virtue.

By inheriting and continuing to sustain hetero-cis-normativity, the transphobe who remains in the American state of innocence is what Sartre would have termed *being-in-itself* and its successor *practico-inert*.⁷⁶ As such, the American transphobe also parallels Sartre's description of the French antisemite.⁷⁷ A unique insight comes from Sartre's discussion of the "moderate" antisemites rationalizing their feelings toward Jews by claiming, "I don't detest them, I just prefer they play a lesser part in the activity of the nation," yet revealing their essentialized viewpoints once they think they are among likeminded people.⁷⁸ Extending Sartre's analysis, one can see how beneath the surface of the moderate American transphobe lies a morally immature actor stuck in the American state of innocence. Although the differing fervor of rhetoric used by transphobes might suggest that there are degrees of transphobia, Sartre's analysis would suggest that all types of transphobes are filled with *ressentiment* and are united as a herd-like mob with a mutually common hatred for transgender people.

Drawing from Beauvoir, regardless of the type of transphobe, their presence exists in the plane of bare facticity, which in this case is hetero-cis-normative faith. Different kinds of transphobes have different ways of oppressing transgender people, which can harm both the minds and bodies of transgender people. Irrespective of the type of transphobe, the different ways they oppress transgender people are all symptoms of the transphobe's pathology, which stems from *ressentiment* resulting from a flight

⁷⁵ Ibid., 50.

⁷⁶ Thomas R. Flynn, "Political Existentialism: The Career of Sartre's Political Thought," in *The Cambridge Companion to Existentialism*, ed. Steven Crowell (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 246.

⁷⁷ Sartre, "Portrait of the Antisemite."

⁷⁸ Ibid.

from affirming life.⁷⁹ At its core, this flight is a flight to safety, absconding from making the Nietzschean descent.

Remedy for Transphobia

Ridding oneself of transphobia requires becoming free of the absolutism of hetero-cis-normativity. It is through the affirmation of life by embarking on the descent that gives us the potential to become free spirits, with this affirmation requiring moral maturity. Additionally, Nietzsche argued that old prejudices and misunderstandings had clouded our capacity to become free spirits.⁸⁰ As such, the American transphobe can challenge their old prejudices and misunderstandings by developing the virtues of moral maturity. In addition to honesty and intellectual conscience, both necessary conditions to face up to the collision between one's own terms of absolutes and those of life, the American transphobe's hindrance from hubris suggests that to make the descent, their hubris needs to be moderated with humility.

In a twisted irony, the American transphobe can look to a transgender person who is prepared to question the substance of hetero-cis-normativity as an example of someone willing to embark on the descent and affirm life. Within the context of the hetero-cis-normative faith, it is this transgender person who lives as a free spirit by facing up to and interrogating their most profound fears, terrors, and desires to understand better their reality and their deeper self. This transgender person embodies the recognition that mechanisms of actions of the conscious are indemonstrable with the acknowledgment that moral judgments about them ignore pre-history and are not made by following intellectual conscience. This transgender person also recognizes that although the hetero-cis-normative faith is paraded as a virtue, it is nothing more than a tinsel to cover up weakness.⁸¹

Nietzsche argued that having the independence of thought to follow one's intellectual conscience is rare, a trait only belonging to the "privilege of the strong."⁸² Moreover, embarking on the descent will be lonely, yet it will lead one to become "homeless in a distinctive and honorable sense."⁸³ This homelessness can be seen as

⁷⁹ Beauvoir, 43.

⁸⁰ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good & Evil*, 71.

⁸¹ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 400.

⁸² Nietzsche, *Beyond Good & Evil*, 58.

⁸³ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 399.

both the reward and the price paid for rejecting safety in favor of affirming life. In the final analysis, a person with an intellectual conscience could never truly be at home in a world where the normative frameworks they are expected to adhere to rule their lives and restrain them. The homeless affirmer of life embarks on the descent into the web of ambiguity, danger, and darkness, hoping to find themselves and recognizing that “[t]he hidden Yes in [them] is stronger than all Nos and Maybes that afflict [them] and [their] age like a disease.”⁸⁴ As such, the descent gives the homeless affirmer of life genuine life experiences, with the implication being that the flight to safety results in a dearth of authenticity.

A person who recoils from taking the descent has no way of “assessing the experience of others and no way of establishing themselves in relation to any way of life which is not their own.”⁸⁵ This deficiency comes from the absence of compassion. An actor who lacks compassion remains immanent, lives in a world of absolutes, fails to recognize other people’s humanity, and essentializes human characteristics through rigid, static labels.⁸⁶ For example, the “label” androgynous is used by the immanent actor to refer to a person appearing part male and part female. Still, for this label to have any meaning in society, one needs to look to the demarcation of gender into its socially constructed roles and hence resort to using hetero-cis-normativity. However, as Baldwin pointed out:

We are all androgynous, not only because we are all born of a woman impregnated by the seed of a man but because each of us, helplessly and forever, contains the other-male in female, female in male.⁸⁷

Baldwin argued further: “Once you have discerned the meaning of a label it may seem to define you for others, but it does not have the power to define you to yourself.”⁸⁸ Taking the descent allows the homeless transgender life affirmer to reverse the power imposed on them by the hetero-cis-normative society’s labeling system, which is a step toward becoming a free spirit. The descent

⁸⁴ Ibid, 402.

⁸⁵ Baldwin, “Many Thousands Gone,” 90.

⁸⁶ Baldwin, “The Uses of the Blues,” 79.

⁸⁷ Baldwin, “Freaks and American Ideal of Manhood,” 828.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 819.

also paves the way toward developing compassion for others having ways of life that are not their own.

An American transphobe willing to take the descent and challenge the hetero-cis-normative faith will surely recognize the dissonance in their previously held authorized facticity. Existing with this dissonance is a sign of moral maturity that marks the development into an adult possessing the independence of thought.

Concluding Thoughts

In the American age of innocence, transphobia is worn as a badge of honor by anti-trans people who intransigently refuse to question hetero-cis-normativity. The arguments American transphobes use as justification for their transphobia are nothing more than rationalizations grounded in an unquestioned life-preserving error. This essay has posited that an intersection of existentialist ideas from Baldwin, Beauvoir, Nietzsche, and Sartre reveals that the affirmation of life requires having reservations over static metaphysics, recognizing life's complexities, and facing up to one's innermost fears. Instead, the American transphobe flees to safety, thus exhibiting their cowardice and setting in motion their *ressentiment*. American transphobes should not be thought of as homogenous. Yet whereas the pathology of their transphobia manifests in numerous diverse ways to harm transgender people, the commonality between transphobes is that their symptoms manifest from a flight from life. This flight results in them preferring being part of a herd-like mob seeking to preserve a hetero-cis-normative faith as authorized facticity.

The remedy for transphobia requires the American transphobe to dispel the misguided myths that they feel legitimize their virtue and develop honesty and humility to temper the influence of hubris that precludes them from questioning underlying metaphysical assumptions. There is much that the American transphobe can learn from a transgender person who displays the characteristics personifying the intellectual conscience required to embark on the Nietzschean descent to affirm life and create. Embarking on the descent is the first step toward American transphobes acquiring compassion toward transgender people. This compassion will enable American transphobes not to define transgender people by a label but to see them as fellow human beings enduring the fear and trembling from having decided to affirm life.

Is there hope for this to happen? Although Nietzsche indicated that the independence of thought was limited to a select

Confluence

few, this does not preclude society from being transformed. As Baldwin argued, even if the price that will be paid for transforming a previously unquestioned norm will be high, precisely because humans created society, they can reconstruct it.⁸⁹ Rather than succumbing to essentializing humans into neatly fitted compartments from within a normative framework, I suggest that the affirmation of life remains an option for anyone willing to add dissonance to their perception of facticity and join the homeless free spirits on their deepest descent through their journey of life.

Acknowledgments

This essay was initially written as an assignment for a class in the MLA Program at Johns Hopkins University that Dr. Adam Culver taught. I thank Dr. Culver for his helpful comments and suggestions.

⁸⁹ Baldwin, "On Language, Race and the Black Writer," 97.