

Authenticity and Gender Norms with Rowan Bell

[music: Blue Dot Sessions, Timid Luxor]

Christiane Wisehart, host and producer: I'm Christiane Wisehart, and this is Examining Ethics, brought to you by The Janet Prindle Institute for Ethics at DePauw University.

On today's show, we're discussing the complicated relationship between gender, authenticity and ethics with philosopher Rowan Bell.

Rowan Bell: I wanted to understand how gender norms can be authentic for people while at the same time being pretty bad for us and pretty bad for society.

Christiane: Stay tuned for our discussion on today's episode of Examining Ethics.

[music fades out]

[interview begins]

Christiane: Rowan Bell, welcome to the show. Today, we're talking about your article, "Being Your Best Self: Authenticity, Morality, and Gender Norms." Just to start, could you give us a brief overview of what you're writing about here? What's the central question that you're tackling?

Rowan Bell: I was seeing a lot of this dialectic between, I guess, you might say different factions talking about how gender shapes our decisions, how gender shapes the way that we feel like we should do things. One faction was saying, I think correctly, that gender norms are pretty bad, that they encourage us to do bad things, that they are constructed in bad ways, that they enable sexism and racism and homophobia and transphobia.

I thought that was right, but I was also noticing this other faction among the queer and trans people that I know (trans and gender nonconforming people) saying that gender norms also affect our decisions in ways that are unexpected. I might feel like even though other people expect me to behave in feminine ways or historically have expected me to behave in those ways, I might feel like masculine ways of being or following masculine norms are more like me. They're more authentic for me. That seems to be true, even though I understand that those norms are pretty bad.

This isn't just true for trans people, it's also true for cis people. I've talked to a lot of my cis feminist friends who say, "I know that gender norms suck. I know that they're really, really awful and misogynistic, but I still really feel like I should be wearing high heels or doing my makeup." More than that, not just that I feel like I should be, but I feel like that makes me feel like myself. It makes me feel more comfortable. It makes me feel like who I really am.

Examining Ethics is hosted by The Janet Prindle Institute for Ethics at DePauw University, and is produced by Christiane Wisehart. © 2023

The central question in this paper is how do those two things work together? I think that they're both true. I think that they're both really, really important elements of gender norms. I wanted to understand how gender norms can be authentic for people while at the same time being pretty bad for us and pretty bad for society, and also socially constructed, obviously.

Christiane: And so, I'm pretty sure that most of the audience probably has a pretty good understanding of what gender norms are, but just in case they don't, could you help us understand what that is quickly with maybe an example?

Rowan Bell: Gender norms, as I understand them, are the social expectations that are associated with gender. People are really familiar with understanding statements like, "Oh, men should be more confident and strong. Women should be more delicate, more beautiful." Those are some of the standard norms that are operative in dominant contexts, but there are lots of different gender norms. This is evidence that they're socially constructed also, depending where you are, who you're talking to, what country you're in, what era you're in, the gender norms will shift radically. Some contexts say that only women should wear jewelry, or only women are allowed to wear jewelry. Other contexts, there are jewels that are appropriate for men to wear. It's okay for men to wear jewelry. They're very, very contextual. They shift very much depending on where and when you are.

One problem with gender norms that I think is very interesting to me is that people tend to assume that the behavior that complies with gender norms is innate. They say like, "Oh, there's just these natural divisions between men and women. There's just these natural masculinities and femininities." Their evidence for that is like, "Oh, well, no matter where you go, people will be behaving in masculine and feminine ways." But if you look at the different things that get called masculine and feminine, that claim starts to look a little bit more suspicious, because they're radically different depending where you are. It starts to look more like these things are constructed and we follow them because of the expectations rather than because they're just deep essential parts of us.

Christiane: Do trans and gender nonconforming communities typically reject gender norms, and especially those oppressive ones that you mentioned, the ones that are patriarchal, sexist, et cetera?

Rowan Bell: That is a great question because the answer is really complicated. This is one of the things that I'm most interested in trying to explain in my work is the way that trans, not just trans individuals, we're talking specifically about queer and trans communities with these important rich histories. Just as an aside, I think that's something that gets lost in this conversation often is people say like, "Oh, these individual people have these views." No, we're talking about entire communities, entire social practices.

This is a really great question because I think in one sense, trans and gender nonconforming people are very, very persistently aware of how awful gender norms can be because we've been

the targets of their enforcement. Most of us have been subject to a range of social punishments from being ostracized to being physically attacked for our failure to conform with to gender norms, to certain dominant expectations.

I think most of us are pretty aware that they are bad, that they can have bad impacts on the world. However, there's two features that I think complicate that. One is that we understand that we have to navigate them. We don't just get to say, "Oh, these things don't matter." You'll hear trans people saying that a lot of transgender nonconforming people will say, "Oh, gender norms don't matter. You don't have to listen to them." I think that's aspirational. I think we want that to be true, but we also very clearly understand that if we don't follow them, there are very bad consequences, so we understand that we have to navigate them in order to move through the world in order to get and keep jobs, in order to access medical care, in order to survive.

What you see in these communities, I think, is both a rejection of the understanding that they're super important. Let me say this a little bit differently, the way philosophers might say this. We reject their normative authority. I think we tend to say these things are, they are what they are. They are just constructed. They're made up, in a sense. They are based on human practice. But because they have this important impact on the world, we also have a lot of strategies for figuring out how to navigate them. Some of those strategies can manifest as our own systems of norms and normative structures.

Ballroom communities are these queer and trans communities of color that have evolved in many major metropolitan areas in the United States. You see these alternative systems of gender practice that are in some sense based on dominant norms, but also they move away from the way those norms work by...they center trans people. You might have a category of women, for example, that unambiguously counts trans women and cis women both. There's no question like, "Oh, is this a woman?" No, they're both women, but that category will also have these normative procedures and these normative prescriptions. It'll also have a bunch of norms attached to it that help trans women specifically navigate these dominant contexts where they have to perform well in order to survive. The answer is complicated because we have to get along in the world just like everybody else and because we have to make sense of ourself in a world where gender is unfortunately a big part of our lives.

Christiane Wisehart: The gnarly part of this is what to make of people from trans and gender nonconforming communities saying things like, "This is who I really am." And so, how does that factor into all of this?

Rowan Bell: What's tricky about that is people hear the term "authenticity" and deep down they think, "Oh, I had this deep inner self." If you look at the way public figures talk about authenticity, I love to quote Dr. Phil because you can look up Dr. Phil's view on authenticity, and he has a definition of it that's basically this. He says, "You have this deep inner self and that self is who you are apart from everything else in your life." If you strip away all of your relationships and all

of your expectations and all of your roles, and you strip away all of the social outer layers, you get to this deep core self, deep inner self.

He wants to sell you a retreat where you can get away into the woods and get in touch with this inner self. This language of uncovering or stripping away suggests that there is this facade, there's this false outer shell. Then what's true and what's real is underneath that and it's deep. If you understand authenticity that way, then when someone says, "Oh, masculinity is authentic for me, or wearing a suit is authentic for me," then it's going to sound like they're saying that masculinity is part of a deep core self that's different from the social expectations.

But I think there's just a big problem with understanding authenticity that way. Independently of the gender question, that view of authenticity just seems really implausible. Human beings are not the kinds of creatures that exist fundamentally in our natural state apart from our social engagements, apart from our roles and our relationships and our engagement with the world; we're social creatures. We're made up of ourselves, who we are, what we care about, what motivates us, and who we really are, I think, who our authentic selves are is made up of elements of the social world.

I mean, people could say things like, "I love to dance. Dancing makes me who I really am." Then dancing is something that we do in the social context. It's something we do to socially constructed music. Being a dancer is a social role. And so, I argue in this paper that authenticity, when people say that a gender norm is authentic for me, they don't mean that it's something that's deep down or a deep part of myself, because that's just not how authenticity works.

I think authenticity is about having a certain kind of relationship to the roles and the expectations and the norms and the relationships that are a part of your life. That's not to say that who you really are is just some random combination of everything that's been thrown at you or who you were born as. It's about making something out of those pieces. I use the metaphor of building and constructing in this paper a lot. I draw a lot from this existentialist tradition, so I draw a lot from the work of Heidegger and Charles Taylor more recently.

The basic thought here is that you have all these materials. I have the body I was born into. I have the society I was born into. I have what I care about. I have what motivates me, what makes me feel good. I have all of those things are all parts of the things that...the materials that are given to me, then my task to make an authentic self, my task is to build that into something that I can own up to. That I can own up to, that I can stand up for, that I can really make into my own.

I think that is a view of authenticity that can both appreciate the sort of intuitive sense of, oh, this is really me as being different from... Sometimes we do things that don't really feel like ourselves. There are things about me that I own up to, then those things are really me, but that doesn't mean that they're deep or unsocial or natural or apart from all these other things that

make up my life. It just means they're the ones that I own up to. They're the ones that matter to me, the ones that I'm willing to stand up for.

Christiane Wisehart: You write about something you call social authenticity, and is that what you just described? Is it all of those factors coming together, not some pre-social core to yourself?

Rowan Bell: Yeah, exactly. Social authenticity, as I understand it...and I want to be clear, many of these ideas have existed for a long time specifically within continental philosophy. The existential philosophers talk about this kind of thing a lot. I use the term social to distinguish it from what I call the inner self view of authenticity, which is that Dr. Phil view of there's this deep self that's not social. Because people tend to think, "Oh, if I can just get away from all the social stuff, if I can just forget all the social expectations, that's who I really am."

I use the term social authenticity to say, no, your engagement with those social expectations, your engagement with all of the stuff with your friends and with all the norms in the world, those engagements can be a part of your authentic self too. For example, people might behave differently around different people or I might behave differently at work than I do around my partner, around my friends. That doesn't have to be inauthentic. It's a matter of a relationship to these parts of yourself and the different parts of who you are, many of them are social, many of them are just a part of the social world, and they're not innate necessarily.

Christiane Wisehart: Another sticky question that you're dealing with here, and this is also maybe the ethics question, is the fact that authenticity holds such, I mean, I think you say that it has normative power, that it has an incredible power over the way that we behave. Can you help us understand that more? What do you mean when you say that authenticity has a lot of normative power?

Rowan Bell: I guess the simplest way to say normative power is to say that it seems like it tells us what we really *should* do. I use this language a lot in my work. The thought is that you have reasons to do things. Some of the reasons might be pretty basic. It might be like, "Oh, I'm hungry." That's a reason to do something. But some of those reasons might seem like they're a little more theoretical or a little more cognitive. I might have a reason to do something. Maybe I promise to go to pick up my friend at the airport, but I really don't want to. I really would rather stay in my house. It seems like I have a reason to stay in my house because I want to, but I also have this other kind of reason.

The other kind of reason is a moral reason. It's a reason that comes from my relationship with my friend and from the fact that I promise to do something. When philosophers talk about normative power or normative force, normative authority is a term that I also use in this paper. They mean that there are the standards for behavior, like morality is maybe the big one. The big normative standard that people think of is morality. Morality is a normative standard that tells you what you should do and we understand "should" as coming apart from what you want to do.

If I always wanted to be a moral person, if I was a perfect moral person, I wouldn't need morality to tell me what I should do. But sometimes, I'm not a perfect person, so I have these reasons, these norms that tell me to do something that comes apart from what I want. In the case of morality and other standards too, for example, I talk about prudence, self-interest. These standards seem like they tell me what I should do even if I don't care about them... If someone was to say, "Oh, I don't care about morality," we would still say to them, "No, you should be a good person."

One example people sometimes give is etiquette. If I'm at a fancy dinner party, there's a sense in which I should use this fork rather than that fork for the salad. But that seems like a different kind of "should" from the moral should because the moral "should" really tells you what, and philosophers actually really struggle to articulate what this is. There's a huge branch of meta ethics that's specifically trying to understand, because we'll talk about things like "normative oomph", that's a real philosophical term. Why does the moral "should" have normative oomph and the etiquette "should" doesn't. It's hard to even talk about that because it seems so intuitive to us.

And so, when I'm talking about normative force, I'm talking about that. I'm talking about these standards that give us oomph or real reasons like we really should follow them. In this paper, I'm talking a bit about how authenticity counts as a normative standard with real oomph. I give evidence for this. I think that if I say that I'm doing something because it's authentic for me, or if I say because I'm going to be a dancer, for example, and quitting my boring life as an accountant and going off to be a dancer because it's who I really am. People seem to understand, yeah, you have a really strong reason to do that, that reason has normative force for you and we get that. I think that specifically when talking about gender and gender norms and queer and trans issues, the language of authenticity has been really, really powerful for us because people intuitively understand that it's a standard with normative force.

Christiane Wisehart: I'm just going to steal a question from your paper because you put it so good but it follows from what you just talked about, which is what should we do when gender norms, which are authentic for us and have that normative oomph, recommend morally or prudentially bad actions?

Rowan Bell: Maybe the unsatisfying answer to the question is that's something that you have to figure out. But I think that one thing that's been ignored in this discourse is the ways in which trans and gender nonconforming communities have already done a lot of work to help us see how we can go about answering these questions. I think when a trans person says some gender standard or some gender norm is authentic for them, that's a really important thing that we need to respect because it seems like not respecting it is associated with a lot of bad things. It's associated with a lot of harms, but that doesn't mean that all gender norms are created equal.

As I said earlier, gender norms are different depending where you are, who you're talking to. If you look at the normative structures that have been created in trans and gender nonconforming communities, you see ways in which they have repurposed or reshaped or re-understood gender norms in ways that can resist their harmful impacts. When I talk about authenticity, one thing I talk about is the productive element of it. If we're making authentic selves out of the world around us, that doesn't just involve taking in everything that's given to me and doing stuff inside of myself, it also involves giving back to the world.

A lot of philosophers talking about authenticity have talked about the way in which it requires you to create things in the world around you in order to create yourself. It might be authentic for you to create art or music or philosophy. It might be authentic for you to engage in political activism. When you're given a world that is really broken and that is really unequal and that is really unjust and you have to make sense of yourself using those flawed tools, you can make your way through that territory by changing that world. It might be an authentic imperative for you to make the world different, such that it is something that you can navigate without as much conflict between these different normative standards.

I say all of that to say, sometimes you see these... when I was talking earlier about the conflict between different factions, I think one disingenuous or unreasonable thing that some people say is like, "Oh, trans people are just re-inscribing these harmful normative, these harmful gender norms, trans people are just reinforcing harmful gender norms." They're saying that, "Oh, these things are saying that they're authentic is saying that they're real and good and important." I don't think that's right because for one reason, I think everybody re-inscribes gender norms all the time just by living in the world, but also because I think it ignores the ways in which trans people and gender nonconforming people are doing all this work within our own communities to try to make those norms better, to try to make them livable for ourselves, to try to repurpose and reshape the world.

All this political activism, all this art, all this philosophy that comes out of trans and gender nonconforming experience is working to help to ease these tensions, to make it the case that if masculinity is normative, it's authentic for me. It doesn't have to be the masculinity that is misogynistic. It can be a more trans positive, a more queer positive, a more inclusive masculinity. That's something that trans people have been working at. That's something feminists have been calling for, and it's something trans people have been working on for as long as there have been trans people in a harmful gender normative structure.

Christiane Wisehart: Why do you care about this? What brought you to this topic?

Rowan Bell: I heard a quote recently, research is me-search. We have a fancy term for this, which is auto theory, theory of the self. I think a lot of philosophers work on things that are very personally important to them and that's true for me here as well. I'm trans, I'm non-binary and something that's affected me throughout my life is I'm a feminist and I have been the target of misogyny. I have been impacted by misogyny throughout my life in various ways. At the same

time, I've often felt, that story at the beginning of the paper where P. Carl is sitting in a taxi and this man is trying to bond with him and say like, "Oh buddy, let's be misogynistic together." I've been in that situation even before I came out.

When I was a teenager, I would hang out with my guy friends and it always felt very, very weird to me because they would treat me like one of the guys and then they would start saying misogynistic things. I would have this really complicated feeling of, on the one hand, this is awful and you shouldn't be saying that. Again, I've been the target of this before and I understand how this hurts me and people like me. But at the same time, this is so affirming for me because I can tell that I'm one of the guys. This feels so much like me. It feels so right to be included in this group or to be subject to these norms.

I will admit, I've said and done things that were misogynistic and I feel really ashamed about that. Let me be very clear here. I am not trying to justify those actions. I don't think that being misogynistic is acceptable for trans people or cis people. I don't think that being trans makes it any better to follow problematic gender norms just to be clear. Honestly, I think they should be evaluated roughly equivalently—trans men or cis men being misogynistic. But it's a practical challenge that I've had to face, trying to figure out.

I think, in some ways, this problem is more salient for trans people and for people like me, because we have that added layer of, "Oh, if I don't successfully perform this, there are consequences." People talk sometimes about how, again, there's this really disingenuous, problematic attitude that says like, "Oh, trans women are hyper-feminine and that reinforces problematic norms of femininity." One major problem with saying that is that if a cis woman doesn't wear makeup or if a cis woman rejects norms of femininity, she's much less likely to be murdered. She's much less likely to be denied medical care. She's much less likely to be harassed, or just basically, she's much less likely to have her gender invalidated. There's a long history of trans people being forced to comply with these norms just to get by.

I do think that makes the cases a little bit different. But to return to your original question, I think what made me interested in this at base, at root, is my own struggles with these, my own very, very tangible discomfort and struggles with these conflicting standards. Then following from that, I think just observing the way these conversations proceed and what I see as often just a disconnect between different kinds of people talking about these issues.

In my theoretical work, I see a lot of feminists talking about how gender norms are bad. I see a lot of trans feminists talking about how gender norms are bad. Then I hear my trans friends talking about how gender norms are authentic for them and paying attention to the practical conflict, but without the benefit often of this theoretical perspective. I think that you need both. I think you need to understand both the problems and the harms that these things can create and the real practical challenges that trans people face every day trying to navigate them.

Christiane Wisehart: This paper is really great because you're centering the experiences of trans and gender nonconforming people when it comes to authenticity and gender norms. Why did you do that? Why did you take that? Why did you frame it like that?

Rowan Bell: I think that this is something that I do in most or all of my work about gender because I think that trans and gender nonconforming people often have a distinctive perspective on issues of gender and issues of gender norms because existing often at the margins of dominant gender categories, and existing like: being gendered differently throughout our lives, being the targets of gender norm enforcement, we just move through a lot of gendered spaces and exist in a lot of positions that cis people or gender nonconforming people might never do.

It's not to say that we are smarter or better, it's just that because of our lived experience, I think trans and gender nonconforming people often just know more about how gender works. We understand more about its nuts and bolts, about the way that it functions to reinforce problematic behaviors, about the way that it shapes our beliefs and our views and our reasons and our actions because we've seen it from so many different angles.

I was talking earlier about how I've been the target of misogyny and I've also engaged in misogyny from a very masculinist bro perspective. I think having both of those perspectives on it has informed my capacity as a researcher because I'm able to see how it works from both sides as it were. I say this not to say that we should treat trans and gender nonconforming people as some kind of epistemic resource. I think there's also a problem that's closely related that we have to be careful of, which is mining the experiences of marginalized people.

There's this great work by Ramón Grosfoguel who says, he calls it epistemic extractivism, like mining the experiences of disempowered people for the knowledge and benefit of the powerful. We have to be careful about that. I guess what I want to advocate for here is the centering of the insight and honestly, the philosophical and theoretical work of trans and gender nonconforming people, because I think that there are perspectives that are available that we have, that can just tell us how gender works for everybody. I think this is useful for understanding how gender impacts everyone, not just us.

[Interview ends]

[music: Blue Dot Sessions, Apple Spice]

Christiane: If you want to find more about Rowan Bell's other work, download a transcript of the show or learn about some of the things we mentioned in today's episode visit prindleinstitute.org/examining-ethics.

Examining Ethics is hosted by The Janet Prindle Institute for Ethics at DePauw University. Christiane Wisehart wrote and produced the show. Our logo was created by Evie Brosius. Our music is by Blue Dot Sessions and can be found online at sessions.blue. Examining Ethics is made possible by the generous support of DePauw Alumni, friends of the Prindle Institute, and you the listeners. Thank you for your support. The views expressed here are the opinions of the

individual speakers alone. They do not represent the position of DePauw University or the Prindle Institute for Ethics.