Gender Construct, Homophobia, and Freedom

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Abstract

This paper explores the roots of homophobia, as explained in terms of adopting a fixed identity in an attempt to deny ones own freedom and avoid the responsibility that comes with choice. Sartre's concept of bad faith and Jung' s concept of shadow are used to elucidate this process.

Key Words: Bad Faith, Existentialism, Gender, Homophobia, Queer Studies.

It is not nature that defines woman; it is she
who defines herself by dealing with nature on her
own account in her own time.
(De Beauvoir, 1952, 33,34)

Homophobia is one of the areas of bigotry still considered acceptable by large segments of civilized societies. For instance, the first bill to extend federal civil rights protection to gay men and lesbians was introduced into the United States Congress on May 14, 1974. This was a full ten years after the passage of the landmark Civil Rights Act. Yet there are still no federal laws in the U.S. protecting the rights of homosexuals (Singer, and Deschamps, 1993: 29). In 1999 forty states still allowed known homosexuals to be fired from their jobs without cause (Fone, 2000: 12).

A telling situation happened in the aftermath of the second world war. Unlike other groups of survivors of the Nazi concentration camps, none of the homosexuals who survived were granted any compensation (Singer and Deschamps,1993: 42). In China, being lesbian or gay is considered not a sin but a psychological illness and is treated with shock therapy and emetics (Singer and Deschamps, 1993: 44). In many parts of Africa and the Middle East, homosexuality is still punishable by death.

In this article, I will explore what homophobia is and why it is so persistent in most cultures. In doing so, I will explore what draws us to demonize the 'other', defined as that which is different from me, and I will examine the etiology of fear related to homophobia and bigotry in general. My arguments will derive largely from the existential philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre (and, by extension, of Simone de Beauvoir), although I also find the psychology of Jung to add an important dimension to the discussion. I will include two case examples from my practice as an existential therapist to illustrate the theory.

Theory

The word *homophobia* is itself interesting. A phobia is an irrational fear. What we know about irrational fears is that they often come to make sense when we understand the deep structure of a person's history. The question then is why homosexuality should so universally arouse irrational fears. I would suggest that some of the answer lies in insecurity about heterosexual identity, based on the gut-level recognition that it is not quite so secure as we would like to believe it is. If it were, the existence of homosexuals would not arouse so much fear. To paraphrase

Simone de Beauvoir, 'One is not born but becomes one's sexual orientation.'

 Furthermore, the very definition of *heterosexuality* in most cultures is based on its opposite: A heterosexual *is not* a homosexual. This becomes even more interesting when one recognizes that the word homosexual is probably preceded by the phenomenon homophobia. For a large number of people, the word 'homosexual' describes *that which is not me*, the 'heterosexual'. That which is not me, the part of myself I deny, always brings up some level of anxiety or fear. This will become clearer as we explore Jean-Paul Sartre's concept of *bad faith* and Carl Jung's concept of the *shadow projection*.

 Actually, since a heterosexual is by definition someone attracted only to persons of the 'opposite' sex, the fact that most people have experienced at least some inkling of attraction to persons of the same sex at some point in their lives makes claims to this identity suspect or insecure. Furthermore, if one looks further into what the word 'heterosexual' implies in our culture, the instability of the concept of heterosexuality becomes apparent, and this instability is indeed one of the sources of phobia.

 Finally the very definition of ourselves as male or female is implicated in homophobia. A 'real man' or 'real woman' is heterosexual. This brings us to our ontological condition as human beings as described by Sartre. Since we can never be a person as a table is a table, since we are not solid somethings, but instead are what we make ourselves be, gender identity, like all other identities, is always in question. The fact that this is so leads to existential anxiety, which in the extreme can become homophobia, since gender identity is one of our earliest identifications.

 By taking on the identity 'heterosexual' one is grasping for an elusive, unattainable fixed essence. For instance, to identify as a heterosexual male in American culture one might expect to be excluded from liking ballet, from crying, from hugging male friends, from empathy, from being artistically creative, from kissing another man, from being expressive with one's hands while talking, from knitting, and from many other things associated with women and homosexuals.

 To be considered a heterosexual female one might be expected never be strong or assertive, not to be athletic, and to love shopping, clothes, babies, talking on the phone, wearing makeup, dieting, romance fiction, serving men, and again the list goes on. Many will argue that they know, or are themselves, heterosexuals with exceptions to the above lists. That is my point: No one fits, and each exception makes one a little more of a sexual suspect, a deviant from an unattainable artificial norm that is linked to violently enforced taboos.

 This linkage between social stereotypes and sexual preference creates a powerful feedback loop. For instance, imagine that I am a twenty-year-old male and consider myself to be heterosexual, and at fifteen years of age, I experienced

an intimate moment with a male friend? Nothing obvious happened, just a moment of tenderness with the slightest hint of sexual stirring with a close childhood friend. Even that event would be such a violation of cultural sexual taboo that I might immediately push it out of awareness. It would then become a non-event as far as I allow myself to know.

Now suppose I am in my twenties walking down the street and I see a man dressed in tight jeans, carrying a man-purse, flailing his arms about as he talks expressively to his friends. My experience will most likely be discomfort in the extreme. This person is visibly violating several taboos and my imagination goes to violations that are not visible. This event resonates with the age fifteen event, which is now attempting to wiggle its way up into my awareness. I will probably not allow the actual memory into my awareness, but the terror associated with it will begin to blend with the outrage I am experiencing from witnessing the blatant and imagined violations of taboos. Thus my outrage might be magnified into disgust and even rage, further reinforcing cultural taboos.

This brings us to the deep structure of what is going on. Simply put, the formation of the ego is an attempt to break reality down into digestible or stable portions. We say, 'I am_____' and then fill in the blanks with constructs such as student, mother, policeman, teacher, convict, etc. Among the most fundamental of these ego constructs are the positions: 'I am male' or 'I am female.' These positions are taken at the earliest moments of ego formation and are therefore embedded in the ego's foundation. From Sartre's perspective the ego is neither a subject nor a seat of reality orientation (as it was for Freud). Instead it is a construct of reflective consciousness—and thus an object. In the case of male or female identities, they are most likely taken on in order to be what we perceive others want us to be, or tell us that we are, especially our primary caregivers in our formative years.

These 'I am' positions are attempts at creating illusions of solidity, or from Sartre's perspective, attempts to avoid the anxiety associated with the freedom to choose who we are at any given moment (Sartre, 1953). According to Sartre, what all existentialists have in common, both theistic and atheistic, is the understanding that 'existence precedes essence, or, if you prefer, that subjectivity must be the starting point' (Sartre, 1965: 64). This statement means that first we exist and next we set out to define ourselves. There is no *a priori* human nature. We are defined by our choices and our actions (Sartre, 1965).

I am not arguing that obvious physical characteristics do not play a role in the development of gender identity. That they are not everything is attested to by the phenomenon of transsexuality, which may create even more phobia than homosexuality. We know that the presence of one genital formation does usually lead to the choice of one identity or another. Still we need to remember that the statements 'I am female' or 'I am male' are vastly different from 'I have vagina' or 'I have a penis.' If I take the position, 'I am female,' I am also taking the position,

'That which is male is not-me.' And, since the acceptable cultural definition of female is heterosexual female, all that is not heterosexual female becomes not-me.

From a Jungian perspective this is a dangerously out of balance position. For Jung, the energies and possibilities of maleness and femaleness together define the whole self, with only a few exceptions around the process of reproduction. Jung states in his personal journal, *The Red Book,*

> *You, man, should not seek the feminine in women, but seek and recognise it in yourself, as you possess it from the beginning. It pleases you, however to play at manliness because it travels on a well worn track. You, woman, should not seek the masculine in men, but assume the masculine in yourself, since you possesses it from the beginning. But it amuses you and it is easy to play at femininity, consequently man despises you because he despises his femininity. But humankind is masculine and feminine, not just man or woman.* (Jung, 2010: 263)

Jung's words about gender remind one of Sartre's cafe waiter, who is playing at being or attempting to impersonate a cafe waiter:

> *Let us consider this waiter in the cafe. His movement is quick and forward, a little too precise, a little too rapid. He comes toward the patrons with a step a little too quick. He bends forward a little too eagerly; his voice, his eyes express an interest a little too solicitous for the order of the customer. Finally there he returns, trying to imitate in his walk the inflexible stiffness of some kind of automaton while carrying his tray with the recklessness of a tight-rope-walker by putting it in a perpetually unstable, perpetually broken equilibrium which he perpetually re-establishes by a light movement of the arm and hand. All his behaviour seems to us a game. He applies himself to chaining his movements as if they were mechanisms, the one regulating the other; his gestures and even his voice seem to be mechanisms; he gives himself the quickness and pitiless rapidity of things. He is playing, he is amusing himself. But what is he playing? We need not watch long before we can explain it: he is playing at being a waiter in a cafe.* (Sartre, 1956: 101-102)

Like Jung's man and woman playing at being masculine and feminine, he can never actually be a cafe waiter in any solidified sense. From Jung's perspective, any part of the self that I deny becomes the shadow, not-me self. The shadow then becomes 'the terrible other' which I project out into the world. Since it can't be me it must be 'out there'. It is here that one's phobia is formed. Sartre, of course,

would agree when, in his discussion of the anti-Semite, he says that the anti-Semite projects his disowned qualities onto the Jew (Sartre, 1946).

But gender identity has even deeper origins than racism. My very security in defining who I am in the world, my ego in its very early stages of development as an object, rests on defining myself as male or female. Hence my ego is dependent on denying parts of reality, my contrasexual impulses and desires. When reminders of these contrasexual impulses and desires are present in my environment, my ego is challenged.

This challenge feels like a threat to my existence. This often leads to manifestations of homophobia, misogyny, transphobia, and self-loathing. Let us take the example above of the male remembering on a prereflective (gut) level parts of himself that experienced feelings of tenderness and even desire toward another male. His feelings of terror are stirred not by what the man with the purse simply is, but by the parts of himself, his shadow, that are projected onto the man with the purse. Suddenly his 'I am male' position is not as stable as he thought it was.

'Animus' and 'anima' are Jung's names for the contrasexual impulses in males and females. Jung suggests that in youth it may be healthy to swing all the way to one side of the gender scale in order to free oneself from the 'anima fascination' of the mother (I would assume this means for females that freeing oneself from the animus fascination of the father is equally healthy, although this is not clearly stated by Jung). He then goes on to name exceptions, 'notably artist, where the problem takes a different turn, also homosexuality, which is usually characterised by identity with the anima' (Jung, 1969: 71). This phrase is often pointed to by advocates of the Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transexual (LGBT) community as an example of Jung's prejudice against homosexuals and transexuals. Yet Jung does go on to state that the interpretation of this phenomenon as a 'pathological perversion is very dubious' (Jung, 1969: 71). He suggests that there is a balance that is lost by a one-sided gender stance.

To take the position 'I am a heterosexual', or homosexual for that matter, is is to take an attitude that Sartre calls the *spirit of seriousness*—an attempt to be rock hard solid, fixed by fate, science, or God. The 'serious world' is appealing because it 'guarantees the worth of its objects' (Barnes, 1959: 48) so that a correct way of living is pre-determined. This way of being lacks any playfulness or creativity while allowing one the illusion of not being responsible for choosing who one is. This attempt to avoid choice is folly, of course; the only limitation on choice is that one must choose (Sartre, 1953).

One could, of course, say, 'I have never been attracted to someone of the same sex,' and the statement would be accurate if that is the truth. It would not be equally true to say 'I am a heterosexual' if one is claiming that 'I never have been

and I never will be homosexual.' This is so because, as much as I might wish this to be true, I cannot limit my choices down there in the future by saying 'I am made this way' or 'God has determined that I be this way.' I can never simply be a heterosexual as a table is a table. I can only be a heterosexual in the mode of becoming or making myself be a heterosexual through my life choices. So I am not a heterosexual in the substantial sense even if I have never desired a person of the same sex. This does not even take into consideration that nearly everyone has some attraction in some circumstances to persons of the same sex.

Sartre would say that it is 'bad faith' to call oneself a heterosexual in the substantial sense. Bad faith, according to Sartre, is a lie to oneself (Sartre 1953: 89). It is an attempt to escape from the responsibility of freedom with respect to the past and the future (Barnes, 1959: 65). This lie is within the context of a single consciousness and therefore done with intention and some level of awareness. Betty Cannon identifies two ways of falling into bad faith: 'I fall into bad faith if I take one or both of two dishonest positions about reality: I pretend either to be free in a world without facts or to be a fact in a world without freedom' (Cannon 1991: 46). To call oneself a heterosexual in the substantial sense is to fall into the second form of bad faith as described by Cannon—the one more often emphasised by Sartre.

The first form of bad faith is the one adopted by the male homosexual who denies he is a homosexual in Sartre's famous example. He denies his homosexuality even in the face of the fact of desiring and making love to men. (Sartre, 1953: 107). In doing so, he is only more blatantly dishonest than the supposed heterosexual who says he is only a heterosexual despite knowing he has occasionally had an attraction to men. It is as though both are saying, 'I am what I imagine myself to be despite my desires or life choices. I take no responsibility for those desires or choices, and, in fact, disavow them.'

In that same passage in *Being and Nothingness* Sartre points out the error of the homosexual's friend and critic who is impatient with his disavowals. The friend wants him to declare 'I am a pederast' in the sense that a table is a table (the second form of bad faith as described by Cannon). Sartre says, 'We ask here: Who is in bad faith? The homosexual or the champion of sincerity?' (Sartre, 1953: 107). Obviously the answer is that both are in bad faith.

What then of the homosexual who admits that she is a homosexual? Is she then acting in good faith? Not necessarily, if she means that she is by nature and for all time homosexual—if she believes this is her essence or biological destiny. This is not to say that there may not be certain biological or genetic predispositions, but only that one still chooses or makes oneself be who or what one becomes. This would be true even if someone discovered a 'queer gene' (which seems unlikely) that made it more likely that she would be homosexual or (even

more improbable perhaps) transexual. She would still choose the way she lives this propensity.

The motives for the homosexual in assuming a substantialized self may be, in fact, underneath it all similar to those of the heterosexual who substantializes his sexual orientation, but with an understandable twist. The homosexual is attempting to escape the social opprobrium of her choice by claiming that she cannot help what she is—that she is determined by her genes or nature to be it. While one can sympathise with the desire to escape homophobia in this way, it is still a position in bad faith and not particularly honouring of herself as a free subject. If when taking the position 'I am a homosexual', I am saying that in the future I will not choose to have sex with persons of the opposite gender because I am not made that way, this constitutes an attempt to make myself into a fixed and solid something, avoiding responsibility for my choices and attempting to deny my freedom.

What both the homophobe and the homosexual claiming genetic determinism are afraid of is their freedom. As Hazel Barnes says of the anti-Semite in Sartre's account, 'He is afraid of himself, or more accurately he is afraid to face the fact that he does not have a self in any final sense but that he is a limitless freedom which is constantly making a self' (Barnes, 1959: 68). The bigot is attempting to coagulate his self into a solid form. He states to himself, 'I am a person who hates and is superior to Jews, Blacks, Mexicans, Muslims, homosexuals, or any object of otherness,' in order to place a value on his 'self' that has nothing to do with his actions or accomplishments, but is an a-priori value determined someplace outside of himself.

By turning other humans into despised others, the bigot is then able to project all of what is not acceptable, for one reason or another, in his own self onto these other humans. He is then able to deflect the anxiety of his human condition and to escape the anxiety that comes from realizing that he is not a fixed something. The homosexual acting in bad faith is similarly attempting to escape her freedom and to find excuses for her sexual choices. While this is understandable, it regrettably degrades her by making her an object of biological determinism rather than a free subject affirming her choice to love and desire those whom she chooses to love and desire.

I am the result of my actions and choices. My actions and choices are not a result of who I am, at least to the degree that 'I am' at all. In Sartre's view, man is nothing but what he makes of himself. 'If existence really does precede essence, there is no explaining things away to a fixed and given nature . . . We are all alone with no excuses' (Sartre, 1965: 47). If we assume that the existentialist stance that 'existence precedes essence' is correct, then my essence is my project, my creation. This computer on which I type, though complicated, was created by technicians to perform specific tasks and has no say in the matter. Its essence was

chosen by the technicians who created it. I, on the other hand, choose to do what I do, including typing this article on this computer now. My essence is my choice and my choices and actions define my essence.

Case Examples

I will provide two examples to illustrate this discussion. Both cases have to do with the clients' attempts to find a fixed, boxed-in, identity in order to decrease the anxiety of uncertainty in their positions within the cultural norm.

The first case involves a transexual woman in her early twenties who was referred to me by a colleague. She had already been through the transition process and had had gender re-assignment surgery and some facial surgery. Her therapist and close relatives were concerned with her perceived need for several more plastic surgery procedures to achieve feminization. There are doctors who show up at transexual gatherings offering a seemingly endless array of procedures to achieve the appearance of the targeted gender. This phenomenon offers evidence of the anxiety associated with being between identities, neither being fully male nor female, and the extremes some will go through in an attempt to alleviate this anxiety.

My first question to this client, whom I will from here on refer to as Brenda, was, 'How transphobic are you?' This led to an initial shock response and then an admission that transphobia might very well be playing a role in her body dysmorphia. Brenda came across as bright, intelligent, and outgoing. She was also quite a beautiful woman by western standards. She recognized her beauty; however, her anxiety about her appearance was fairly constant. Brenda wanted to be a 'genetic' female, like her sisters. She wanted her femaleness to be beyond question. She wanted her childhood to be the childhood of a little girl. The thought of being 'read'—recognized as a transexual— was horrifying to her. Brenda wanted to be a female, fixed and solid, without any danger, ever, of instability in this status.

Brenda found herself in an interesting predicament. It is not unusual to want to latch onto a fixed identity of male or female; most people find a sense of security from this behavior. As mentioned above it can be a way of avoiding choices—I am a woman so this is what I must do. For Brenda, though, neither male nor female would work as an identity. She knew she was not male and yet was born with male genitalia. How could she be a woman if she was born with male genitals? The idea of being a transexual offered little comfort, probably because there is not even a perceived stability in that term. Transexual can mean many things—the meaning of the term is in dispute within the LGBT community— and most of those things are despised by most of our culture. Brenda

fostered the irrational hope that enough surgery would transform her into a female, a female as a table is a table, fixed and solid. This, of course, is an impossible project. No one is a female, fixed and solid.

In therapy we explored the ambiguity of 'self' and the anxiety of not knowing. Brenda entered into a dialogue between her various aspects that were in conflict——the boy, the woman, and the transexual. She began to recognize, on a gut level, that she was all and none of these things. She was no-thing (Sartre says the 'nothingness' is the source of our freedom). As she opened to her anxiety she was able to let go of her project of becoming a thing. In other words, she accepted her freedom.

Brenda went on to work as a model for a short time and then earned a degree from a top university in her field. She reports enjoying her life and is no longer obsessed with becoming more and more female.

The second case is a man who came to see me for several issues. One that he found particularly disturbing was that he suddenly found himself sexually attracted to, aroused by, a male in the locker room of his gym. He was happily married and had good relations, on all levels, with his wife. This incident led him to wonder, 'Am I gay?' and 'Should I leave my wife and pursue a man?' He found this questioning extremely disturbing. He was no longer 'a heterosexual man' as he knew himself to be. His first reaction was to look for a new box of identification.

We explored what he felt to be a paradox, being happily married and having sexual feeling for a man. This led to that very anxious place of recognising the absence of any true identity in a fixed sense. As he moved through the anxiety of being 'nothing' he was able to tap into expansiveness and enormous creative energy. It no longer mattered what he was. What became important was what he could now do while stepping outside of the constriction of the formally held social construct of heterosexual male.

Conclusion

It is possible, and even common, to acquire a false sense of comfort, at least on a temporary basis, by adopting a fixed identity. To say that I am anything allows me to imagine that it is possible to predict my future behavior. It may also provide a sense of belonging to a group of people with the same or similar identity. There is a large price to pay for this comfort. The price is freedom and authenticity. I limit my choices to to what I imagine the choices of that identity to be. I define myself by an a-priori definition of that identity. In the long run I am also denied the comfort I bargained for. The world of facticity will provide ample reminders of my self-deception. The reminders may come in the form of someone playing the same

role or someone refusing to play that role. For instance, if I am playing the role of "good girl" and when angry respond with a "saccharine politeness " as opposed to authentic anger, and if someone responds to me with that same saccharine politeness, I am likely to be "triggered", reminded on a pre-conscious level of my own inauthenticity. This trigger will most likely lead to anxiety and serve as a boundary disturbance between me and the person that behaves like me. Also if someone responds with authentic anger toward me I will be unlikely to be able to respond appropriately to that.

If I perceive the source of the anxiety to be somewhere in the world outside the boundary of my imagined identity, my only choice is to reject more and more of the 'not me' in the world. This action leads to both a limiting of choices and to hostility toward the perceived sources of anxiety. Bad Faith turns out to be a lose-lose game; I shrink my world and end up with at least as much discomfort I was trying to avoid.

If I choose to acknowledge my freedom and accept the responsibility of my choices, one result my very well be the discomfort that has come to be known as existential anxiety. However in this scenario I have agency over this anxiety. It is I who choose it over the alternative of bad faith or lying to myself. And it is I who can have more authentic relationships as a result of this choice.

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