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Agency, Authorial Authority, and the Gendered Narrative of Self

When the jazz pianist Billy Tipton passed away in 1989, it was discovered that he had been born biologically female. Upon this realization, the question of Tipton's identity immediately entered the public domain. Everyone, except for the man himself, was debating what the true identity of Billy Tipton may have been. Adélaïde Herculine Barbin, an intersexed individual, inhabited the world as a woman until, at the age of 22, she was deemed to be a male psuedohermaphrodite during a physical examination, and was forced to live the rest of her life as a man. These individuals had no agency in their definition of self. Yet, cisgendered individuals are rarely put into a position in which they must forfeit their authorial authority in their narratives of self.

In this article, the reader is presented with analyses of Liberalism and Communitarianism, the two most-discussed philosophical theories of self. Liberalism claims the individual has free agency and choice in the determination of self, whereas Communitarianism argues that individuals are constituted by social relationships, communities, and cultures and are thus socially determined. The issue, however, is that Communitarianism would not allow transgender individuals to determine their own self narratives, while Liberalism would not allow the very important sense in which the individual's true gender identity is not something that can be chosen or controlled.

A new definition of self is thus necessary that allows agency and authorial authority in our narratives of self, while allowing for the importance of natural, communal, and relational influences on our identities. This article thus first critiques Liberalism and Communitarianism and then offers the reader with a new identity of self to be considered.