

A Different Sort of Personal Identity: "Ethical" Identity

I. Personal Identity: "Ethical" v. "Metaphysical" questions

The previous lectures and readings on personal identity were primarily concerned with the *metaphysics* of personal identity.

Question of diachronic identity/unity: Confronted with an individual X at one time and Y at another, what would make it the case that X and Y are (or are parts of) the same person?

We've seen that the answer to this question may well depend on what sort of thing you think persons are: are persons bodies? Streams of consciousness? Souls? So our inquiry can potentially tell us something not only about whether and under what conditions you or I will survive to the next moment, but also about what it is to be a person at all.

But there is a different and more specific sense in which we might be concerned with the "identity" of a person, e.g., we might want to know what makes the person X (or stages X+Y) Tracy Roberts rather than Michaela Johnson or even Darren Williams.

Question of precise individuation: What makes X (or X+Y) *the very person* he or she is?

We are asking: what is it that distinguishes persons from each other, that makes me me and you you, and me not you. Is there some unique mark or feature that I and only I have, that no one else could have? To answer, one might consider one's DNA structure, one's biological origins in a particular sperm and egg, one's particular body, one's distinctive path through actual space/time.

There is yet another related question, one that is often at issue when we find ourselves in an "identity crisis", when we ask: Who am I anyway? In those moments I don't think what's bothering us is what literally (or metaphysically) distinguishes me from you. What we're concerned with is what our "core" self, or "true" self is really like. We're concerned about what our real talents are, what we deeply value, what "makes us tick". In a sense we're asking "what makes me me?", but the import of the question is: What of the many things I value and the many things I do are the ones that are centrally important, that are worth pursuing, that should define the shape of my life? These questions, although perhaps most naturally asked about ourselves (in the first person), can also be asked about others. Note that there are really two questions at issue:

(i) Descriptive question concerning "ethical" identity: What are the core traits and values that [at this point in my life] define who I am (or who X is)?

(ii) Normative question concerning "ethical" identity: What are the core traits and values that *should* define who I am (or who X is)?

Crisis can strike either when you suspect that what you thought was the answer to the descriptive question isn't accurate, e.g., you aren't really a talented musician or a conscientious friend as you had thought, or when your answer to the descriptive question conflicts with your answer to the normative question, e.g., you realize that your life is organized

around trivial things rather than things that really matter.

II. Rorty and Wong

Rorty and Wong are interested in what we will call "ethical" identity. On their view:

A person's identity is constituted by *a configuration of central traits*. In characterizing identity by the structure of central traits, we do not mean to imply that these traits remain constant throughout an individual's lifetime or that they individuate a person, or that they serve as referential reidentifiers. We are focusing on traits that typically make a systematic difference to the course of a person's life, to the habit-forming and action-guiding social categories in which she is placed, to the way that she acts, reacts, and interacts. (p. 19, my italics)

How should we understand the notion of "centrality" they are relying on? There are three main dimensions, each independent of the other (p. 20):

- i Ramification: how broadly the trait is manifested in the person's life and how much depends on it (both socially and individually).
- i Dominance: how strong or persistent the trait is.
- i Appropriation: how important one takes the trait to be.

Examples:

Shyness might be ramified and dominant, but not appropriated.

Self-control may be ramified and appropriated but not dominant.

A willingness to forgive others may be appropriated, but not ramified or dominant.

Aspects of "ethical" identity (pp. 21-25)

- i Somatic, proprioceptive, and kinaesthetic dispositions, e.g., deft/awkward, flexible/stiff, tall/short, excitable/calm.
- i Central temperamental or psychological traits, e.g., shyness, aggression, generosity.
- i Social role identity, e.g., casting in "social dramas" as "the villain", scapegoat, father figure.
- i Socially defined group identity, e.g., race, class, age, gender, ethnicity.
- i Ideal identity, e.g., sense of ideal self, internalization of role models.

What aspects of "ethical" identity are central to an individual seems to depend at least in part on their culture. In some cultures social identities (one's "proper role" in the culture) are at the core of a person's identity; in other cultures not. Nonetheless, philosophers tend to debate the question what aspects of ethical identity are central to defining who we are. What exactly is this debate about? Is it a debate about the structure of the self? Or about local cultural norms? Or about how we ought to think of ourselves?

III. Appiah: Race and Gender as "aspects" of identity

Appiah distinguishes "metaphysical" from "ethical" questions about a person's identity. If, when I ask: "What makes Sally Sally?" I am looking for a special feature I have and a twin Sally--someone very like me but not *really me*--would lack, this would be a "metaphysical" project in Appiah's sense. If I am trying to determine what set of core traits and values "make me tick", i.e., that explain what I do and why, this is an "ethical" project in Appiah's sense. (Note that Sally and twin-Sally may have the same ethical identity: the very same values, goals, etc., structure their lives.)

Interestingly, Appiah seems to think that it is *not* entirely an open question what an individual's "ethical identity" consists in; at least, it is not entirely a matter of individual choice. He argues that "our" concept of the self-specifying that the relevant "we" includes those of us "in the modern West" (p. 497)--makes gender a central component of ethical identity, and race less central. One way of reading this claim is that

Thesis 1: Most of us in the modern West have a descriptive (ethical) identity that situates our gender as more central than race, so on "our" (Western) understanding of what it is to be a self, gender is more important than race.

Thesis 2: A replacement of one's gender would make a new "ethical person" whereas the replacement of one's race would not.

Thesis 3: A sex-change results (can result?) in a new "ethical person", but a "race change" would not (cannot?).

"Ethical Persons" and the Self

In order to make sense of these claims, it will be useful to introduce a number of distinctions. So to begin: what is an "ethical person" in the sense intended?

i We seem to ordinarily use the term 'self' to refer to a psychologically organized source of agency, perhaps something like a coherent personality; include within this a complex pattern of relations to others. (Including the various "aspects" of ethical identity that Rorty and Wong list.) Some bodies house no selves (e.g., if the body is in a permanent coma); other bodies house several selves (e.g., if the body has multiple personality disorder).

i In order not to beg any questions about *personal* identity (what it is to be the same *person* over time), we should *not* assume that the concept of a self just is the concept of a person; perhaps personal identity is a matter of bodily continuity and yet the same *person* can coincide with many selves. However, let us assume for this discussion that you are a self.

i Then one of Appiah's questions can be put this way: Can X and Y be the same self, if X is a man and Y is a woman? This might be considered either as a matter of time/replacement, or of possibility. Could the self you are now continue to exist and yet change its gender? Or would a new self be created? Would it have been possible for you to exist and be the self you are, and yet have been a different gender? In effect, is a self's gender essential to it? Appiah's other question is: What about race? Is it essential too?

Sex/Gender, Biological race/Social race

To answer these questions, we need still more distinctions.

i On Appiah's view, *sexes* are distinguished by familiar anatomical differences (internal and external genitalia)-we'll use the terms 'male' and 'female' to refer to sexes; *genders* are distinguished by social role and personality traits (such as masculinity and femininity)-we'll use the terms 'men' and 'women' to refer to genders. (p. 495) It should be clear that sex does not determine gender: one can be female and yet not be feminine, not function socially as a woman, etc.

i Biological race consists of those features of the body that (supposedly) determine one's racial category; social race consists of the experiences and way of life that those viewed as of a common race share. (See, p. 496 and 497, though the terms are mine)

Appiah argues that it is possible to be a male and yet have the 'ethical identity' of a woman. E.g., It may be that in the case of transsexuals the gender of the self does not "match" the sex of the body; for transsexuals, a "sex change" operation will in many cases leave the self intact, even if the sex is changed.

But we need to ask: given a *self* that is gendered as a woman, could that *self* become a man (or v.v.)? Under the envisioned conditions of psychological/social change, would the (woman) self be *replaced* by a new (man) self? Given the background understanding of ethical identity, what's at issue is whether gender is such a deep organizing

psychological/social principle that shifting to a different gender would result in a kind of incoherence that would destroy the self. Could a self that shifted from being psychologically/socially organized "like a woman" to being psychologically/socially organized "like a man" over time still remain coherent and organized? Could your actions and attitudes have been organized differently along gender lines right from the start (and it still be you)? (We should also ask the background factual question whether there really is a difference in how men and women are psychologically/socially organized!!)

Although Appiah seems to be addressing these last questions--relevant to Thesis 2, his argument focuses on quite different examples, more relevant to Thesis 3. His main point seems to be that one *can* undergo a sex-change and plausibly claim afterwards to be a different "ethical person" from before (p. 497). He contrasts this with the case of race: one *cannot*, he maintains, undergo a "biological race" change and truly claim to be a different person from before. (Note that to undergo a "race change" one need not have one's appearance altered: one might simply move to another culture which interprets the bodily markers of race differently.) He concludes that "racial" ethical identities are "less conceptually central to who one is than gender ethical identities." (p. 497)

But it is not clear why the change matters in one case but not the other. Moreover, we should ask why his intuitions about these cases of sex-change and race/color-change are relevant to the question Appiah started with. He wanted to know whether *he* (AA), who is in fact a man, could have been the same self but a woman (because socialized differently). This concerns Thesis 2. On the face of it, facts about AA's anatomy--and Thesis 3--are not at issue here, since he has allowed that sex need not "match" gender. What Appiah's examples seem to show is *not* that a gender shift from masculine to feminine (or v.v.) or can destroy the self, but that a change in one's *genitalia* from male to female (or v.v.) can destroy the self. This latter claim is to the point only if one assumes that attitudes towards one's genitalia are partly constitutive of gender; yet earlier gender was explained just in terms of femininity/masculinity and social role. How exactly is Thesis 2 related to Thesis 3?

Although Appiah did not include genitalia as relevant in his brief explication of gender, it is clearly at issue for him: in asking, "Would that still be me?" about an imagined AA who went through a sex-change and was socialized as a woman, he suggests that the answer would depend on "how central my being-a-man-my social masculinity and , perhaps, my possession of the biological appurtenances of maleness-is, as we would ordinarily say, to my identity." (p. 495).

So Appiah's point can be summed up by saying that it is normally the case (in the "modern West") that one's self-one's "ethical identity"-makes central an understanding of one's body as male or female; but does not make central an understanding of one's body as racially marked. In fact, his argument is more relevant to the question whether *sex* is central to the self, not *gender*. Returning to the Rorty and Wong framework, Appiah is maintaining that at least some of the somatic (bodily) facts that determine our core sense of self are facts about genitalia; whereas the somatic facts about skin color (etc.) aren't as central. Do you agree? Isn't it plausible that there is significant variation here? Some people may take their sexual anatomy to be central to who they are and find it unimaginable that they--the self they now are--could exist without the sort of anatomy they have; and others may not. And some may take their racial morphology to be central, and others may not. Is Appiah saying that some are right about what is central to who they are and others are wrong?

Note that there are several dimensions to the question:

a) If X had a different physical anatomy (either sexually or racially) than you have now, but almost everything else (psychologically and socially) about X were the same as for you, could X be you?

b) If X had a different physical anatomy (either sexually or racially) than you have now, and if that difference made a difference to X's psychological and social reality--so that X began to feel and act like someone of a different race or sex than you have now, and was treated by others accordingly--could X be you?

And the background question remains:

c) If X has the same physical anatomy as you but a different psychological/social reality along race and gender lines-- imagine someone X who lived in a society without racism or sexism, where one's "color" and one's genitalia don't make a significant difference socially--could X still be you?

Questions to consider:

i Does one's answer to questions about *ethical identity* depend at all on one's view about *diachronic identity/unity*? Does it depend at all on one's answer to the question of *precise individuation*?

i What determines whether a particular trait is central to one's selfhood or not? Is choosing to make a trait central/peripheral enough to make it so?

i Rorty and Wong suggest that some philosophers who attempt to describe "ethical" identity--what the core traits of the self really are--are in fact making normative recommendations about what our identity should be. Yet Rorty and Wong are themselves attempting to describe "ethical" identity. Is their view also normative? If so, what are they (implicitly or explicitly) recommending should be central to identity? If not, how do they avoid normativity?

i If we cannot change by will central aspects of our ethical identity, then what is the point of making recommendations about what our core identities *should* be?

i Do you agree with Appiah that there are significant differences between the centrality of race and the centrality of gender to the self? If so, what explains the difference in our attitudes? What explains the difference in our attitudes towards the centrality of sex and biological race?

i Is sex more objective/biologically real than race? Does the Fausto-Sterling essay provide a basis for thinking that sex is a social category? Do it provide a basis for thinking that gender is a social category? Is race more a social category than gender or sex? Why or why not?

i Do you think there are differences in the importance men and women place on the sexual features of their body with respect to their identity? Do you think there are differences in the importance people of different races place on the racial features of their body with respect to their identity?

i Allowing for the sake of argument that "we" do make gender (or sex) more central to our identity than race, how should we answer the normative question? Should we aim to make gender (or sex) less central? (Why or why not?) Should we aim to make race more central? (Why or why not?) Should we aim to make both irrelevant? (Why or why not?) Is that possible? (Why or why not?)