

SOCIAL & NARRATIVE IDENTITY

Identity & Literature (Summer 2013)

Laura Guidry-Grimes

WHO AM I?

- ◆ Moving away from metaphysical, numerical questions
- ◆ Focus on self-description, self-conception, social affiliation
- ◆ Significant changes to someone's social or narrative identity can have important implications for how that individual *is* treated and *should* be treated
 - ◆ **Descriptive vs. normative** judgments
- ◆ Need a philosophically robust account of how to answer the questions “Who am I?” and “Who are we?”

IDENTITIES

◆ Can describe a person and things in different lights—
can emphasize its

- ◆ constitution (parts, whole, systems)
- ◆ origin
- ◆ essence (if there is such a thing)
- ◆ function
- ◆ role

◆ Identity conditions can vary, depending on which
description is on the table

- ◆ Example: Ship of Theseus



SOCIAL IDENTITY

- ◆ Given or found/chosen group affiliation
 - ◆ E.g., race, gender, sex, family, ethnicity, culture
 - ◆ Can be resented, embraced, known, unknown, central, peripheral

- ◆ “it is particularly important that it is shared, and an insistence on such an identity is an insistence on the ways in which it is shared” (Williams 360)

- ◆ Can be biological, essential, or socially constructed
 - ◆ ‘Socially construction’: “*X* need not have existed, or need not be at all as it is. *X*, or *X* as it is at present, is not determined by the nature of things; it is not inevitable” (Hacking 6)
 - Socially constructed identity is nonetheless *real*

SOCIAL IDENTITY

- ◆ Social processes can inform or determine (to some degree) my self-concept
 - ◆ Philosophical disagreement on how much our identities are constituted by social relations, pressures
- ◆ Social ID as “the individual’s knowledge that he or she belongs to certain social groups together with some emotional or value significance to him or her of the group membership” (Tajfel, qtd. in Williams 360)
- ◆ “A stereotype deployed against me by others impinges on my self, if it gets into it, it is an obstacle to my living freely or effectively or in a convinced way” (Williams 360)

WHAT MATTERS IN SURVIVAL

- ◆ Numerical ID is necessary, not sufficient for our prudential interests
 - ◆ I want it to be me who persists, but I have numerous other concerns for my future self.
- ◆ Important for us to meaningfully have anticipations, fears, and hopes for the traits and projects of the future self
- ◆ Narrative identity as a “mental autobiography, an extremely detailed story of what we have experienced and done” that is “richly colored by a sense of one’s own beliefs, desires, values, and character” (DeGrazia 80)
 - ◆ Narratives can vary in form, structure, highlighted events, depiction of the “protagonist”

BEING A PROTAGONIST

◆ Creating a self-narrative as **intrinsically** and **instrumentally** valuable

- ◆ Tied to surviving as a distinctive person
- ◆ Necessary for sense of self, values to have permanence and meaning long-term
- ◆ Needed for *self-creation*

◆ “*You are the individual who is realistically described in your self-narrative or inner story*” (DeGrazia 83)

◆ Incorporates events, stages when the individual was not or will not be a person (as a baby, in dementia)

OBJECTIVE VS. SUBJECTIVE ACCOUNTS

- ◆ Problem: First-person perspective can be distorted
 - ◆ Self-deception
 - ◆ Forgotten, repressed memories
 - ◆ Idealized, romanticized events
 - ◆ Subconscious/unconscious elements
 - ◆ Imperfect capacities for memory, interpretation, synthesis, reasoning

- ◆ So should we privilege first-person or third-person accounts? Or does narrative identity ultimately not matter that much?
 - ◆ DeGrazia privileges first-person narrative because we want “a highly personal answer that, among other things, filters through objective facts about oneself, deeming only some of them salient” (84)

PROBLEM OF DISTORTION

◆ Narrative could be highly implausible → needs to be **realistic, within reason**

◆ Narrative could be severely delusional → should **qualify** what is a mere belief state

◆ Therefore, need some checks on what counts as a “legitimate” story

◆ needs to stand up to reality (minimally)

◆ “other people’s *knowledge* of the relevant facts provides social reality checks that shape the story that will be accepted” (DeGrazia 86)

SOCIAL RELATIONS & PRUDENTIAL INTERESTS

- ◆ Interpersonal relations partially constitute everyone's narrative (welfare interests closely tied to the welfare interests of others)
- ◆ Mirroring: see how one is perceived and understood by others— affects one's sense of self (negatively or positively)
- ◆ Coherent, intelligible narratives makes possible **planning, self-knowledge, moral responsibility**
- ◆ **Self-creation:** “*conscious, deliberate shaping of one's own personality, character, other significant traits [...] or life direction*” (89-90)
 - ◆ Can be limited by cultural, economic, political, developmental factors

QUESTIONS? COMMENTS?