Being in Absentia

Presidential Address of the 55th Annual Meeting
of the Florida Philosophical Association, 2009

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By way of introduction, let me assure you that I will not be speaking this evening of out of body experiences, states of semi-consciousness, reincarnation, or teletransportation. Nor will I touch on, except indirectly, multiple personality disorder or split-brain phenomena. Now that you are suitably sated and liquored up, these may strike you as just the sort of topics fitting the occasion. I am sorry to disappoint you. I intend to speak of what it means to retain one's identity when one is away from the source of that identity. I mean this in a fairly mundane sense. I should also say that little in what follows is terribly original to me. I shall make full use of the wisdom of Greater Minds Than My Own.

We are all familiar with the idea that identity is a "sameness" relation. To discuss personal identity is to discuss the status of being the same as, or equivalent to, some person or self. One traditional view is that personal identity is a function of the properties that make reidentification across time possible, and that make a person numerically identical at any point in time. Reidentification typically is a matter of bodily continuity or psychological continuity, or both. Proponents of psychological continuity accounts claim that the identity of persons consists in relational associations among temporally distinct stages of the person's consciousness. These stages are unified most readily by memory, which tethers the person in the present to events and experiences in a person's past, and by anticipation of future experiences and actions that will count as those of the same person. The belief I have of being the person to whom certain properties can be attributed across time is grounded in the reflexive recognition of being the subject of memories to whom those properties refer.

But certain aspects of a person's identity cannot be established by memory alone. Some elements of identity call for ongoing support from an array of exogenous environmental phenomena. Social and group identities are notable in this respect, and as we shall see it is identity of this sort that concerns me this evening. In addition, certain questions about a person's identity aren't about numeric reidentification. Or rather, they aren't settled by verification of an identity-relation between time-slices of a person since their concerns run deeper. More often than not, what

matters to us where the question of identity arises is not that persons exist as temporally discrete entities that can be reidentified as numerically equivalent over time, nor identity as the relation in which a thing stands to itself alone. Rather, the issues that attract our attention to questions of identity in the first place are, more often than not, issues about the "relation that holds between a *person* and *particular actions*, *experience*s, *or characteristics* that are hers."[1] These are the sort of identity issues that concern me this evening. The point is that we take a distinctive interest in *our* identity because our lives (our "lived experiences") are *invested* in the memories, beliefs, values, embodiment, projects, and relationships that make up our own lives rather than the others. Such phenomena are linked to what Marya Schechtman labels the "four features" of life. These features are our survival, the special concern we have for our history and the future experiences we anticipate, the responsibility we bear for our own choices and actions, and our desire to be treated as the appropriate subject of compensation for sacrifices we have made. We care about these features because they are closely wedded to our identity as "subjects with agency, autonomy, and inner lives."[2]

So where our concern is our identity as "subjects with agency, autonomy, and inner lives," the primary end of an account of personal identity is to discover what phenomena constitute the arrangement of defining features that make a person who she is and that contribute to the person's self-understanding. We could say that my concern is with the identity of *the self that is a unified agent*. In this respect, my account shares conceptual space with the account of identity advanced by Christine Korsgaard, and more recently by Jeanette Kennett and Steve Matthews.[3] My position is that *the self as unified agent* is constituted out of beliefs, preferences, and values, dispositions of temperament, as well as relationships, social roles, embodiment and memory—that are primary to the person's identity as an agent.[4] Primacy is marked by the fact that, whichever metaphysical account of the self is offered—one that emphasizes psychological connectedness or one that emphasizes bodily continuity, for example—and whatever questions about the self we wish to pose—questions about survival, or about deservedness for compensation or retribution, for instance—*these characteristics are needed if the subject is to be her own agent*.

The pragmatic necessity of unified agency should be obvious. Persons must be able "coordinate and integrate conscious activities" if they are to succeed in doing anything at all.[5] They must be capable of deliberating about and resolving conflict among the contents of their motivational psychology at a time, and as being able to see through to fruition their longer-term plans and projects. But it seems that if this sort of activity is to get off the ground, it must be accompanied by a *self-conception* that includes beliefs about one's unified agency. I am shifting the focus of discussion slightly. The components that make up the person's *self* frame the background against which her *self-conception* is drawn and (if we subscribe to what are called narrative accounts of

selfhood) provide the context in which her experiences are fashioned into an interconnected story that define the individual's representation of herself. The term *self-conception* refers to the subjective, reflexive concept a person has, consisting of beliefs about (for example) her cognitive states, her emotional disposition, her moral virtue, her body, her life plans, commitments, values, social roles, and so on. Obviously a self-conception draws on non-cognitive phenomena as well. Conative tendencies and proprioceptive, kinesthetic, and somatic awareness all contribute to the generation of a sense of self. But a conception of self is distinctly cognitive; it expresses a concept or idea. The prospect of survival, concerns about compensation and responsibility, matters of self-interest, and the quality of personal relationships have a special claim on a person's attention—they have particular normative force or resonance—because a person views herself as a unified agent, that is as someone who has lived a particular life, who has made choices, who has planned and executed actions, has relationships over time, and has invested talent and energy in much of these and can make some sense of these.

So far I have noted why a particular sense of self is important from the perspective of the subject. But second-personal concerns generate an interest in self-identity as well. It is a matter of first-personal *and* second-personal concern that we be able to present ourselves as partners in social exchange with others. Self-identity is foundational for interacting with others in ways that gives expression to our values and concerns. Insofar as the beliefs that constitute a self-conception reflect the relevance a person perceives himself to have in light of the varied roles he occupies or groups of which he is a member—the social roles and collective associations that inform the person's identity and the status accorded these roles in the context of social interaction—a person's self-concept is shaped by the way he is categorized and dealt with by others.[6] The point is that, once fashioned, the person's self-conception (as a unified agent) guides practical deliberation, acts as the anchor for her general ends and values, frames motives for action and the person's manner of presentation, influences public transactions (notably, the manner in which a person is classified and treated), and assumes a managerial role in stressful circumstances.

These characteristics essential to agency have a source. When I speak of the *source* of my identity as a unified agent, I am thinking of whatever gives rise to and corroborates my identity—what holds it up, so to speak. More precisely, I am thinking of whatever gives rise to and corroborates my self-identity or self-conception—my sense of who I am. A person's self-conception arises largely out of the active role the person takes in monitoring and interpreting the salience of the phenomena that are central to her identity in the manner I have described. This active engagement is the immediate source of a person's self-conception. But developing and sustaining a sense of oneself relies on a range of environmental events. This is especially true when

what are at stake are aspects of the person's identity that are integral to the person's *self-conception as a unified agent and occupant of a social group*.

Yes, things have gotten more tangled. (Just have another drink, and the details will cease to trouble you.) We have reached the payoff, the dénoument, the Big Question: What happens where a person's self-conception as a unified agent and occupant of a social group, the practices that support this self-conception and the self-regarding attitudes it gives rise to, and the person's ability to carry on in the guise of this self-conception in a way that makes sense to her—what happens when all of this is disrupted because the person is somehow *absent from the source of her being*? When the source of who she is, and of how she understands her motives for action, are in absentia? What could it mean to *be in absentia*?

To address this, I am going to focus on an array of beliefs, proattitudes, and behaviors that I had come to accept as natural and desirable aspects of my identity. Without these, a good portion of my weekend social activity made little sense to me. In this respect, these components of my self-concept are key to my status as an agent, albeit for an admittedly circumscribed range of activities. The identity of which I speak is my identity as a Gator. I will call this my "Gator-being."

Now, what does it mean to be a Gator, and to conceive of one's identity in these terms? And, *what is it like for a Gator* to be a Gator? Certain obvious facts spring to mind. To be a Gator is to be *not*-Gator-bait. To be a Gator is to bleed orange and blue. To be a Gator is to be part of the Gator Nation. What lends Gator-being its crucial element of my self-conception as an agent is the tenacity it has on reflexive thoughts and the fact that it frames my deliberations about what to do. Just a few weekends ago, in fact, my Gator-being was threatened.[7] I had to deal with a rather inept handyman who interrupted me as I was watching the fourth quarter of the Gator-Mississippi game, and who, despite my pointed attention in the direction of the television set, just stayed planted beside it, chatting away, until I was forced to drag my attention to his interest in repairing the broken shower door in the master bedroom. Now, if this man had been a Gator—if I had been in Gator country, or if my Gator-being had been given the notice it needed and was due—well, I wouldn't have a paper to present to you this evening.

The sorry fact is that one cannot, save Herculean effort, be a Gator in absentia from all that sustains one's identity. Social identity calls for recognition. It would be possible to be a Gator in territory that is clearly that of The Enemy—say, in Seminole or Bulldog terrain. There, at least, one knows what one is by contrast to what one clearly is not. It is harder to be oneself and to know how to proceed in a place that fails to recognize the import of one's identity at all. Davis, California is such a place. Few people know what a Gator is and those who know do not care. It is not enough that I stand up and declare, as I did to a class of undergraduates this fall, "I AM SOMEBODY. I AM A GATOR." My Gator-being is invisible to them.

I have done what I can to sustain my Gator-being in absentia, but this is not a project I can complete is isolation. David (Copp) and I gather (if two people can be said to "gather") in front of the television on Gator gamedays and cheer the team. I sport my Florida Gator Crocs. But it is clear that my identity is slipping away. Continuity of identity could not be preserved in this case by strategems that merely transfer my allegiance. It's not that I see myself as a fan of college football full-stop, or that my self-identity is invested in the collegiate team of the university of which I happen to be a member. Just the opposite. It is the fact that one is a Gator that makes college sport a part of one's life. Being an Aggie is not just an impoverished substitute. It is no substitute at all. Why is this? The enthusiasm for Aggie sports is muted on the Davis campus and in the community, to be sure. That may be due to the fact that the mascot is a cow, and cows, despite all their appeal, lack the fire and fear a gator produces. Who runs from cows?

So you see the problem. I am beginning to mistrust my sense of who I am. Should I join the other Davisites on Saturday at the Farmers' Market? Should I feign indifference to the SEC? Should I conclude that Gator-being is ephemeral nonsense, something I will eventually outgrow? Probably I should do that. But I don't want to. I am not willing to trade authenticity for membership in a community that picks a cow as a mascot. I want to make sense of my odd desire to arrange my time on a beautiful Saturday afternoon around the schedule of a bunch of oversized college kids and their grossly overpaid coaches. I want to feel at home in my Gator-Croc shoes, cheering with my Gator husband and Gator cats.

As I look around me, I see Gators. It is a happy sight. I will close with some Gator philosophy, in haiku:

To be as Gator
Dasein essence in the Swamp
I am not a cow.

Thank you, good night, and GO GATORS!

Notes

[1] Marya Schechtman, *The Constitution of Selves* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1996) 77 (emphasis original). Concerns about the metaphysics of identity and about reidentification might "define the limits within which more nuanced questions [of moral responsibility, ownership of actions, and so forth] are appropriate." Marya Schechtman, "Staying Alive: Personal continuation and a life worth having," in Kim Atkins and Catriona Mackenzie, eds., *Practical Identity and Narrative Agency* (New York: Routledge, 2008) 37.

[2] Schechtman, *The Constitution of Selves*, 68.

[3] Christine Korsgaard, "Personal Identity and the Unity of Agency: A Kantian Response to Parfit," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 18.2 (1989): 109-123. Reprinted in Daniel Kolak and Raymond Martin, eds., *Self & Identity: Contemporary Philosophical Issues* (New York: Macmillan, 1991) 323-338. All references are to that text.

[4] See Amélie O. Rorty and David Wong, "Aspects of Identity and Agency," in Owen Flanagan and Amélie Rorty, eds., *Identity, Character, and Morality: Essays in Moral Psychology* (Cambridge, Mass.: Bradford Books, MIT Press, 1990) 19-36.

[5] Christine Korsgaard, "Personal Identity and the Unity of Agency: A Kantian Response to Parfit," 329.

[6] As Sheldon Stryker and Peter Burke note, "It may be that each basis of identity has stronger or weaker ties to various psychological outcomes. A principal outcome of category-based identities, for example, may be self-esteem or the lack thereof, depending on whether the category is valued positively or negatively by the person or by others in the person's environment." Stryker and Burke, "The Past, Present, and Future of an Identity Theory," *Social Psychology Quarterly* 63.4 (Dec. 2000): 284-297. The quote appears on p. 293.

[7] In previous work I have claimed that centrality to a person's self is established by the fact that a person will regard herself as radically changed if a trait is lost or strongly modified. I have come to believe that this addition merges the notion of the self with that of self-conception in a way that is unhelpful. Among those who do subscribe to this view are Harry Frankfurt and Jan Bransen. See Harry Frankfurt, *Necessity, Volition, and Love* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999). A recent statement of Bransen's position is put forward in "Personal Identity Management," in Catriona Mackenzie and Kim Atkins, eds., *Practical Identity and Narrative Agency* (New York: Routledge, 2007).