

Identity: Being-in-the-world and Becoming

“As the planks of Theseus’ ship needed repair, it was replaced part by part, up to a point where not a single part from the original ship remained in it, anymore. Is it then still the same ship? If the discarded parts were used to build another ship, which of the two, if either, is the real Ship of Theseus?”

This statement of the famous paradox of identity over time, noted by the ancient essayist Plutarch (45-120 CE), and developed by Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679 CE), forms the epilogue of the film *The Ship of Theseus* (2013). The paradox challenges us to think about what anchors the identity of a human being insofar as the film is about human beings, although the ship is given as metaphor for a person in the epilogue. The film tells us the stories of three people, with the link between them revealed only at the end. The three stories are of Aliya, a blind photographer; Maitreya, a Jain monk; and Navin, a stockbroker, all based in India.

We will find our way through the puzzle of identity by first acquainting ourselves with these stories. We will then discuss the problem of bodily identity as posed in the analytical tradition of philosophy (Williams 1973) in search of an objective answer to: “what matters in identity?” and consider criticisms internal to this tradition (Wilkes 1988). We will then propose an alternative conception of bodily being from the Continental tradition of philosophy (Merleau-Ponty 1945/1962; Beauvoir 1952/1989) and discuss its deployment by contemporary feminist philosophers to explicate a kind of female bodily identity (Young 2005; Alcoff 2006). The Continental tradition takes up identity often in terms of what being-in-the-world means. With reference to the stories, we will thus ask the question: If *lived body* is the pivot of identity, then which changes can be sustained without a threat to a person’s identity?

1. Three Stories

The first story is of Aliya, who takes up photography after losing her eyes to a cornea infection. She uses sound to guide her to the subject of her photographs and a hand-held scanner that “speaks” out the colour of the object it scans. Curtains are bright orange and yellow, the sari blouse of an aunt she playfully touches with the scanner is red. Orlando, her partner, sometimes narrates what’s in the picture she has taken. Together they edit the photos. Sometimes there are arguments. She complains, “I have to draw opinion and assurance about my own art from what others say.” She does not, however, see lack of vision as a limitation of her art.

After a corneal transplant, Aliya’s vision is restored. One might have expected her to become an even better photographer, but that is not what happens; in fact, her photographs become non-descript. She no longer captures the essence of her subjects. To become again the photographer she once was, she resorts to blindfolding and prefers the results of her resumed, blind artistry. She has become herself again.

The second story of Maitreya, a Jain¹ monk waging a court case against experimentation on animals, takes us to the busy corridors of a High Court with ceaseless footfall around a centipede trying to avoid being crushed under heavy boots. Maitreya comes to its rescue offering it safe transport atop court papers, out of the traffic of booted feet, on to the safety of a green leaf where it can continue its life.

Maitreya is diagnosed with liver cirrhosis and his life will be in danger if he does not accept a liver transplant. His circumstance means he must give up his fundamental guiding principle of compassion and consume medicines whose production has involved the “torture” of animals. Since all the medicines prescribed to him are from companies that have not pledged to end animal testing and thus torture, he refuses treatment. His condition worsens

¹ Jains are followers of the religious creed of Lord Mahavira (500 BCE). They are against gratuitously causing suffering to animals. Amongst their other precepts is the idea of respecting the many-sidedness of truth.

dramatically and in the face of death, despite his heroic resolve to live a life of integrity, his body pulls him back from the ultimate sacrifice. He finally agrees to get the transplant.

The third story is of Navin, a stockbroker and a recipient of a kidney transplant who accidentally accosts Shankar, a needy worker, from whom a kidney has been stolen. After an initial panic, Navin is relieved quickly to find out that his kidney is not the stolen one, but drawn into the intriguing drama of illegal kidney transplants, he resolves compassionately to help the poor man find the thief of his kidney. The investigation takes Navin to the house of an old man in Stockholm. When the truth is placed before this old man that he is the recipient of Shankar's stolen kidney, he pleads: "Maybe my family was protecting me emotionally by not telling me it was a stolen kidney. Maybe the doctors felt they will lose a client. But what could I have done even if they told me the kidney was stolen from somebody?" Navin wants the old man to return Shankar's kidney for the sake of justice, but the old man uses money to buy his way out. Shankar agrees to accept the money he is offered as an out of court compensation because he does not want to be caught in court battles. Navin argues on the point of principle, saying, "We'll get your kidney back... We'll get justice." Cramped within the constricting walls of a slum, Shankar cries: "What will I do with the kidney? The [black] market rate for kidney is 30,000. He has given me 650,000... Leave it. I am getting fixed for a monthly payment. Why are you messing it up?"

This story illustrates the gap between two ideas of integrity. Integrity means one thing to Navin, a stockbroker who can easily make money and can afford to not compromise his idea of justice narrowly conceived as seeking compensation for a wrong. We might wonder how Navin can possibly uphold justice when trading with companies who are blatantly unjust. Indeed, his socialist grandmother in the film initially chides him for his choice of career as a stockbroker. Given his privileged background and his apolitical experience of dealing with power structures, his idea of integrity is to stake all to get back the kidney, so he

is unable to sympathise with the pragmatic choice Shankar makes. Had the kidney been actually sold in a legal transaction, Navin would not have seen any fault in it. The taking of the kidney without consent makes it unjust for him. Integrity for Shankar, who lives a precarious existence, is not tied to Navin's idea of seeking justice, a path too onerous for him. If personal integrity means being true to oneself, then from Navin's privileged point of view, Shankar's integrity has been compromised. From the point of view of Shankar's lived reality, his choice is the rational one, based on possibilities realistically open to him. In Maitreya's story, legal cases get dragged in courts and wrongdoers are not brought to justice. For Shankar, seeking undeliverable "justice" is pointless. Instead of committing to a fruitless exhausting court battle, Shankar chooses to lead the remainder of his incapacitated life with some financial security. His wholeness as a human being, his identity, is threatened no matter what he chooses. In accepting out of court compensation from the person responsible for the theft of his kidney, Shankar makes the more liveable choice.

At the end of the film we learn that the three protagonists, Aliya, Maitreya and Navin, are linked to each other through the body of one donor, a cave explorer. They belong to the lucky set of eight people of different ages, ethnicities, and genders, each having received a body part from one man who died from a head injury whilst on a cave exploration.²

2. Personal Identity and Bodily Identity

In light of the trajectory of the film, then, we may ask a few questions about the nature of the identity of a person. If body parts change, is it the same body? And if it is not the same body, can it be the same person? Aliya's life is changed remarkably when she loses her sight. We can wonder whether Aliya remains the same person through her many bodily transformations. Perhaps Aliya becomes a different person when she loses her sight. When

² A reference to Plato's allegory of the cave with ignorant prisoners taking illusion for reality is unmissable in this last scene when the protagonists learn the truth about the sole donor.

she regains her sight, does she return to being the same person she was before going blind, or does she become yet another new person? Is Aliya, the blind photographer who uses a hand-held scanner to “see” colour, the same as Aliya after her vision is restored? One way to answer the question is to say that since we are describing the change as it has happened to Aliya, it follows that Aliya is the same person to whom these remarkable transformations occurred. Additionally, because Aliya remembers how she was before the change and looks back at the photography as *her* photography, it can be argued that she must remain the same person. We might ask, however, “does she understand herself as the same self?”

Maitreya’s story illuminates questions about what is essential to identity in normative terms. Is Maitreya still the same Jain monk who once dedicated his life to protecting animals from suffering *after* he has become a beneficiary of violence against animals by accepting medical treatment? At the end of the film we see him dressed in ordinary clothes and not the garb of a Jain mendicant, indicating that he thinks the answer to the question is no.

Navin’s story is about ownership and trade of one’s body parts. If we conceive of a person’s identity in a way that the body is merely a possession, then it appears that like other things we “own,” the parts of a body can be traded without detriment to identity. This conception of identity has specific application in cases where the sale is not of a body part but of the *use* of parts of the body.

Analytical philosophers after John Locke have also raised and answered the question of identity of persons but instead in terms of reach of memory, not parts and wholes. Locke defined a person as “a thinking intelligent being, that has reason and reflection, and can consider itself as itself, the same thinking thing, in different times and places.”³ Locke’s view

³ Locke distinguishes between the identity of substance, of man and of person. Person for him is a forensic term. ‘Wherever a man finds what he calls himself, there, I think, another may say is the same person. It is a forensic term, appropriating actions and their merit; and so belongs only to intelligent agents, capable of a law, and happiness, and misery. This personality extends itself beyond present existence to what is past, only by consciousness, whereby it becomes concerned and accountable; owns and imputes to itself past actions, just upon the same ground and for the same reason as it does the present.’ (Locke 1689)

is taken as providing the “memory criterion” of identity.⁴ When contemplating an imagined soul-swap between a cobbler and a prince, Locke allows that the body plays a role in the identity of the resultant *man*, but not in the identity of the resultant *person*.

Other philosophers have challenged the description of what occurs when a radical, life-altering change happens. They suggest that it is not memory or consciousness that carries identity with it; rather, memory along with the sameness of the body determines a person’s identity in this view. Our beliefs about what makes a person the same over time are tested when extreme changes happen to a person’s body-mind complex. Wilkes (1988) discusses in detail the case of multiple personalities of Miss Beauchamp and concludes, “Multiple personality patients present us with situations in which all the facts are in....And here it appears that we have no clear consensus about what to say: the concept of a person fails to cope under this particular strain” (Wilkes 1988: 128). She shows that the ideas of personal identity either as “one body = one person” or as “one mind = one person” are both put under strain by the case. The psychiatrist treating the patient was able to empathise with the alternative personalities presented to him thus supporting the claim in favour of a plurality of persons rather than a singularity, but he was still tasked with identifying *the* real Miss Beauchamp, the one he must reach and help.⁵

Medical knowledge of complex brain conditions has also raised questions about identity. For instance, experiments on an epileptic patient with a bisected brain had exposed the possibility of two centres of consciousness in one body. In the experimental set up, the left hand literally did not know what the right hand was doing (Vesey 1977). Whilst a normally cognitively unified person would be expected to behave in a coordinated fashion as

⁴ See Vesey (1977) for summaries of various positions.

⁵ His views, however, “were to some extent determined by what he thought a young lady at the turn of the century *ought* to be like” (Wilkes 1988: 125). The upshot of considering such cases is that they illuminate the malleability of our concept of personal identity and show it to be an ethical, political, and cultural matter, not simply a matter of semantics or logic.

one organism directed towards its goal, the epileptic patient appeared to be behaving as two people in one body, often in conflict with each other.

Locke's "memory criterion" of identity was challenged in the 20th century by Bernard Williams, who presented an alternative way of describing what may happen in imagined cases. Consider, for example, if an emperor wakes up with the memories of a peasant and the peasant wakes up with the memories of the emperor after a magician's miraculously engineered swap. Using Locke's memory criterion the person goes where the memory goes. In Williams's alternative description, which holds that bodily identity is necessary for personal identity, the person stays where the body stays. Lockeans will say that the peasant has woken in the emperor's body and the emperor has woken in the peasant's body. But Williams questions the coherence of the assumption that makes the story of the swap plausible, the assumption that we are able to "distinguish a man's personality from his body." He argues that the voice, facial features and comportment expressive of a personality are bodily constrained:

However much the emperor's past the sometime peasant now claimed to remember, the trick would not have succeeded if he could not satisfy the simpler requirement of being the same *sort* of person as the sometime emperor. Could he do this, if he could not smile royally? Still less, could he be the same person, if he could not smile the characteristic smile of the emperor?⁶

It may be the case that our identity is based on our past as well as what might be reasonable to hope for or fear in our future. As we grow, no less magical than the results of a conjuror's tricks, our bodily changes may leave one questioning whether one is the same person. For stability and reliability it is tempting to fall back on Locke's conception of

⁶ 'Personal Identity and Individuation' in Williams, B. (1973), p.12.

continuity of consciousness (one's self-knowledge) as making one the same person over the course of one's life. Nonetheless, perspectives change, too, as one grows and develops in a bodily way. By perspective I mean not ideas, beliefs and values, but instead a more basic "result of perception." Consider the ordinary experience of meeting an older cousin after a very long time, someone not seen since childhood. This cousin suddenly does not appear as big as remembered. The world appears different from a 5 ft 3 inches height than it does from a 3 ft 5 inches height. Likewise, objects a person had found unwieldy as a child and was warned to avoid handling, e.g. a hammer, are easy to use as a young adult. With a change in perspective on the world, new possibilities for action arise.

3. Being-in-the-world and Body Schema

We have briefly noted that posing the problem of identity of persons as if it were a complex case of identity of a composite object—body plus memories—leads to problems in the application of the concept of identity. This is indicated by Wilkes's discussion of multiple personalities and by the thought-experiment of the peasant and emperor. In both cases it is difficult to decide who the "real" Miss Beauchamp or "real" emperor is. A rather more convincing account of the identity of human beings is presented in another Western tradition of philosophy, sometimes described as the "Continental" tradition mainly due to the geographical location (for example, France, Germany, Italy) of the philosophers who do philosophy in this way. Common questions about human identity are conceptualized in radically different ways in this tradition.

In the Continental tradition, a decisive turn is made in answering questions about the ontological status of human being, by which we mean questions about the status of *being* of homo sapiens. In this tradition, the identity of human beings pivots around bodily being, and bodily being is always enmeshed in the space of action broadly understood as including expression and communication. The human being is not only a sentient being but always an

acting being. The clearest statement of the continental tradition of conceptualising the body is by Merleau-Ponty. He writes, “the body is the vehicle of being in the world, and having a body is, for a living creature, to be involved in a definite environment, to identify oneself with certain projects and to be continually committed to them.”⁷ Merleau-Ponty posits being-in-the-world as a “pre-objective view.” What this means is that first, our consciousness is not separable from our bodies and it is not already given, as it were, prior to the world of which it is a part. Instead, consciousness gets constituted through our engagement with the world. Second, when we step back from this immersion in the world to reflect on the relation between the body and the world, we may be unable to maintain our grip on the world. Habitual, everyday being-in-the-world is not an *act* of consciousness; rather, being-in-the-world is what can “affect the union of the ‘psychic’ and the ‘physiological.’”⁸

A useful concept deployed to explain the body’s being-in-the-world is that of “body schema” (not to be confused with body image). Body schema is my precognitive familiarity with my lived body. My body schema gives me the know-how of comportment in the world. For example, my body schema tells me how big a puddle I can jump, how heavy a suitcase I can lift, whether in a particular situation I can successfully suppress a surge of anger, or how reliably I can contain a burst of laughter. The “undivided possession” of the body is provided by the *body schema*, which is nonetheless *dynamic*, and means that “my body appears to me as an attitude directed towards certain existing or possible task.”⁹ When I lift up my foot to climb a step, my body is already attuned to exert itself with the necessary muscle contraction to complete the task. As I get older (or when I am ill) my ability to complete the same task unreflectively may be impeded. Over time, my body schema has to dynamically adapt itself to my new frailty. We can experience the adaptability of the body schema when we are ill or

⁷ *Phenomenology of Perception*, p.94.

⁸ *Ibid.* p. 92.

⁹ *Ibid.* p.115.

have an injury. With a twisted ankle, for instance, I have to recalibrate the exertion with which I normally climb steps, because my body schema is disturbed.

4. Kinds of Bodily Identity

Simone De Beauvoir, a central 20th-century Continental feminist philosopher, writes that “to be present in the world implies strictly that there exists a body which is at once a material thing in the world and a point of view towards the world.”¹⁰ Human beings have a point of view on the world, which is their space of action. That is, a point of view is always from a location, always with limits, and within potentially shifting horizons. When the body is oriented towards a world of manipulatable objects in a purposive way it has a comportment, a readiness to act (a motor intentionality). Alternatively, when the body is reduced to a mere object, its comportment is altered, its motor intentionality is inhibited.

Iris Marion Young juxtaposes Merleau-Ponty with Beauvoir, developing a picture of female body comportment. She shows that the possibilities for women are limited not by the type of body per se, but by the use to which the body is put.¹¹ From reported observations of how young girls use their bodies to throw a ball with how young boys use the full strength of their bodies, Young argues that girls are hampered by the lack of trust in the abilities of their bodies. Fear of failure also makes girls grow up with an “inhibited intentionality.” They do not use the full force of their strength to project themselves in the world. They learn to be defensive out of fear of being hurt, because they are socialised into believing that they are fragile. She concludes: “Women often approach a physical engagement with things with timidity, uncertainty, and hesitancy. Typically, we lack an entire trust in our bodies to carry

¹⁰ *The Second Sex*, p. 39

¹¹ See ‘Throwing like a girl’, originally published in 1980 and reprinted in Young (2005) *On Female Body Experience*, pp. 27-45.

us to our aims.”¹² What is typical is not true of all. With some help from others, people can devise ways of being-in-the-world that transcend the given.

In the film, we see that the open possibilities of self-realization, the flourishing of her being-in-the-world, are not limited by Aliya’s blindness. Her body schema is adapted to capture the essence of subjects she chooses to photograph. It is in fact the regaining of sight that disorients her and distorts the familiar settings of her horizon to the extent that she is unable to practice her art. Moreover, as a blind woman, Aliya does not see the gaze that sees her. She is not consumed or inhibited by herself *being seen*, which is liberating in her case. In a different case, women who take up the hijab sometimes describe the power to see without being seen as liberating.¹³ We should not that Aliya is from a privileged background, which might contribute to boosting her confidence in her professional expertise despite her perceived “limitation” of lack of vision. In materially impoverished social environments, blind girls live in fear of being attacked. Gendered horizons are modulated by class. Some identities readily available for rich girls are out of reach for the poor. Social and economic norms limit girls and women in different ways and depending upon their lived experience in specific locations, women negotiate their identities in different ways too.¹⁴

Philosopher Linda Alcoff (2006) carefully explains that a horizon “affects how one experiences the world and one’s perceptions and interpretations. Horizons are open-ended, in constant motion, and aspects of our horizon are inevitably group related or shared amongst members of a social identity... we need to understand the situatedness of horizons as a material and embodied situatedness, and not simply mentally perspectival or ideological.”¹⁵ To analyse social identity, Alcoff argues, we must pay attention to the role of the body and of

¹³ See Dhanda (2008b) ‘What does the hatred/fear of the veil hide?’

¹⁴ Dhanda (2008) shows how caste identity is negotiated when the ex-untouchable acquires the political self-identity of a Dalit (the crushed or broken).

¹⁵ *Visible Identities*, p. 102.

the body's "visible identity." Embodied situatedness is a useful idea to understand the identity choices of Aliya and Maitreya.

Our bodily identity is subject to all kinds of social normalization. Kathleen Lennon gives examples of such normalization: "Hair straightening, blue tinted contact lenses, surgical reconstruction of noses and lips, are practices in which the material shapes of our bodies are disciplined to correspond to a social ideal, reflecting the privileged position which certain kinds of, usually, white, always able, bodies occupy."¹⁶ However, note that crafting one's body may also be rebellion against the given-ness of the so-called "natural." Donna Haraway presciently challenged the "human vs animal" and the "animal vs machine" binaries three decades ago with her "manifesto for cyborgs." Aliya, as the blind photographer, uses a hand-held machine to call out the colors of objects that she cannot see, and her camera announces necessary information enabling her to capture "the essence of things." Her bodily being can be seen as a cyborg. The totality of her being includes the machines she relies on to practice her art, and her art is what makes her who she is.

5. Conclusion

A range of factors matter when addressing the puzzles of identity. We have to decide how to lead our lives: which paths to take, which decision to make, and how to live with our chosen identity.. Or we must abandon the path hitherto taken in favour of a new identity. Our knowledge of our situation is bound up with our perception of the possibilities of action open to us.

Maitreya's perception changes when he is in the near-death situation. His pre-objective beliefs, encapsulated in his being-in-the-world, are shaken when he slips into a delirium induced by his illness. He becomes unsure about what fate awaits him after death. At this crucial juncture, when asked by a devotee to answer if there is a soul, all he can utter

¹⁶ Kathleen Lennon 2014

is “don’t know.” Aliya’s story shows us that one’s way of being-in-the-world is necessarily immersed in and tied to one’s activities. She acquires an outsider’s view of herself as a blind photographer when she regains her vision, but then, she starts *thinking* about how she is doing photography instead of just doing it. Her previous habituated being as a blind photographer is disturbed. What restores balance is regaining her grip on herself, and finally, letting go even of the self-identity of a photographer. Navin’s story shows that living with integrity, an important ingredient of personal identity as wholeness, has different meanings to different people. His story is a comment on the gulf between the middle-class do-gooder and poor man he wants to help when it comes to valuing bodily integrity. The best way to live with integrity is linked to available choices and to horizons within which these choices take shape.

The limitation of horizons is evident in the typical lives of girls and women socialized in patriarchal society to lack confidence in their lived body. Philosophical discussions of personal identity in the analytical tradition, fuelled by imaginary cases of body/memory swaps tend not to pay attention to the very real constraints of embodiment in the world we inhabit. A corrective is offered by focus on the lived body developed in the Continental tradition, which feminist philosophers have productively deployed to throw light on the constitution of bodily identity.

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