

Diversifying Syllabi 2016 Text Summary and Teaching Tips

SECTION ONE:

Article/Essay Title: “Being Oneself” (Chapter 2 of *The Importance of How We See Ourselves: Self-Identity and Responsible Agency*)

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Readability: Difficult

Thesis:

To be oneself, one must maintain a stable, distinctive self-conception that allows one to be accountable to others. One can fail to be oneself in ways that do not threaten the integrity of the self or an agent’s accountability, but which still damage the integrity of one’s self-conception.

Key Definitions:

self: “a distinct, active subject of experience and of normative agency”

authenticity: “an agent’s actions are regarded as authentic expressions of his will (or expressions of his authentic will) when they express what is most meaningful to the agent and most evocative of his deeply held concerns”

self-denial: “an attempt to preserve some status one believes one has or sincerely wishes oneself to have”

self-deception: a systematic mischaracterization of some element of one’s life motivated by prior commitment to particular self-image, and which affects both one’s beliefs and actions

Brief Summary:

Section 1: The Self

why we need a conception of the state of being oneself

- to sustain a distinctive identity
- to make sense of selves as responsible agents
- to respond to others’ expectations

characteristics of being oneself

- stable and coherent core
- capable of being accountable to others
- clear reflective understanding of constitutive features of one’s identity
- self-concept can more or less faithfully represent it

identity

- aspects of self that one is completely unwilling to change for subjective reasons
- shaped by roles, relationships
- includes distinct volitional character

case of Levi being not himself

- normally sensible about diet, polite dinner companion
- incident where ate gluttonously and stole food from dinner companions
- says he can't recognize himself in his actions
- not himself, so possibly not responsible for actions
- not suffering from pathologies such as addiction, hypnosis, multiple personality disorder

Section 2: Authenticity

authenticity as self-governance

- whole-hearted endorsement of and identification with one's actions
- "a person is himself when his behavior is a manifestation of values, principles, beliefs and desires that he has authenticated"

authenticity as honesty

- acknowledge features of self once recognize them
- takes responsibility for faults
- "Authenticity consists in truthfulness toward oneself and about oneself, in word and in deed."

Section 3 – Inauthenticity

case of Anatole Broyard

- black man who 'passed' as white for his career as a writer
- cut ties with parents, siblings, hid black identity from children

forgetting oneself

- 'passing' as attempt to deny key element of identity, to forget oneself
- not necessarily destruction of self-concept, but concealing it
- need not involve self-deception (e.g. Broyard's case)
- can be empowering for marginalized individuals (e.g. George Eliot)
- but attempts to forget oneself are often tragic because they often fail
- may impede practical ability to manage life (Broyard's failure to write novel)

responsibility for forgetting oneself

- not necessarily sole responsibility of individual
- in Broyard's case, social forces also responsible

case of Auschwitz

- Auschwitz workers pictured in leisurely, playful pursuits
- incongruous with daily supervision of mass murder

self-denial

- an attempt to preserve some status one believes one has or sincerely wishes oneself to have

- may be psychologically adaptive strategy to managing life
- but still responsible for denial, as long as can exercise self-governance (Auschwitz workers were responsible)

Section 4 – Self-Deception

self-deception

- “the consistent description of an inconsistent stretch of one’s mental life and conduct”
- affects both beliefs and actions
- motivated by prior commitment to particular self-image
- can mislead person about own motives, threatens accountability

paradoxical nature of self-deception

- “requires that one both know something and simultaneously prevent oneself from knowing it”
- “rests on the apparently illogical assumption that one can deliberately misrepresent to oneself one’s own reasons for action and belief”

ways out of the paradox

- deny conscious intentionality of deception
- deny the unity of the self
- characterize deception as purposive, but not intentional

Section 5 – Self-Deception and Rationality

self-deception and rationality

- self-deception can be partially rational, adaptive, empowering
- but self-deception endangers practical agency
- “self-deceivers attempt to tailor their beliefs to fit their desires, rather than orient their desires and beliefs to the world, the direction of fit that signals rationality”
- self-deceivers deny both evidence against desired belief and that self-deceiving

self-deception as euphemism

- a mere pretense of believing
- motive is not to believe what is false, but to make world fit preferences
- agents are still accountable on this understanding of self-deception

SECTION TWO: to be completed by note taker during discussion

Possible Applications:

- Unit or class on Authenticity
- Unit or class on Personal Responsibility
- Metaphysics class where you discuss personal identity
- Discussions of Autonomy
- Discussion on self-deception
- Could be useful in a discussion about moral responsibility for acts we don't identify with

Could also be used in a philosophy of race class or Philosophy of gender class:

- Racial identification or gender identification and their role in creating an authentic self.

Complementary Texts/Resources:

Calhoun, Cheshire. 1995. "Standing for Something." *Journal of Philosophy* 92 (5): 235–60.

FRANKFURT, HARRY G. 1971. "Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person." *Journal of Philosophy* 68: 5–20.

Korsgaard, Christine M. 2009. *Self-Constitution: Agency, Identity, and Integrity*. Oxford Univ Pr.

<http://search.proquest.com/philosophersindex/docview/743003320/3D21312D2F8A40A2PQ/1>.

MOODY-ADAMS, Michele. 1990. *On the Old Saw That Character Is Destiny IN Identity, Character, and Morality: Essays in Moral Psychology*. MIT Pr.

<http://search.proquest.com/philosophersindex/docview/42774196/A0709D49B1764A18PQ/1>.

Paul, L. A. 2015. "What You Can't Expect When You're Expecting." *Res Philosophica* 92 (2): 149–70.

Sartre, Jean-Paul, and Hazel Estella Barnes. 2001. *Being and Nothingness: An Essay in Phenomenological Ontology*. Special abridged ed. New York: Citadel Press.

Taylor, Charles. 1991. *The Ethics of Authenticity*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.

Williams, Bernard Arthur Owen. 1985. *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.

Zimbardo, Philip G. 2004. "A Situationist Perspective on the Psychology of Evil: Understanding How Good People Are Transformed into Perpetrators." In *The Social Psychology of Good and Evil*, 21–50. New York, NY, US: Guilford Press.

Possible Class Activities:

- Have student brainstorm examples of when they weren't being themselves
- Ask them what values they have, how are they related to who you are?
- Rachel Doezal—is she being inauthentic? Why?
- Have students take Implicit association tests

Films:

- *Albert Nobbs*
- *Memento*
- Orange is the new black (Episode about Boo's background story)
-

Books:

- *God Bless You, Mister Rosewater*
- Don Quixote

What traditional texts might this text replace?

Williams, Bernard Arthur Owen. 1985. *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press. → the example about "George"