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Identity Confusion

Commentary on Medina's "Identity Trouble"

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Given constraints, I will proceed sketchily, programmatically. Professor Medina may be pleased that I here follow Wittgenstein's advice: assembling reminders of what many philosophers have forgotten.

- 1. I agree with Professor Medina that identity is relative to fields in such a way that whenever *X* and *Y* are identical, they are always identical *in* some respect and their being identical in this way does not preclude their also being different in other respects. This statue may be the same lump of clay I saw in your workshop yesterday but not the same statue I saw, since it hadn't yet been shaped into a statue then.¹
- 1.1. I disagree, however, with several of the further claims that Professor Medina seems to think these facts somehow support.

- 1.1.1. Contrary to what he suggests, identity (and similarity) always contrast with difference and exclude it, and vice versa. If *X* and *Y* are the same in color, then *eo ipso* they cannot also be different in color. They may, of course, still be different in shade, or tint, or saturation. But then *eo ipso* they cannot also be the same in shade, or tint, or saturation.
- 1.1.2. Identity's relativity to fields doesn't entail that it has a special "pluralistic logic," whatever Professor Medina means by that.
- 1.1.3. Identity's relativity to fields doesn't entail that identity is a 'family resemblance' term/concept in Wittgenstein's sense. Nor is it in fact such a concept, not always at any rate, for when X and Y are identical in being exactly six-feet tall, they have exactly the same quality.²
- 1.1.3.1. Moreover, for family resemblance in Wittgenstein's sense to make sense, the family, contrary to what Professor Medina thinks, cannot be construed simply or chiefly as a social construction. It makes little sense to talk of a family resemblance holding between an adult and her adopted children. Rather, I take Wittgenstein's point to be that, among 'blood relatives,' Alicia and Benjamin Rivera, say, both 'look like Riveras' because they have the typical Rivera wavy hair, low forehead, and widely-set eyes, while we say this of Benjamin and Consuela because their faces feature the Riveras' characteristic forehead, eyes, and small nose, of Consuela and Diego because they manifest the familiar Rivera eyes, nose, and broad mouth, and of Diego and Edwina because they share the Riveras' usual nose, mouth, and prominent jaw. The Riveras don't resemble one another because they all share some single facial feature—Alicia and Edwina share none—but because we can trace similarity through them from one to another. So too, Wittgenstein noted, we call various endeavors games not because they all share some one characteristic but because we can trace such relevant similarities, and he suggested the same may be true of other cases, where philosophers are tempted to seek some essence held by all and only the members of a group. Whatever the merits of this analogy, it doesn't even get off the

ground if there are no qualities really shared even by any two family members, but there exists instead only a social convention of associating them.³

- 1.1.3.2. My point is that the causal mechanism for family resemblance in the literal sense is biological. The social construction of families plays no role in it, and family resemblance would hold even if societies didn't recognize or institutionalize reproductive pairing and rearing. So, I contend, it is confused to use Wittgenstein's metaphor of family resemblance to segue to talk about social construction on the grounds that families are social constructs. Moreover, today's theorists typically exaggerate the extent to which, and the ways in which, families are social constructs. An analogy should help. We officially, legally count people as dead only on certain conditions, formalizing that recognition through such documents as death certificates. Still, it is preposterous to assert flatly that death is a social construction, a social construction *simpliciter*. Rather, it is a biological fact that is to some extent, more or less accurately and more or less responsibly, socially recognized in different ways in different societies. The situation with families is, I think, much closer to that than it is to our constructing someone as a professor or student.
- 1.1.3.3. As family resemblance must be rooted in something beyond local custom, so too must family life itself. Because different societies set different conditions on entering or exiting a family, and different boundaries on of families, some thinkers have drawn the unwarranted conclusions that families themselves are social constructions, and that societies can properly define them however they choose, especially, shaping them to fit an antecedent political agenda. Some judges have been persuaded to constitutionalize this fallacy. Professor Medina's unwarranted dismissal of 'family values' reflects this approach. In reality, societies are built around families, and they act suicidally when they refuse to root their conception of family life in familiar truths about human nature and children's needs.⁴ Generative families, in their central and defining mission of rearing children, are likely to benefit from partners publicly committed to permanent and

faithful love, the subordination of felt desire to long-term plans, and lives given to sacrifice for the dependent. Properly understood, these are the real 'family values,' and, especially in our time of irresponsible social experimentation, they warrant legal protection and social celebration, not scorn.

- 2. Professor Medina emphasizes what he thinks is the "contextuality," "performativity," and "normativity" of social/group identity.
- 2.1. These claims are problematic. It is true that there are social groupings in which anyone's membership is relative to discursive context, determined (conceptually, not just causally) by her own and/or others' performances, and laden with normative expectations about her performance. Such roles as professor, judge, point guard, etc., are of this sort. X may be a judge in our social system but not in yours; and whether she is one may be affected by how we treat her and by how she conducts herself. Filling one of these roles consists in being subject to various obligations, holding various rights, enjoying various privileges, suffering various liabilities, and having various immunities.
- 2.1.1. Yet it is probably only academics who will need to be reminded that the groups Professor Medina has in mind—women, homosexuals, Blacks, Latinas/os, and others—are not like that. You can't be a Black person or a woman here but not over there, now but not then, among these people but not those. (Though, what is quite different, you can be *thought* to be Black or a woman, etc., in some places, times, or groups, while not in others.) You cannot perform so as no longer to be a woman, nor is there anything we can do (non-causally) to make that true. Hence, these groups cannot be social constructions.
- 2.2. A social construction is, in any case, a poor candidate for someone's identity.
- 2.2.1. By their nature, social constructions are extrinsic, contingent, mutable, assumed (or imposed, or some

combination of the two), and relative, among other things. They emerge from mutual decisions to treat certain people, things, and events, in certain ways—a fact that has misled even some of our most talented philosophers into thinking that, in social constitution, we make things by having beliefs about them (Searle 1998, Chapters 5, 6).

- 2.2.2. In contrast, the concept of identity retains its connection with sameness even when used in a slightly different sense. Your identity is that which remains the same, or that in virtue of which you remain the same, through various (real, imagined, conceivable, or possible) variations. It must, then, be something stable, and thus normally something quite deep, in you. You can't have one identity here and another there, nor can your identity (in any serious sense of the term) depend on what you do or what others expect of you. Those can all change without your really changing (that is, changing in your self, non-relationally) but your identity cannot change that way.
- 2.3. Because someone's identity is a matter of who she is in respects that are stable, fundamental, important, it has little to do with what she identifies with, either wholeheartedly (Professor Medina's "identification") or in a constrained and reserved way (his "disidentification"), nor with what she defines herself against (his "counter-identification"). All those concern only how she feels and sees herself.
- 2.4. But is not being a professor part of my identity? And cannot that be both a construct and also something stable, fundamental, and important? it will asked. The claim that being a professor is part of someone's identity is at best murky and misleading. It may certainly loom large in her view of herself, even in her self-image, and in how others think about her. That is not enough to make it (even part of) her identity. For one thing, she and they may be wrong about her being a professor, misinformed, or mistaken, or deluded. Not every truth about me yields an identity, nor does my or others' making much of it suffice to do the trick. (Suppose I obsess over such minutiae as wearing brown socks, or others do?) We are better off in fairly obvious ways framing the

point about what people care about without entangling it the discourse of identity. As for the second query, recall that we can change from being professors by signing a piece of paper or relevant others doing so. If other people decide to do things somewhat differently, then the professional associations and colleges in virtue of which we are professions would no longer exist. Not so stable, then. Your being a professor is neither close to the real foundation of who you are morally (since most of your deeper moral rights and duties and virtues are otherwise grounded, nor essential metaphysically to you(r identity).

- 2.5. Perhaps some of the groups Professor Medina has in mind—groupings by race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, etc.—are sufficiently deep to be part of a person's identity (though still not for all that, 'group identities'), but only insofar as they are not social constructions, and independent of the psychological stances and processes he discusses.
- 2.6. I think we would do well to eschew not just the thesis that social identities are social constructions but the very concept of varied social identities and the claim that they are constituents of a person's individual identity. Appiah dates talk of social, group identities only to the 1950s. Gleason sees as central to the notion's development Erik Erikson's sociological adaptation (especially in his talk of "American identity") of the discourse of identity from his theories of psychological development.⁵ What matters for our purposes is that the notion of group identities is not so venerable, well established, or long entrenched. Similarly, I doubt many beyond some intellectuals and activists often talk explicitly of such identities. Of course, people do sometimes say things like, 'It's not just what we do, or how we make a living. It's what we are.' That's a way of showing how much they care about a change that's envisioned, as when a late career worker is asked to retrain or a hospital contemplates closing its public clinic and opening a cash-cow coronary wing. Still, other idioms are available and, because less confusing, preferable. Since the linguistic and conceptual idiom I criticize is so limited, both temporally and demographically, its reform does not seem to me unrealistic.

- 3. For understanding and assessing identity-politics, the most important questions about group 'membership' are: (Q1) What is it for someone S to be a G (i.e., a member of group G), in what does that consist? (Q2) In what *matters*, for which *purposes*, when, where, in which *ways*, and for what *reasons* does it matter that S is a G? Elsewhere I have raised difficulties for some of the answers that have been proposed to Q1, especially those offered by J.J.E. Gracia and J.A. Corlett for being (a) Hispanic and Latina/o (Garcia 2001a, 2001b). Here I briefly treat only Q2.
- 3.1. Professor Medina seems not to appreciate the depth of the difficulties confronting so-called identity-politics.
- 3.1.1. Identity-politics, in at least one important use of that term, supposes that (some? all pertinent?) norms of action express group solidarity and respond to the group's shared needs, interest, situation, oppression, history, and so on. So conceived, identity-politics requires that these features must be widely shared and without significant intra-group differences. Professor Medina is correct that affirming Alicia's and Bernardo's identity in being, say, Hispanic, is logically compatible with acknowledging their sexual difference. However, he needs to show *that* and *why* this difference will not undermine the political solidarity that identity-politics grounds in their ethnic similarity ('identity'), especially since it means they face different experiences and challenges from both within the group and without.
- 3.1.2. Real moral norms must be grounded in moral virtues, and thus reflect human nature in natural human dependencies, needs, interests, relationships, and personhood. Of course, our moral features (that is, rights, etc.) are shaped by what as human beings we need or is in our interest, especially including our relationships to other persons, that is, our social nature. Nor do I wish to deny that special circumstances can make many kinds of fact take on ethical significance, bringing universal norms into application. What I mean to reject are: (i) adapting to

Professor Medina's targeted social groups (ethnic, racial, sex/gender, etc.) the view (out of Bradley and Hegel) that someone's duties emerge from her social situation so that her chief duties are those she has as and because she's Black, Latina, a woman, and so on, (ii) the quasi-Aristotelian variant of this, according to which anyone's ethical task in life is to fulfill herself not in her humanity but in her Blackness, being Latina, womanhood, and so on, (iii) the view of many devotees of identity-politics that someone's chief moral duties are those she owes to such groups, (iv) the related anti-Kantian, anti-Rawlsian view that a person ought to do her moral thinking precisely as Black, etc., in such a way that it becomes crucial for her to internalize values, emphases, etc., supposed distinctive of certain ethnic or racial or sex groups to which she belongs, (v) the moral relativism that holds we ought follow the norms prevalent in our group, now defined by our ethnicity or race or sex or sexual 'orientation' rather than by the sort of 'culture' that anthropologists study. I see each of these as a kind of 'identity-ethics' adapted from more familiar forms of identity-politics.

- 3.2. In addition, identity-politics runs into problems grounded in the fact that every person belongs to a number of different social groups.
- 3.2.1. Do all these groups generate norms? (Or what is quite different, though Professor Medina seems not to notice this difference: Do they all generate "normative expectations?") If so, how does someone properly choose among them in cases of practical conflict?⁶
- 3.2.1.1. Norms of group solidarity in preferences, tastes, reactions, etc., which are closely tied to identity-politics (and may be needed to ground it), tend to: promote and preserve stereotypes, often harmful ones, privilege some subgroups (images) over others, thus serving to marginalize other subgroups, stifle personal creativity, and deprive the group of the benefits of fresh, critical, and independent thinking.
- 3.2.2. The problem seems to be less what Professor Medina calls a "surplus of [individual] identity" over and beyond any

one group identity, than the fact that moral norms (virtues, obligations, rights) transcend group-membership and are only murkily affected by group-membership and in ways difficult to justify.

- 3.2.3. Why should we think membership in *any* such group generates valid moral norms?⁷ Professor Medina offers little reason and I recall no good reasons presented in the literature. I suspect that identity-politics presents a *reductio ad absurdum* of interest-group politics: narrow, selfish, instrumentalist, divisive, irresponsible.
- 4. These observations should dispose us to break the link between someone's belonging to a social group (belonging to it) and norms that properly govern her projects, attitudes, commitments, and action.
- 4.1. It is not really true that there are several different "ways of being Black," Latina/o, female, 'gay,' etc., contrary to what Appiah and others have sometimes said. We don't, then need to bother with the pseudo-question of which "ways" are better than others. Nor should we allow that people "learn to be [a] Black," pace Gates, nor learn to be Latina/o, female, homosexual, or any such thing, because being Black, etc., requires no skills or techniques or instruments to master, and admits no variety of styles, manners, or methods.⁸
- 4.2. Likewise, there is no pertinent *scale* in being (a) member of group *G*, no *degrees* of being (a) *G* (contrary to Blum, Corlett's earlier view, and others), no *extent* to which someone is (a) *G*, no being more or less (a) *G* than she used to be or than others are.⁹
- 4.3. It makes little sense for someone to make being Black, Latina/o, female, etc., into a personal project. This contrasts with Dyson's recent suggestion that someone may be "intentionally Black," as opposed to her being "accidentally" or "incidentally Black" (2005). As being Black, Latina/o, female, and so on, is not a project, or an activity, there can be no variety of "ways" of doing (or being) it.

- 4.4. Similarly, there are no standards for ethnic or racial or gender 'authenticity' in someone's tastes, beliefs, commitments, conduct, etc. There is no difference, contra Gooding-Williams' appalling distinction, between being 'a Black person' and being both Black and a person (2001).
- 4.5. This suggests many social theorists will need to think differently, more seriously about African-Americans committed to social advancement through in-group attitudinal and behavioral change, about assimilation-friendly (even English-First) Latinas/os, about pro-life women (including feminist women), and those who largely support the traditional Western family, about men and women contrite about homosexual acts and focused more on personal reform than social tinkering, about poor people who want to escape and reduce poverty through capitalism, and many others. 10 Their various political programs may be problematic in this or that respect, as are those of their adversaries, and not everyone will find it in herself to appreciate, welcome, and celebrate individuals who challenge (stereo)typical expectations and resist in-group pressure. What we must insist on is moving the discussion to the merits of their views, assessing them on the basis of universal—not groupbased—ethical and prudential norms. Philosophers live up to their calling when they show us the way out, helping us abandon the conformist rhetoric of group solidarity and the turbid notion of social identities.
- 5. My interest here has chiefly been in matters of race and ethnicity. I have sketched reasons why I don't join Professor Medina in despising 'family values' or delineating the dizzying minutiae of 'counter-identification' and 'disidentification.' Nor will I follow his path into speculative anthropological interpretation and recent theorizing in human 'gender' or 'queer studies.' Some people make much of and care deeply about their racial and ethnic ancestry, as others take great pride in their home city, celebrating its history and sports teams. In both cases, these affiliations, no matter how emotionally meaningful to some, will normally

lack ethical significance. In contrast, a person's sex, and her sexual desires and conduct may be quite important morally. My outsider's impression, however, is that the current state of studies on 'gender' and sex makes it difficult for thinkers to explore these consequential matters in ways properly informed by the major traditions of ethical and religious thinking. Instead, serious inquiry into important ways in which men and women complement each other beyond the manifest anatomic ones is discouraged by shallow charges of 'essentialism,' while sober reflection on what moral virtue involves in (and brings to) our sexual attitudes, desires, and behavior gets stifled with cant about 'heteronormativity,' etc.

Once we leave behind the myriad confusions of identity-politics, perhaps we can develop different forms of scholarship on women, sex and homosexuality, ethnicity, race, poverty, etc.—a scholarship skeptical of and unconstrained by current assumptions and ideological demands. That could help support a politics that marks a real step forward and is 'progressive' in more than merely its advocates' self-flattering rhetoric.

More important, no liberation can be complete, or even adequate, until it progresses beyond the merely political to include liberating our minds from 'scripts' rooted in the delusion of 'collective identities,' and ending our selves' enslavement to uncontrolled, misdirected, and irresponsible appetites.¹¹ It doesn't advance these vital projects, but only holds them back, when we persuade ourselves to promote minor facts about our forebears and neighbors, along with our various quirks and kinks, to the grandiose rank of 'social identities' and immunize them from moral questioning.

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discussion of family resemblance. Contrast Gracia (1999) with Garcia (2001b).

- ⁴ Collin reminds us that social constructionism owes much to Hobbes's theory of social contract (1997). We do well to remind radical constructionists—who extend the notion to families, races, ethnicities, sexes, and sometimes even claim that it extends 'all the way down'—that Hobbes thought the whole process rigidly determined by "laws of nature." We can safely reject this rigidity and quite differently conceive the pertinent requirements of human nature. Nevertheless, we proceed with foolhardy hubris when we imagine that nature imposes no substantial constraints on how we can shape families within our social life.
- ⁵ I think Erikson's uses both multiply confused and derivative from the older, metaphysical use in a way that undermines claims that this notion of a 'social identity' merely involves a separate and independent sense of the term 'identity.' However, I will not here explore those issues. I discuss them further in Garcia (2005).
- ⁶ Contrast Appiah's warnings of the imperialistic tendency of racial identities with Karenga's Afrocentric imperatives ('Buy Black, think Black, act Black, etc.'), which latter seem both to privilege being Black in everything over everything else and to offer little justification for Karenga's particular conceptions of what being Black in thought, taste, etc., consists in (and why it requires these forms rather than others), for this norm itself, nor for its priority over other standards (either similarly group-centered ones or dissimilar, universalistic norms).
- ⁷ There may be special circumstances in which membership can help trigger application of wider norms. Appeal is sometimes made to a moral imperative of gratitude to those who earlier made sacrifices to help advance fellows within a social group as grounding a duty on beneficiaries to 'give back' by carrying on the work of group advancement. This is reasonable. However, other ways of expressing gratitude may also be legitimate and it can hardly be owed that someone now give up her individuality and strive merely to resemble others in the group. In any case, no such duty of

¹ I try simply to follow Geach's seminal discussion in "Identity," and "Identity: A Reply" (1972, 238-249).

² I prescind from the controversy in philosophical semantics over whether 'being exactly six feet tall' is a context-relative predicable, sometimes predicating different qualities in different discursive contexts. Even if it is, X's and Y's both being six feet tall is the same thing when they, or the speaker, or whatever, are in the same kind of discursive context. On the dispute, see Cappelen and Lepore (2004).

³ I make a similar point against the appeal in J.J.E. Gracia's account of Latina/o identity to Wittgenstein's conception and

gratitude could constitute in itself a conclusive, dispositive reason for action, automatically taking precedence over other commitments, convictions, needs, or relationships. Likewise, it is sometimes thought, for example, that Black people need thematically to give priority to preserving Black cultural forms and advancing Black welfare, combating racial injustice, and so on, because others are unlikely to do so. (Or are less likely to do so without Black people leading the way.) However, these others should not so easily be let off the hook of promoting justice and helping the needy. Moreover, it would need to be shown that these others are more likely to redress other social needs and injustices. Without that, parallel and equally strong reasons could be advanced for Black people to assign different and conflicting moral/political priorities. Perhaps the morally sensitive will have to take up the slack left by the morally insensitive, however unfair that is, but then, notice, the special responsibilities are not assigned on a racial basis. Rather, every socially responsible (that is, morally virtuous) person will have grounds for similar priorities.

⁸ Contrast Appiah's talk of "ways of being Black" (1996), and Gates's discussion of learning to be Black at Yale (1996).

⁹ See Corlett (1999, 2003) and Blum (2002). For counterarguments, see Garcia (2001a, 2003).

¹⁰ There are, of course, limits to such stereotype-defying types of group-membership, because some social groups are defined partly (even largely) on the basis of certain ethical or political convictions or commitments. Thus, capitalism-loving Communists, Marxists who reject class analysis, anti-evangelizing evangelical Christians, Catholics who hate the papacy or approve of abortion and mercy-killing, feminists indifferent to women's welfare, and so on, would all properly be subject to criticism for inconsistency that threatens their very membership in these social groups or opens them to unfavorable evaluation as members. My point is that, apart from economic class, membership in the kinds of group on which Professor Medina concentrates is not defined by such convictions but by biology, ancestry, sexual conduct or

orientation, relation to the means of production, etc. The only plausible exception is being Latina/o, for ethnicity may depend in part on culture, which is often thought to include ethical, perhaps even political, practices and attitudes. Still, it would hard to defend the claim that Latinas/os so share a single and common culture that someone's internalizing its standards of action, taste, and so on, is constitutive of her belonging to the (pan-)ethnic group.

¹¹ For somewhat fuller discussion of the dependency of sexual politics on sexual morality, see Garcia (1997).