

“Senses of Self” Conference

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Abstracts

Rowan Bell “Changing One’s Story: Narrative Identity and Retconning”

According to conceptions of narrative identity, our identities are constituted by the stories we tell about our own lives. But sometimes those stories change, and sometimes we talk as if these changes are retroactive. For example, trans people often talk about our pasts in terms that reflect the genders we have, in fact, claimed more recently. I argue that these kinds of claims can be fruitfully understood as retcons. "Retcon" is short for "retroactive continuity." In fiction, a retcon occurs (or, something is “retconned”) when an ongoing narrative is changed in order to reflect the evolving story, through either recontextualization in a successive installment, or direct changing of the original text. This is a common narrative device, especially in speculative fiction. For example, when J.R.R. Tolkien was writing *The Lord of the Rings*, he re-wrote and re-published parts of the previously published novel *The Hobbit*, in particular the story of Gollum, to be more consistent with the emerging narrative about the influence of the One Ring. Drawing on work in philosophy, literary theory, and comic book studies, I establish and explore an analogy between fictional and identity retcons to understand how the latter might work. I argue that, just as fictional retcons can repair and enhance the ongoing story and open up possibilities for new developments, identity retcons can contribute to narrative repair, enhance our ongoing self-construction, and open up new possibilities for our futures. However, like fictional retcons, they can also be problematic. In extreme cases they might rise to the level of self-deception or gaslighting. I'll identify two dimensions along which both kinds of retcons can be evaluated: who has the authority to retcon a narrative, and what kinds of values underwrite the attempted retcon.

Anna Bortolan “Emotional Labour and Self-Identity”

This presentation explores the relationship between emotions and the self, focusing on how such relationship can play out within the socio-material infrastructure of the modern workplace. More specifically, I suggest that the “emotional labour” required or produced by various work environments can threaten self-identity due to how it can influence a person’s evaluative outlook on the world, and I explore some of the consequences that this may have for mental health.

I start by considering how self-identity is connected to what is of import to us, and how this is sustained by affective experience. I then move to argue that,

by fostering the experience and display of certain patterns of emotions, a work environment can cement the centrality of specific values, cares, and commitments, and deplete the affective resources available to sustain one's own evaluative outlook on the world. I conclude by suggesting that some aspects of the phenomenology of "burnout" provide an illustration of these dynamics.

Sidney Carls-Diamante "Bipolar Disorder and the Self"

Bipolar disorder (BD)/manic depressive disorder is well-known to profoundly affect the self, although this subject has received little attention from philosophy until recently. BD is a spectrum of affective disorders characterized by recurring episodes of mania, depression, and mixed states exhibiting manic and depressive features, interspersed with euthymic or asymptomatic periods. To raise awareness about the philosophical and existential issues arising from BD, I discuss two major self-related issues commonly faced by individuals with BD: self-concept confusion and altered self-experience.

Due to the profound effects of symptomatic periods on behaviour, cognition, and personality, an experience frequently reported by individuals with BD is "feeling like a different person" when manic, depressed, or euthymic. These conflicting experiences of oneself can lead to self-concept confusion, wherein an individual finds it difficult to determine whether the conceptualizations or judgements they hold about themselves are accurate.

In addition to its symptoms, pharmacological treatment for BD can also impact one's experience of oneself. Many individuals with BD report altered self-experience, which they typically describe as feeling that they are "no longer themselves" or that their "personalities change" subsequent to taking mood-stabilizing medication. As altered self-experience is often an unsettling experience, it is a major factor in medication non-compliance. However, despite its extensive clinical ramifications, altered self-experience related to medication in individuals with BD remains a neglected topic.

Matilda Carter "Authenticity and the Ever-Changing Self"

Claims of identity change are an ordinary part of our social lives and are typically taken to be weighty reasons. Our common acceptance of identity change as a weighty reason, however, seems in tension with the weight we place on authenticity. If we take being true to ourselves as important, then it seems natural to worry about identity change: to fear that it threatens to pull us away from a valuable ideal. Alternatively, if identity can truly change so easily, we might question why authenticity is important in the first place. In this talk, I chart a path towards resolving this tension.

Joshua Knobe "What the Self is Really All About"

People sometimes make sense of each other by employing the notion of a true self. Thus, we might say that certain behaviors reflect your true self and others do not. I will argue that this way of making sense of the self is part of a much broader approach that people can also employ to understand various things other than the self. This much broader approach involves thinking about what

something is "really all about." For example, we could ask what the United States is really all about, and we could conclude that certain things that the United States has done should be seen as betraying what it is really all about. Or we could ask what philosophy is really all about, and we could conclude that philosophy was losing touch with what it was really all about in certain periods in its history. The claim that certain behaviors you have performed fail to reflect your true self should be seen as just one example of this much larger phenomenon.

Krisztina Orban "Self-Referring as Self-Directed Action"

I propose that examining pointing and, especially, self-pointing helps us to better understand Self-Referring (knowingly and intentionally self-referring). I explain basic features of pointing and self-pointing, such as referring, reference-fixing and the subject's knowledge of the referent. I propose to treat Self-Referring as a self-directed action. Self-pointing makes it explicit how Self-Referring is a self-directed action produced for intentionally expressing something about the agent of the self-directed action. My project is an attempt to naturalize the capacity for Self-Reference. The capacity for self-directed action predates and enables the acquisition of Self-Referring. The structure of self-pointing reveals how the referent of 'I' is fixed in such a way that we can begin to see how it supports the cognitive significance of Self-Referring expressions. In arguing for my proposal, I reflect on findings from developmental and comparative psychology and analyze Self-Reference in both spoken and sign-languages.

Elizabeth Schechter "Two Candidate Cases of Multiple Mindedness"

The split-brain phenomenon and dissociative identity disorder (DID) have both been taken to be candidate cases of multiple persons in one body, since both involve causal dissociations between personal-level psychological states, manifesting in disunified behavior. Philosophers have typically argued that DID subjects are better candidates for multiple personhood because their behavior is more disunified. In this paper I argue that while such philosophers are correct that a DID subject is intuitively more like a case of multiple persons in one body, the grounds of this intuition do not concern disunified behavior per se. Rather, the grounds concern the differing self-conceptions of a split-brain subject on the one hand and at least many DID subjects on the other.

Victor Verdejo "Polysemy and the Senses of Self"

At least since Frege, it has been acknowledged that uses of "I" admit of a plurality of ways of thinking and forms of awareness. They include introspective, primitive, bodily and agentive, perhaps also observational and social. This raises two questions: (i) is there a form of self-awareness that is more basic for self-reference, and (ii) how is the apparent unity of the self actually sustained across the multiplicity of 'awarenesses'. One tempting proposal is to suggest that "I" is polysemous and involves different but related senses (Schellenberg 2026). The polysemous view of the first person aligns with a surge of related polysemy-based accounts (Liu 2025), and provides a compelling articulation of mental file

theory (Recanati 2012). In this talk, I will examine the prospects of this proposal vis-a-vis plausible answers to the foregoing questions, and defend a "rich self" view. I argue, in particular, that the plurality in self-awareness associated with "I" need not entail polysemy in reference. Instead, a single token-reflexive reference rule for "I" can be seen as pragmatically enriched by different informational channels. I contend that this framework better explains first-person reasoning and supports a genuine, though flexible, unity of self.

Hong-Yu Wong "The Self and the Sense of Embodiment"

How does a subject have to relate to her body so as to constitute a paradigmatic sense of embodiment? What makes it the case that a subject is aware of some material object as its body? Ways of 'losing one's body' – such as locked-in syndrome, anarchic hand syndrome, deafferentation, or out-of-body experiences – come from disruptions to the normal functional relation between a subject and her body. This suggests that at the heart of the sense of embodiment is a certain functional structure between a subject and her body. What is required for this functional structure? I argue that an account of core normal human sense of embodiment requires that we consider different aspects of how subjects are aware of their bodies. I will consider the consequences of this for our understanding of the self and also pathologies of embodiment.