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## Symposia on Gender, Race and Philosophy

Volume 1, number 1. May 2005

<http://web.mit.edu/sgrp>

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### Category Skepticism and its Cure

Commentary on Medina's "Identity Trouble"

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I welcome José Medina's paper as offering some companionship in a project I have been engaged in for some time: working to re-conceptualize social categories (or at least some kinds of social categories, identity categories) in such a way as to make some kind of "identity politics" both cognitively and politically intelligible. I have thought of the task as "re-metaphoring" or "re-imaging" what social categories are, in order to dissolve the category skepticism that has been expressed in feminist, queer and race theory, and to promote a pluralist ontological imagination that can accommodate the multiplicity of identity (Frye 1996, 2000, 2005). He thinks that once we can cognitively handle plural identity, we will be able to understand how change in the constitution of identities happens and can be made to happen, in particular, change that kicks the pins out of whatever it was that made identity a mechanism of domination and oppression. I am very sympathetic with this general picture,

but I have reservations about the value of the Wittgensteinian metaphor of "family resemblance."

Three metaphors have dominated much of the thinking about identity categories: categories as species, categories as sets, and categories as containers. You can see the influence of the first two in the lines of thinking prevalent in some quarters of feminist, race and queer theory that lead people to category skepticism. According to a vernacular understanding of what a species is, a duck, for instance, is a duck by virtue of inherent deep structures of matter, installed at the moment of its individuation as a distinct living organism, that are the causal basis of its distinctly ducky morphology and behavior. When people come to believe that gender categories or race categories are not like that, are not species-like, they conclude that gender categories and race categories are not real. They say they are fictions, or something like mirages, illusions, mere effects of discourse. To draw this conclusion, they must be assuming that the only way a category can be real is for its principle of coherence to be a causally efficacious material deep-structure sameness. Such thinking is governed by the image of categories as species.

Similarly, when people come to believe a category, such as *woman* or *Black*, cannot be defined by a set of explicit and unexceptionable criteria—necessary and sufficient conditions, they conclude that the category is "indefinable" and hence "unreal," not theoretically or politically viable. The background assumption must be that the only way a category can be viable is by having as its principle of coherence a boundary that divides the universe of discourse into "this" and "everything else" and enforces a particular sameness across "this." Medina correctly refers to this as "the essentialist assumption" (660), and rightly avails himself of the Wittgensteinian rejection of it. This thinking is governed by the image of categories as sets. Blended, the images of species and set merge into the image of a container, the image of a category as a *container* that individuals are *in*. A container like a jar of olives or a can of peas, clearly labeled and guaranteed to have nothing inside but things that are very, very similar to each other (Frye 2005). Theorists of race, gender and/or ethnicity, anyone who needs to be thinking of

social groups in terms that support analysis of structures of oppression and domination and that support solidarity and resistance, need to be cured of the container metaphor and its kindred images of species and sets.

Of course one turns to Wittgenstein.<sup>1</sup> One of Wittgenstein's great contributions to philosophy is his appreciation of the ways we land up in philosophical quandaries (for example, various kinds of skepticism) because our imagination is in the thrall of particular images or metaphors.<sup>2</sup> Wittgenstein understood that one does not get released from the magnetic field of an image or metaphor except by replacing it with another, or others. As an image for conceptualizing categories or kinds his metaphor of family resemblance is an improvement over the image of a container, most significantly in its easy permission of conceptualizing a single individual as a member of multiple categories. But I think it can hinder or misdirect perhaps as much as it can help. The metaphor's limitations or misdirections will not be consequential if it is richly mixed with other metaphors, and I don't object to invoking it, but in this work Medina comes too close to making this one metaphor be a theory of what identity categories are. (The theory would be: "Identity categories are family resemblance categories, that's their logic.") Not only is an image not a theory, but (even as Wittgenstein pointed out that there is not *one* thing that language *is*) there is not one thing that a social category, or identity, *is*. In particular there is no one principle of coherence that is *the* principle of coherence of identity categories, no one thing it is for an  $x$  to be a  $\Phi$ , for example, no one thing it is for an individual to be a woman. So, before airing my critical thoughts and cautions about the metaphor, I want to say that I do not intend to hold it responsible for what we would demand of a theory, a single adequate theory, of social categories or identities. And other metaphors I float are intended for mixing with it, not replacing it.

1. It seems to me that in directing one to think of identity in terms of similarities and dissimilarities among individuals, the metaphor of "family resemblance" is misdirecting us.

There are moments in lived identity politics when one is moved to construct one's conception of oneself and/or another in a way that resolves dense multidimensional patterns of many kinds of relations into perceived similarities/dissimilarities with the members of some group or various groups, but I think that those are moments in which, for some political and/or emotional reason, the complexity, the curdled-ness of identity is being cognitively resolved toward unity and set-theoretic clarity; they are not moments in which the reality, plurality and structure of category membership is revealed. I think that the Wittgensteinian image of categories as family resemblance structures better images what identity seems like in the defensive moments of simplification and clarity, than it images what Medina (and I, and Lugones<sup>3</sup>) wants to conceive of as the plural, mutable, curdled identities that can serve as loci of political solidarity and coalition.<sup>4</sup> As Medina sees it, thinking of identity categories in terms of webs of similarity and difference lodges us in the logic of purity *only if* we are ignoring the fact that to perceive similarity one has to ignore differences. But I am not convinced of that. I think the logic of purity can accommodate this feature of cognition. It can accommodate the understanding that everything is infinitely similar to and different from everything else and that some sort of perceptual filtering and focusing goes on to make some similarities and some differences salient in perception and cognition.<sup>5</sup>

2. I think the Wittgensteinian metaphor misdirects also in that it encourages thinking of identity in terms of similarities and differences among *attributes or traits of individuals*. For instance, the metaphor draws Medina into discussing how we "see" or are "blind to"<sup>6</sup> similarities and differences in a way that gives the impression of the pre-existence of attributes or traits that independently *are* similar and different, and are awaiting our discriminating notice and forgetfulness. The illustrative reference to similar hair, similar noses, similar ways of talking or of laughing, which flows easily from the image of family resemblance, encourages thinking of

similarities and differences as a matter of individuals having the same or similar attributes or traits. This is apt enough in the case of actual members of genetically-related human families; each individual has a range of attributes that are in certain ways like those of certain other individuals in the family. My attributes that are similar to the attributes of those people are what give me the resemblances that others are noting when they say, "Oh, she does look like a Kasey, doesn't she?" but those attributes/traits and their resemblances to attributes/traits of various other Kaseys are not what make me a member of that family—it is not in virtue of having those attributes that I am a member of that family. On the contrary what is *perceived as* similarities and differences between me and other people is determined in part by what families the perceiver thinks I am in. In either case, family (category) membership does not consist of, and I think is not "sustained by," family resemblance among individuals. On page 662, Medina seems to say this, also. He says that "membership in these categories is not *determined* by facts," though many facts bear on the question, that "familial identity is shaped in and through normatively structured and situated practices (or 'language games') [...]." But then he goes on to say that "familial identity is sustained by interrelated networks of similarities and differences [...]." This ambivalence is due, I think, to a misfit of the family resemblance metaphor and identity categories.

3. The metaphor of family resemblance also generates a tendency to think of identity as *membership* in something, and more affectingly, as *belonging* to something/someone. Medina invokes both figures frequently, and in this context I think they are charged with the affective significances of the notion of "family." In our affective experience of identity, there is of course a vast weather of feelings related to our understandings of ourselves as belonging or not, and as being perceived by others as belonging or not. Identity categories are indeed cognitively and emotionally lived in many settings very much on the analogy or metaphor of the family; their webs of relationships are often experienced as belonging or being excluded/rejected, as by parents, or siblings, or in-laws.

This gets carried in to Medina's theorizing of disidentification, which is presented as a kind of unease ("we feel ill at ease with the members of our family, we feel that we 'don't quite belong'" (663); "our uneasy feeling that we do and do not belong to a family" (668); "Who has not had the experience...of feeling left out while being included?" (663)). I think the figures of membership and belonging predispose Medina's analysis to a valorizing of discomfort and a nostalgia for a new stability, a new arrangement in which we can be more comfortable, one in which we can have a feeling of belonging ("disidentification itself is an occasion for a rearticulation of these similarities and differences" (668)). Why should we suppose that our experience of our plurality, of never being only or simply *this* or *that*, must be uncomfortable? Why should it not be pleasant, energizing, experienced as a delightful richness? The metaphor of identity as family membership evokes such *angst* and longing.

4. Thinking in terms of family resemblance, and hence in terms of networks of similarity and dissimilarity of attributes or traits makes it strenuous put the picture into motion. There is an aura of the "natural" around the image of a family: one is born into the families of one's parents, one is stuck by accident of birth with this father, that brother, and I seem just fated to the morphological similarities, for example, the body-type, head shape, and skin color, that contribute to my family resemblance to the Kaseys. The image does not carry associations of fluidity. Medina has to *exhort* us: "It is important to note that the relationship that holds between these networks is a *dynamic* one [...]" (659). If we thought of identity categories as constituted by and constituting complicated networks of overlapping and criss-crossing desires, indifference, and aversions, how much livelier the image would be. I start imaging complex and living webs of affective and economic (in a broad sense) affinities and separations as something like a structured magnetic field. Recall the schoolroom experiments of moving a magnet around beneath a sheet of paper with iron filings on it, the patterns that were formed and how they changed. Imagine how it goes when you are moving more than one magnet

around beneath the paper. Perhaps identity categories are moving force fields and every individual is always in the influence of all of them.

5. Wittgenstein's other image in §67 is that of a thread spun by twisting fiber on fiber. Although this image has the disadvantage of being linear rather than multidimensional<sup>7</sup>, it strikes me as more felicitous, in one way, than the image of the ways members of a family resemble each other. What is highlighted by this image is that it is *friction* that holds the thread together is. Although there are some material qualities objects have to have if there is to be friction between them and adjacent objects, those qualities are not distinctive to the particular objects and the friction is not a property or attribute of each object. The resistance that holds the fibers together in a larger whole is not reducible to properties or attributes of the individual fibers. It is salutary to carry this idea over to the imagination in which we conceptualize social categories. It may be helpful to imagine that what holds such a category as *women*, or *Hispanic*, or say, *Christian* together is frictions among its exemplars, or resistance at the points at which they are in contact with each other.

Although I would not try to make the family resemblance metaphor do as much of the work of theorizing identity as Medina does, his work with it is helpful. The way to make metaphors maximally illuminating is precisely to stretch them and discover their limits. That exercise reveals much about the territory on which the metaphor sheds light.

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<sup>1</sup> Among feminist theorists, Heyes (2000, Chapter 3), and Lindemann Nelson (2002), and others have turned to Wittgenstein and his metaphor of family resemblance to help in theorizing the category *women*.

<sup>2</sup> There is linguistic evidence that in English the grammar of the terms 'woman' and 'man,' 'boy' and 'girl' in a wide range of contexts is the same as the grammar of folk species terms like 'dog,' 'raccoon,' and so forth; that is, they are used like species terms. For example, one says "There's a raccoon on

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the porch,” and “There’s a man on the porch,” and not “There’s a human on the porch.” We don’t even have a one-morpheme noun in English for a human being. We can say “There’s a person on the porch,” but if we know that person’s sex (or think we do), we would in most cases use the word ‘woman’ or ‘man’ or their kin such as ‘lady,’ etc. I suspect that this feature of the grammar of the gender words, in English, influences our imaginations (to the extent that those imaginations are Anglophone), supporting the influence of the “species” image.

<sup>3</sup> See Lugones (2003, Chapter 6), “Purity, Impurity and Separation.”

<sup>4</sup> It seems to me that Medina is inclined to agree with this point (662-63, on identification and counter-identification) but also that he is inclined to disagree with it, when he explains that disidentification involves a particular awareness of similarities and differences between oneself and others in various other identity categories.

<sup>5</sup> There is interesting work in cognitive psychology that explores and records that sort of complexity in perceptions of sameness and difference of attributes/traits while remaining comfortably in a “modern” scientific ontology. Compare, for example, Rosch and Mervis (1975).

<sup>6</sup> It is not a good idea to use blindness as a metaphor for this cognitive operation; it seems to me to be a case of exploiting what a seeing person imagines to be the experience of a blind person, to serve purposes not chosen by the blind person as her own.

<sup>7</sup> To repair this fault, one could imagine instead a ball of felt.