

## Identity by Design: Some Epistemological and Control Issues

Suzanne M. Jaeger  
*University of Central Florida*

Claudia Ruitenberg's main point, if I understand her correctly, concerns the role of the teacher in facilitating student experimentation with personal identity. She agrees that personal identity is, to some degree, both socially constructed and within one's control. However, she challenges the view that identity is something that can be transformed simply by reading certain books, creating fictional identities in internet chat rooms, or by purchasing a new wardrobe or new body parts through plastic surgery. Ruitenberg argues that students need to be better informed about the existential conditions of a self-designing process. She relies on an analogy with architectural design. Just as the architect pays attention to certain material and situational conditions influencing a structural design, so do students need to be aware of the historical, social, cultural and material conditions from which their self-creating projects emerge. These conditions make up the particularity *æ* or *thrownness* *æ* of both a person and an architectural work.

It bears noting that Ruitenberg's claims about what *ought* to be the case is derived from her descriptions about what *is* the case, and on the basis of the analogy. Although not every philosopher agrees with the legitimacy of deriving an "ought" from an "is," the maneuver is defensible on the basis of common sensibilities around certain concepts such as, what it is to be a *good* architect or a *good* teacher. Of course, one might also disagree about what defines *goodness* in either case. Historically, there have been different approaches to architecture, for example, modern compared with postmodern and supermodern. The concern for a "reflective conversation with the materials of the situation" is different in each case. My point, however, is that since there are different concepts of "good" architecture and "good" teaching, the prescriptions drawn from the analysis of these concepts are similarly relative.

My second comment on Ruitenberg's essay is an appeal for some explanation of what a failed attempt at self-designing looks like. The ill effects of neglecting facticity are never specified. The failure of an architectural design is somewhat more obvious: the building is an eyesore or a functional nuisance, or it collapses. What happens when one fails in the design of one's self-identity?

My last, lengthier critical comment addresses two tensions in the assumptions of Ruitenberg's argument. First is a tension between agency and lack of control. Second is a tension in Ruitenberg's epistemology that allows her to distinguish between achievable self-inventions by way of reinterpretation and design, and pseudo self-inventions that are out of touch with the real world because they neglect facticity.

In relation to the first set of tensions, at one point in her essay Ruitenberg says: "Being-in-the-world always has effects beyond those intended by the designer." Many of us living in the West have acquired the wealth not only to purchase alternative wardrobes, but also medical expertise to select bodily features that mark

personal identity, such as gender, breast size, and facial features. However, the meanings generated by these attributes in relation to ourselves is not entirely within the individual's control.

There are many different reasons why intended meanings are not univocally communicated. Some of these reasons have to do with currently accepted non-essentialist theories of meaning. That is to say, when meaning is understood to be a rule-governed, social activity rather than explained as relative to an ideal language, it becomes evident that the expectation that intended meanings can be univocally understood by everyone is based more on politics than on the way language actually functions. Hence, Derrida, for example, has emphasized the proliferation of meaning with every use and re-use of a signifier.

One of the implications of the messiness of communicating meaning for claims about self-determination and the design of self-identity is that, despite the choices someone might make in their personal attributes, for the purpose of recreating an identity, one is never fully in control of the meanings these attributes have for others. I am only reiterating Ruitenbergs claim here. However, I would also like to present an example to emphasize the significance of this claim.

In her book, *Body Work*, Debra Gimlin describes an unanticipated result that some women face after having cosmetic surgery.<sup>1</sup> Though a woman may successfully acquire the desired appearance that makes her more "normal" in a culture that she believes judges and rewards her for her looks, her character becomes suspect for having had plastic surgery, and her self, by implication, becomes deviant. "The unacceptable act of cosmetic surgery displaces the normative body as an indicator of character....their accounts show that they struggle with a self-concept that continues to be deviant despite their now-normal appearance."<sup>2</sup> A similar observation is made in another chapter on the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance (NAAFA). Through various strategies NAAFA's members successfully construct identities independent of common stigmatizing associations between fat and character. However, outside the group, its success is limited. "In a recent survey, NAAFA found that 51% of its membership had experienced weight-related job discrimination."<sup>3</sup> The conclusion Gimlin draws is that in mainstream American culture self and body are closely linked and so overweight people continue to be discriminated against.<sup>4</sup>

What is said here about identities created through plastic surgery and support groups most likely also holds for those created in chat rooms and other virtual spaces. Despite the design choices people make in their attributes in the creation of a self-identity, the meanings implied, both by the attributes and the choices made, are beyond the individual's control. On the other hand, just because meanings are not entirely within one's control is no reason not to play with the various attributes associated with personal-identity. Another line of inquiry could consider how one establishes degrees of control over meaning, who has control and how much, and in what specific mediums of self-creation.

I want to turn now to the second tension in Ruitenbergs argument that becomes evident when she invokes a Nietzschean pedagogy in which "the self emerges in a

constant interpretation and re-interpretation.” One might understand such a statement in postmodern terms to undermine the stability and unity of the self. Every self-interpretation is, on the other hand, a re-interpretation that emerges as a result of the various forces at play in any theory, language or discourse used to purportedly make sense of a present self in relation to some past self or other self existing in another discursive context. On the other hand, one cannot help wondering, “who is the self that Ruitenberg describes as listening carefully to the situation?” “Which self is it that recognizes its thrownness in order to successfully redesign itself?” Some continuity to the self is implied in the act of self-interpretation. It is easy to get into a tangle here. A postmodern account of the socially constructed self is paradoxically defended from a modern rationalist’s epistemological standpoint in which one’s interpretations are centered by knowledge of a *real*, historical, social, and cultural world — otherwise, suggests Ruitenberg, the designing of identity fails.

I am not sure what to do with this epistemological tension in the argument. It relates to an old philosophical debate between determinism and freewill that has many guises. Perhaps it is just an empirical truth — a paradox that we experience in life: our selves and our histories are both conditioned by our facticity and open to new interpretations. The epistemological tension at least provides a useful continuum on which to locate a focus of analysis. For example, the malleability of identity might be an important focus in our selection of literature for students. How an African American character in a novel is socially positioned makes a difference to the meanings an American student finds in the text. Our pedagogical aims might center on reconstructing positive self-identities in the face of historically and socially entrenched negative ones. Alternatively, when it comes to discussions of plastic surgery, it may be the continuities in identity that become important. We might want to consider how and why the self retains an identity despite alterations in personal attributes.

Thus it might be possible to live with the epistemological tension. I agree with Ruitenberg when she says that to be good teachers we need to help our students see the complexities involved in designing personal identities. Fortunately, it does not require that we solve all the philosophical problems.

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1. Debra L. Gimlin, *Body Work: Beauty and Self-Image in American Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

2. *Ibid.*, 104-5.

3. *Ibid.*, 130.

4. *Ibid.*