

Grant Gillett

Subjectivity and Being Somebody: Human Identity and Neuroethics.

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In the preface to this book Grant Gillett, neurosurgeon and professor of medical ethics at the University of Otago, New Zealand, refers to the need to address the profound issues surrounding neurology and being human. He comments that in so doing he ‘traversed some fascinating territories of the mind—philosophical logic, linguistics, psycholinguists, psychology, neuroscience, neuro-psychology, anthropology, theology, ethics, metaphysics, phenomenology, existentialism, structuralism, post-structuralism’ (vii). It is evident within this treatise that Gillett, in his attempt to discover qualitative humanness, draws on his varied intellectual pursuits to support and share his conclusions.

Gillett begins and ends with an assertion: ‘Being *somebody* is not just a matter of being some *body*’ (1, 252). It is both. ‘As somebody, one cannot be plucked out of the continuity within which one is somebody and expect one’s being somebody to be evident from the atemporal (narratively disarticulated) body that is then made available as the object of study.’ One is relational—as Gillett puts it, ‘a-being-in-the-process-of-becoming-among-others’ (249). In the pages between these assertions he systematically advances an argument to prove his point. In the second chapter, ‘Origins’, he sets out to identify humanness from the perspective of philosophical and biological developmental theory. Exposing ethical issues, Gillett identifies topical questions concerning embryos vs. tissues, the continuance of personhood through successive molecular replacement, and the integration of a human subject/soul/self (2) as a subjective member of a community of like minded individuals (23). He steps boldly into the ethical debate on stem cell research and the impact such research has or may have on natural human life, and he suggests that stem cells might be used to enhance human life without resolving all the issues (24). Recognizing that there are significant medical health advantages as well as ‘significant ethical issues in relation to the therapeutic use of stem cells’ (29), Gillett identifies five areas of concern: the ‘placebo effect’ (29), ‘therapeutic pressure’, ‘long term complications’, ‘other long term dangers’, and ‘our conceptions of ourselves’ (30).

This discussion leads into the meaning of belonging—becoming the narrative subjective self. In the third chapter, ‘What I Am Not’ (32-61), Gillett concludes that ‘human identity is not that of a package of DNA’ (34) suggesting that this assertion raises the question of the formation of all people, particularly young human beings, within a horizon or framework which includes a subset of relevant stories which evoke the sense of belongingness in what he terms ‘localized history’ (34-5). Personal identity and genetic identity are distinguishable argues Gillett, as he goes on to discuss the debate concerning cloning. As in his discussion on stem cell tissue in the previous chapter, Gillett challenges his readers to re-examine, and perhaps re-state, the ethical argument (40) in light of the dynamic influence of personal and communal narrative (43). Further,

he suggests that questions concerning individual health might be addressed from the perspective of the narrative nature of identity and well-being (61). By way of clarification in Chapter 4 ('Metaphysical Subjectivity'), he states that the 'type of subject (may be discerned) by considering not only commonplace facts about perception but also the memories and story of the coming-to-be of the subject as a logical subject' (68).

Noting 'that human identity is (at every stage of development) a product of being-in-context' (101), in 'The Moral Subject' Gillett approaches the subject of memory from the standpoint of experience. Experience, for Gillett, is a history of a narrative identity structured and re-structured in association with others as beings-in-the-world (85). He comments that 'amnesic syndromes, in which a person suffers damage to parts of the brain subserving memory, reveal a great deal about the way that the brain organizes memory' (95). Interestingly, he suggests 'that all the functions loosely grouped as belonging to memory involve the modification (and continuous revision) of neural connections in the context of the unfolding story of the subject' (95). In this chapter and the next Gillett then goes on to discuss the active role of the participant 'in the compilation and editing of life experience' (96), which subsequently leads to the formation of memory and moral engagement with other beings-in-the-world. By the end of Chapter 6, 'The Sins of the Fathers', Gillett has introduced 'four holistically connected concepts' which he considers 'helpful in understanding a human being as a moral agent. First, the person is *an integrated rule follower* and so can think. Second and third, *thought structures action*, and fourth ... *a lived narrative* which is more-or-less coherent and informs ... conscious life and their identity' (123). Intentionality, human freedom and responsibility become the bridge between philosophical enquiry into the building of identity and what he calls the 'Mechanics of the Mind'. Gillett turns to the practical application of neuroscience and discusses 'the significance of neurological interventions in contemporary bio-medicine' (3). Included in the chapter entitled 'Deep Play in the Mechanics of the Mind' is a discussion of the moral issues surrounding the impact of psychosurgery and neuroimplantation on an individual's perception of identity (156-60). Gillett raises issues such as bi-polar disorder (57-8), split brains (146-55), Cybernetic enrichment (161), neuroimplantation (156), cyborgs (161-2), Locked in Syndrome (138), and Persistent Vegetative State (140). He devotes all of Chapter 8, 'Names and Narratives', to an ethical consideration of the diagnosis and care of the continuing identity/identities of human subjects living with Multiple Personality Disorder (170-93).

Clearly Gillett is writing for an audience engaged in the philosophical ethics of neuroscience; however, this book, though complex, does offer insights to the non-professional reader interested in the issues surrounding the care of persons living with neurological challenges. It suggests stepping back to reflect on ways of encouraging such persons to develop ways of being-in-the-world-with-others (145). Chapter 9, 'Care of the Soul', brings to the fore the debate surrounding the 'division between body, *soul / psyche / mind*, and *spirit*' (194). Traditional philosophical and theological definitions and ways of understanding the relationship between body, mind and spirit are presented by Gillett, who suggests that 'it would be mistaken to identify spiritual or ethical aspects of our being with any complex of neurological functions arising from or caused by structures associated with the temporal and limbic systems', even though spiritual awareness does

give cognizance to a human being's way-of-being-in-the-world (220). This discussion is taken further in Chapter 10, 'The Expulsion of Humanity', as Gillett introduces cognitive impairment such as Alzheimer's Disease. The associated degradation of cognition and re-evaluation of identity pose ethical considerations at every level of interconnecting relationships. Within the context of the narrativity of life Gillett discusses subjectivity, and he proposes that the recognition of the uniqueness of every individual human being be affirmed (232). He asserts that in acknowledging this uniqueness the ethics of care, consideration and dignity are fundamental to being in relationship with and understanding the dynamic evolving (or in the case of cognitive degradation, devolving) nature of other human subjects.

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