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Facing the future

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Date: 03-13-06 16:53

In early September 2006, when the Society of Fellows began planning this roundtable discussion, face-transplantation was a looming possibility, not an established reality. Given that the Society is a community of young scholars from across the disciplines in the humanities and social sciences, our goal was to use a specific, and admittedly somewhat “sexy” contemporary issue in medical ethics, as an occasion to explore concretely how different disciplinary perspectives differently structure and enable analysis of a contemporary ethical issue. Our interest was as much practical as theoretical. Each of us is charged primarily with teaching the core curriculum in humanities and social sciences here at University of Chicago. And each of us approaches our common core teaching from distinct disciplinary backgrounds, raising questions about how to understand what makes core teaching “core” exactly. Reflection on the import of disciplinary perspectives to core teaching seemed especially relevant, because most of the core courses are organized around big general themes, under such titles as “Human Being and Citizen,” “Power, Identity, Resistance,” and “Self, Culture, and Society.” Our aim was to host a public, interdisciplinary brain storm, not with any expectation that we would be able to answer the many questions raised by face transplantation; but instead to test the benefit of interdisciplinary research and teaching as means to discern what kinds of questions are most important to ask.

Each in a distinctive way, Naomi Beck and William Schweiker pose a challenging critique of the “obvious” questions that arise when thinking about face transplantation. Rather than question the permissibility of the procedure, or its potential import for conceptions of personal identity, Beck inquires about the social, cultural, historical, and economic conditions out of which the specific medical procedure becomes possible. What are the values that must have already long since been in play, she asks, that are the precondition of wondering about the value of this particular surgical procedure? Scientific discoveries and advances are typically proclaimed as if they emerge out of their own natural momentum; yet such cannot be the case. In the contemporary world, massive institutional and national investments drive scientific research. And it is improbable, at best, to imagine that the institutional processes enabling science are value-neutral; as if scientific innovations can be evaluated apart from the commitments that make the innovations possible. And as if, perhaps most important, the weight of those prior commitments don’t create an overwhelming imperative for their realization. As a result, once the real possibility emerges of an innovative procedure, the moment to question its purpose and permissibility is likely past. In part because the stakes, as Beck’s two examples underscore, are likely as much geopolitical as they are local or scientific. National prestige may be as equally or even more significant a motivating force, than therapeutic benefit. The actual occurrence of the procedure we had chosen as our topic, between the planning and the event of the roundtable discussion, in its own small way evinces how scientific innovation regularly outpaces its ethical analysis.

As a result, analysis of the specific procedure, following out the train of Beck’s remarks, may be irrelevant at best. Worse, it may manifest a significant blindness to tougher, more intransigent, and arguably more compelling areas of critical inquiry. It is in this vein that I take William Schweiker’s theological-ethical reflections on the “face” as a synecdoche of moral personality. Rather than provide analysis of the surgery that

took place in France last November, instead Schweiker raises pointed questions about the relation of moral responsibility to aesthetic self-presentation. In particular, whether surgical alterations or substitutions of the body in general, and face transplantation in particular, can potentially undermine or otherwise alter long-lived and highly cherished conceptions of morally responsible self-identity. For Schweiker, the answer with regard to face transplantation appears yes; but this is an unhappy affirmative. The prospect that one's face could cease to signify one's "self," morally speaking, is alarming, to say the least. To stay the threat of surgical alteration to the conditions of moral personality, he draws on the distinction, familiar in medical ethics, between "therapy" and "enhancement." Therapy, he suggests, aims to restore the "self" to itself, by restoring one's standing within one's community. Therapy is therefore a good for both individual and community, since it restores a broken relation and thereby restores moral responsibility. Enhancement, by contrast, seems to be a kind of over-reaching of the self; and as such it degrades rather than restores. Although Schweiker doesn't explain how exactly enhancement degrades, the suggestion seems to be that it destabilizes the presentation of self in community, that it manifests a kind of dishonesty, or at least a desire to elide the traces of one's character that make one's face distinctively one's own. And that it thereby degrades the cohesion of a community of morally responsible selves.

Given the extent to which cosmetic surgical procedures are rapidly becoming more and more available on demand across the globe; the extent to which cosmetic procedures provide a basis for forms of popular entertainment; the extent to which these entertainments celebrate cosmetic surgery and function in turn as marketing for members of the American Board of Plastic Surgery; and the extent to which consumers of cosmetic surgical procedures regularly justify, in multiple senses of this term, their purchase of cosmetically improved selves precisely in terms of a purported enhancement to their moral identities; Schweiker's concerns are highly compelling. Even so, I find they compel precisely because they suggest that the distinction between "therapy" and "enhancement" may not finally be viable or sustainable. As many others do, Schweiker introduces the distinction in order to delimit a clear boundary that separates the permissible and non-permissible. Yet Schweiker's conclusion potentially powerfully undermines that distinction. And this tension in his argument I find a strength, not a weakness, because it points to the ways in which the conceptual coherence and practical relevance of analytical distinctions may be much less static than is assumed by persons who typically invoke them.

If, as Schweiker suggests, the culture that funds and promotes such a surgical procedure as face transplantation is a culture obsessed with the body, a culture that refuses to accommodate disfigurement except on its own terms, as a disaster that merits therapeutic response, instead of an alteration of self that prompts re-integration of the altered self into the community; what basis finally exists on which to determine where "therapy" ends and "enhancement" begins? Schweiker's conclusion, as foreboding as it seems at first glance, might then turn out to be more optimistic than otherwise; because it holds fast to the hope that analytical distinctions of ethical argument can withstand the juggernaut of economic, cultural, and national forces that produce the possibility of face transplantation in the first place.

Perhaps the underlying question is: Can we face the future we are creating for ourselves?

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About-Face

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Date: 03-07-06 22:57

*While this technique [of face transplantation] holds some promise for people who have suffered serious facial disfiguring, its sinister possibilities are unmistakable. In an age of identity theft and virtual realities, the face has remained one of the last traces of human selfhood. When faces become masks we can change at will, where does the fake end and the real begin?*

-- Mark C. Taylor

Mark C. Taylor's question in this epigraph shares the same general trajectory as Naomi Beck's parting question in her essay on the historical context of face transplants: "Is a face transplant of the same order as cosmetic and plastic surgery, or is it something else...?" Taylor's comments also resonate with the concerns voiced by Professor Schweiker in his paper on moral identity and face transplantation, which provides a response to these questions. According to Schweiker, whose essay I will focus on here, face transplants are ethically inadmissible for cosmetic purposes, and should be strongly resisted even for therapeutic purposes.

Having proffered this judgment, Schweiker opines that in our "aesthetically driven culture," he runs the risk of being considered "too morally rigorous." Let me be clear here at the outset of this short response: I believe that the problem is not that Schweiker is "too morally rigorous," but rather that his argument is insufficiently nuanced, and thus insensitive to the range of moral issues at stake in this debate. In this connection, one should be aware that Schweiker's suggestion that he might be seen as too morally rigorous functions as a defensive rhetorical conceit; it suggests that any critique of his position will betray a slackening of moral principles. But this is simply not the case. It is the case that failing to point out the shortcomings in Schweiker's analysis would only contribute to the plight of those who might benefit from face transplants and the like, furthering the detrition of their 'humanity.' I will thus make it my task here to complicate and critique Schweiker's assessment of the current situation.

Allow me briefly to recapitulate Schweiker's argument. He believes that what is "most important for the idea of 'moral identity'"—where moral identity has to do with being able "to identify ourselves or someone else as the author of deeds for which she or he is then responsible"—is recognition of "continuity of selfhood," through which the individual "meets conditions required to 'ascribe' actions to her or him [so] that others can impute actions to that individual." The "face" is especially important because it is a "marker" or "synecdoche" for the "whole person," for that continuous selfhood. There is, therefore, "strong warrant to resist transplantation" for therapeutic ends, while "the transplantation of a face purely for reasons of enhancement," Schweiker insists, "is not ethically acceptable." The "only plausible warrant" for such procedures "is rehabilitation of the person's moral identity as basic to the very conditions of their being responsible beings" [sic.]. In other words, face transplants are ethically justified if and only if the procedure facilitates, or at least does not impinge upon, the ability to impute actions to the individual agent. To allow for procedures "purely for reasons of enhancement" by the "much too easy manipulation" available through technological interventions will "diminish our humanity." Thus, what is at stake "is the extent to which we do or do not take the moral identity of a person as most

definitive of an individual's life or if some other marker of identity—say aesthetic self-presentation or cultural acceptability—is most deeply valued.”

The elegant progression of Schweiker's exposition, coupled with the rhetoric and tone of rectitude, make the argument seem at first unassailable, and its conclusion unimpeachable. But there are several points on which the account proves insufficient, suggesting that a more ethically nuanced response is needed.

First, in stating the high stakes of the debate (“the extent to which we do or do not take the moral identity of a person as most definitive of an individual's life or if some other marker of identity—say aesthetic self-presentation or cultural acceptability—is most deeply valued”) Schweiker, like many before him, posits a distinction between aesthetics and morality. While earlier in his paper he has rightly admitted that the *aesthetic* dimensions of the face are connected to the “basic need for social recognition within the dynamics of self-understanding and self-esteem, and so also one's moral identity,” here he seems to want to oppose the two. This problematic dichotomization—moral identity vs. aesthetics—emerges poignantly in Schweiker's conclusion that face transplantation “purely for reasons of enhancement” is ethically unacceptable. Given Schweiker's own emphasis on the importance of the face to moral identity, it is inconceivable that there should be such a thing as a face transplant “purely for reasons of enhancement.”

Whatever reasons one might proffer for pursuing a face transplant—even if those reasons be putatively for the sake of enhanced beauty—this will necessarily also be intertwined with moral identity. Indeed, a transplant will inevitably be tightly bound up with issues of social integration, self-esteem, and other such matters that, by Schweiker's admission, are interwoven with the moral fabric of a person (regardless of whether the individual would or could offer these moral concerns as reasons for transplantation). The reason that Schweiker deems the French example to be “a good test case” for warranting a transplant is precisely because the aesthetics of the face are “powerfully indexed to social practices of inclusion and exclusion,” including self-esteem and such. In sum, as he formulates the constitutive conditions for moral identity in this essay, Schweiker both *insists* on the distinction (claiming that transplantation for “purely” aesthetic reasons is unacceptable) and *denies* it (in his claim that the aesthetic dimensions of the face are intimately connected to the need for social recognition and therefore moral identity).

Further, the general orientation of the comments with regard to the therapeutic use of face transplant technologies seems to me rather reactionary. Only in this particular sense is Schweiker's judgment “too rigorous”: his argument is indeed insufficiently flexible to accommodate the possibilities that he cannot or does not want to see. When the technology exists to bring relief to those who suffer from, for example, severe facial defects that cause them anguish, it is—to my mind, at least—immoral to deprive them of the most expeditious procedures possible.

In a similar vein, consider this question: What *precisely* is the danger of face transplantation, by Schweiker's account? On the one hand, he claims that face transplants diminish our ability to read continuity of selfhood, which in turn endangers our ability to impute responsibility for actions. On the other hand, he says that “we know...that someone who is horribly injured in the face...is the same ‘person’ as she was before the accident.” The juxtaposition of these claims highlights a kind of confusion in Schweiker's essay. If we can discern the continuing selfhood of an injured person despite a severely disfiguring facial injury—which would render a face “unreadable”—what danger is there in replacing a face? Similarly, it is not apparent on the basis of his essay that Schweiker can coherently adjudicate between what constitutes admissible and inadmissible facial transformation. To the point: Why *exactly* is it that a face changing with age does not constitute an ethical

problem, while one that is surgically altered does?

All this points to another problem—that of the putative legibility of the face. Schweiker relies on an old, entrenched, and problematic model according to which the body, and especially the face, are taken to be reflections of the inner self. While over the course of most of his essay he understands the face as a way of ascertaining continuity of selfhood, in his conclusion we find a troubling conceptual slippage. Here he claims that the “‘face’ draw[s ] significance” from its “capacity to indicate moral character”—and not merely the continuity of moral agency—“of an individual.” But this is just the kind of logic that might underwrite certain forms of racial and sexual prejudice.

There are a great many other issues that would further complicate Schweiker’s account—from the use of simply cosmetic make-up to the practice of drastic body modification, from cyborg culture to transvestism and gender reassignment procedures—but space prevents me from raising them here. Let me conclude by suggesting that, as we move ineluctably toward an era of multifacility, we will need to develop a hermeneutic adequate to the task of adjudicating the moral and ethical problems attendant upon that shift. My hope is that we will open ourselves to the possibilities of facial transplantation so as to contribute to the flourishing of individuals, however hard they may be to “read.” To begin mapping out these new ways of thinking has not been my concern here, and it is a task better left to Schweiker and other gifted ethicists. It is, I believe, their duty and privilege to formulate ways of recognizing moral selfhood and imputability beyond the limits of mere faciality, in order to speak relevantly to the changing face of contemporary culture.

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Re: About-Face

Author: [mbaldwin](#) (---.aep.bellsouth.net)

Date: 03-13-06 09:30

Two things here are important, in my view:

1) You artfully expose the problematic assertion that a natural disaster which changes the face (e.g. fire, dog attack, or even a disfiguring assault) somehow does not disrupt moral identity enough to warrant a therapeutic surgery which theoretically can "restore" that same identity.

2) You rightfully suggest that Schweiker's argument would render cosmetics, piercings, tatoos, gender-reassignment, and, although you don't suggest it, even facial hair as deeply problematic from an ethical standpoint. This should be compared, by the way, to ancient Israelite taboos which, in modern interpretation, would place restrictions on all of these practices in one way or another: no tatoos, no gender-bending, no shaving the corners of the head, no tearing the flesh. Even the art of cosmetics is connected with human sin and the rebel angels in 1 Enoch.

Nevertheless, I disagree that we are "ineluctably [moving] towards an era of multifacility." Yes, we are more open, or perhaps you might argue that we should be more open, to plasticity, and to temporary anonymity

(e.g. the masquerade, although this is now the chat-room). Nevertheless I do not anticipate... yet... the ability to swap in and out of faces depending upon your mood in the morning, as if these were laying alongside the base-makeup and the eyeliner on our vanities.

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