Forgetting Yourself

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The self is the basic unit of personality and personal identity. It is who and what we are. Philosophers debate competing theories of the self. These theories portray the self as, for example, a “bundle of perceptions” (Chisholm 1994, 97); a rational agent structured and motivated by internalized general norms (Piper 1985); a homuncular system of effective agents and subagents (Johnston 1988); and a duality of conscious and unconscious motives accessible through psychoanalysis (Erwin, 1988). Philosophers also debate the seeming capacities of the self, such as self-knowledge and self-deception. Self-knowledge—what it means to “know thyself”—has been a frequent subject for explorations of mind, language, and epistemology (Cassam 1994), whereas self-deception has been a favorite topic of contemporary moral psychology (McLaughlin and Rorty 1988).

We humans may be able to know ourselves and deceive ourselves, but, according to an idiomatic English-language expression, we also are able to forget ourselves. Though fundamental to persons, selves can be forgotten. Consider this hypothetical instance of forgetting oneself.

Case 1: Jo takes care of her elderly mother, who is in poor health. Jo normally behaves lovingly toward her mother, as she believes she ought. But one day Jo is especially tired and feels sorry for herself. When her mother makes a request that Jo would ordinarily fill without hesitation or protest, Jo curses, denies the request, and storms away. Afterward, Jo is ashamed and feels fortunate that others did not witness her discourteous behavior.

Jo has “lost her cool.” Her outburst is an example of forgetting oneself.

As I shall explain it, to forget yourself is, inadvertently and temporarily, to abandon the manners or morals—the communal norms of decorum or decency—that generally sustain both social approval and self-esteem. Forgetting yourself typically stems from lapses of self-awareness or, as in Case 1, self-control. Often, forgetting yourself is to be in what Gilbert Ryle described as one of those “situations in which a person admits that he did not know at the time what he was doing, although what he was doing was not an automatism but an intelligent operation” (1994, 25). A person who forgets himself or herself is not “alive to what he is doing all the time he is doing it” (1994, 27).

Self-deception also involves failing to be wholly alive to what one is up to. When taken literally, forgetting yourself, like deceiving yourself, is a puzzling phenomenon. Self-deception, literally construed, is a matter of fooling the self; it paradoxically entails believing and disbelieving the same propositions at the same time. Forgetting yourself, literally construed, paradoxically entails simultaneously remembering and not remembering your own identity as a person who accepts and adheres to particular norms. If we accept as valid the appealing but controversial conception of the self characterized by Amelie Rorty (McLaughlin and Rorty 1988, 13) as “strongly integrated, capable of critical, truth-oriented reflection, with its various functions in principle accessible to, and correctible by, one another,” both forgetting and deceiving yourself should be impossible. Anyone but one’s own self should be forgettable. Anyone but one’s own self should be deceivable.

Nevertheless, in hypothetical Case 1, Jo manages to forget herself. A person with Jo’s responsibilities might also deceive herself. Imagine the self-deception of sons and daughters like Jo who resent obligations of elder-care but cannot acknowledge resentment concerning the care of their own mothers. Imagine, too, that paradoxes of self-deception and forgetting yourself operate in tandem in such instances: You deceive yourself about the burdens of caring for your mother, refuse to hire a private-duty nurse, allow your frustrations to grow, and eventually forget yourself in a regrettable outburst.

Forgetting yourself has affinities to akrasia, also known as “moral backsliding” or “weakness of the will”—a phenomenon Georges Rey (1988) has discussed in connection with self-deception. Like self-deception and forgetting yourself, akrasia has a paradoxical quality. Assuming a certain contested conception of the self as rationally motivated and free, how is it possible for a person to know what is right, good, best, or virtuous, but fail to do it? Akrasia occurs, if it occurs at all, when a rational person deliberately breaches what he or she knows to be a morally binding behavioral norm. According to my analysis, forgetting yourself also consists of breaching what you know (or at least believe) to be a binding behavioral requirement.

But the chief differences between forgetting yourself and akrasia are these: First, instances of forgetting yourself can involve nonmoral as well as moral norms; and second, forgetting yourself involves lapses of self-awareness or self-control rather than intentional, deliberate behavior. By contrast, paradigmatic instances of akrasia involve strictly moral norms and self-aware,
deliberate acts of noncompliance. A moral backslider with the responsibilities of Jo in Case 1 might slip away for an hour each week to satisfy her craving for a certain television program, thereby deliberately violating her admitted obligation to continuously monitor her elderly mother’s needs. By definition, then, *akrasia* is a moral breach. (Morality certainly cannot commend the negligent abandonment of one’s helpless charges.) Yet *akrasia* may function to relieve pent-up resentment of the sort that can lead frustrated people to forget themselves.

Philosophers have written volumes about the phenomena of self-knowledge, self-deception, and *akrasia*. The same cannot be said of forgetting yourself. A comprehensive philosophy of the self would include an account of this interesting phenomenon. My purpose is to frame such an account and then to link it to current concerns about awareness of group membership and racial identity. Achieving the liberal ideal of a “color-blind society” may be a practical impossibility. In order for a color-blind society to emerge, people need to be able to put race out of their own minds and keep it out of the minds of succeeding generations of youth. I want to suggest that although it is doubtless possible to put race out of one’s mind, many Americans are too racially self-aware and/or race-conscious to do so. Among many African Americans, race-consciousness has become a matter of group pride. For them, forgetting race is “acting white” and acting white is something for which a black should be condemned. To the extent that it breaches an African American subgroup norm against acting white, forgetting race would seem to be explicable as an instance of forgetting yourself.

I do not defend a particular conception of the self, although my analysis may entail some conceptions or rule out others. My account of “forgetting yourself” is consistent with at least one important conception of the self—namely, the conception of the self as governed by rule-like norms. There is considerable appeal to the notion that we are “Kantian” selves “defined by ... general prescriptive principles [internalized in the normal process of socialization] to which we are usually disposed to conform our emotions, action and habits” (Piper 1985, 182–183). Forgetting ourselves can be seen, from within a “Kantian” framework, as failing to do as we are generally motivated to do—that is, as failing to conform “our emotions, action and habits” to certain socially instilled general prescriptive principles.

**Forgetting Decorum and Decency**

According to another old-fashioned, idiomatic English-language expression, selves can be forgotten. I can forget myself. You can forget yourself. We can forget ourselves. Even the awkward people described as “self-conscious” and the commanding ones described as “self-possessed” are capable, on occasion, of forgetting themselves.

“Forgetting yourself” is a figure of speech. It is not a literal act. When we “forget ourselves,” we have not literally ceased to remember who we are. We know who we are. More precisely, we know as much about ourselves as we ever did. We retain memories of our unique and individual personal identities. We can recall facts about ourselves, such as our names, occupations, ethnicities, and tastes. But when we “forget ourselves,” we breach applicable rules, standards, virtues, or other behavioral norms. We fail to comply with norms of social decorum or moral decency applicable to persons with our traits, capacities, roles, and good characters. Fine actors, for example, occasionally forget their lines, and fine citizens occasionally forget to be decent and decorous.

We are social creatures, products of communal forms of life. Communal relationships and values are sometimes said to be constitutive of personal identity, shaping who we are and what we value (Benhabib 1992, 73–74). The social character of the self as dependent upon the material and normative resources of communities does not entail the assumption that people are more automatized than autonomous. To varying degrees, people can and do reflect on the point of conformity to communal conceptions of appropriate and inappropriate affects, attitudes, and conduct.

In many instances, conformity to communal norms of decorum and decency strikes us as something about which we have a choice. And in most instances we choose to go along. Indeed, our decision to conform to well-established or pervasively accepted patterns of behavior often helps to sustain our self-concepts as responsible, cooperative members of society. Thus, the same “good” behavior that wins social approval also earns self-esteem. Capable of what Gilbert Ryle called “higher-order self-dealings” (quoted in Cassam 1994, 39), we adults take on the aspect of “prefect[s] regulating [our] own conduct.” We are responsible people who deserve self-esteem and the esteem of others, not because we have blindly adhered to communal norms but, rather, because we have chosen to regulate our conduct in accordance with reasonable social expectations.

Most people behave as they are supposed to, according to social rule and role. Yet whereas many social expectations are hardly enough to survive wintry critique, others wilt under cool scrutiny (Benhabib 1992, 74). In recent decades, the latter has been the fate of the distinctly oppressive social expectations that once confined women and people of color to subservient roles in the national economy of the United States. So, when we say in earnest that someone has forgotten himself or herself, the norms we presuppose may be widely accepted, entrenched communal norms of the sort that the best political, moral, or legal theories would not endorse.
Why We Forget Ourselves

People typically forget themselves either because they are inattentive (to what they are doing or where they are doing it) or because they are overcome or excited by emotion. Jealousy, anger, lust, and fear can lead individuals to forget themselves. Sometimes it is a drug or alcohol that makes a person less attentive or more subject to their emotions. In fact, people commonly drink to lower their inhibitions. And for the most part, they do so in what mainstream American cultural norms deem appropriate settings and contexts. They drink at home, in bars, and at parties. But I would stress that deliberately ingesting drugs or alcohol so that one can “let down one’s hair” is not the same thing as forgetting oneself. Normally, when we are hoping to let down our hair, we are not hoping to forget ourselves. It is one thing to take a drink, hoping it will embolden us to ask a friend to bed; and something else to make a pass, unexpectedly, at our friend’s spouse. Only the latter counts as forgetting ourselves. I would also stress, in connection with altered states of consciousness, that although we may joke that a stand-offish, somber person made giddy and gregarious by a drink has forgotten himself, we do not mean it. We are making light of that person’s disposition to take the virtue of sobriety to an extreme.

People try not to forget themselves even when they are tired, angry, and intoxicated. For although the consequences of forgetting ourselves can be trivial and amusing, sometimes they are highly shameful and harmful to ourselves and others. The following hypothetical case illustrates an inconsequential, trivial instance of forgetting oneself. In this instance the breach stems from inattention, a lapse of attention brought on by exhaustion and ennui.

Case 2: Pam is a vice president at a major corporation. She is sitting at a table in a windowless conference room filled with staid colleagues who are politely debating proposed strategies for marketing a new product. It is very late in the evening and her mind begins to wander. She begins to think about a pleasant musical she attended the night before. She starts to hum one of its tunes. A close friend sitting nearby gently nudes Pam to restore her attention. Pam then realizes that she had forgotten herself.

Here, forgetting oneself has resulted in a minor breach of social etiquette and professional decorum.

In the United States, people hum aloud in public, but typically in churches or at music lessons, parties, rock concerts, and such. It is not the rule (though also not rare) to hear someone humming while applying for a bank loan or observing the cross-examination of a star witness in court. Sophisticated professionals avoid humming at business meetings. They consider it inappropriate. They know that humming in the midst of a meeting suggests absentmindedness or indifference. Absentminded inattention undermines the confidence of clients, customers, and colleagues. Of course, some successful businesspeople are tolerated as eccentric individualists who are either prone to absentmindedness or consciously unwilling to “play the role.” For the latter group, humming during lulls in meetings might be ordinary, self-aware behavior.

A significant feature of Case 2 is that Pam’s close friend, rather than another person sitting nearby, nudes her to attention. Forgetting oneself is an asocial moment: The forgetting subject goes private, slipping away from the constraining norms of the public, communal realm. Friends want us to keep our jobs, our “faces,” our standing in the community. Good-hearted strangers may want the same thing for us. But there is a limit on acceptable and comfortable paternalistic intrusion by non-intimates. In the realm of mere etiquette and decorum (as in Case 2), perhaps the most polite thing a stranger, mere acquaintance, or co-worker can do when someone forgets himself or herself is to pretend it did not happen. If others convincingly pretend not to have noticed, they spare the forgetting subject the embarrassment of knowing for certain that others witnessed his or her deviance. By contrast, our friends have duties as friends that go beyond polite evasion. They ought not allow us to make fools of ourselves by, for example, violating workplace or other norms. Friends have special permission to reach into our privacy and, with a nudge, a telling glance, or a reprimand, to draw us back into the public arena.

Rebellion and Critique

Forgetting oneself is an act of nonconformity, though not an intentional act of rebellion or critique. But, clearly, failing to conform to established norms is sometimes a good thing. Pam (from Case 2) is no rebel against corporate culture, and she is embarrassed by her lapse of decorum. Yet her lapse possibly has a beneficial consequence. It may usefully signal to others that their meeting has gone on too long and should be ended. Similarly, in a society where women are not supposed to talk back to men, beneficial consequences may flow when a normally subservient woman “forgets herself” by telling off her husband or father. Stubbornly conventional cultural insiders would view the woman’s behavior as “misbehavior.” But letting off steam in response to oppression may have psychological and political advantages that incline outsider or insider culture critics to view inadvertent misbehavior with favor.

A third hypothetical case illustrates a consequential instance of forgetting oneself. In Case 2 the “forgetting” was a matter of inattention; in the following case, as in Case 1, it is a matter of unbridled emotion.
Case 3: Min is a high school teacher. For the third day in a row she is trying to teach history to a group of unruly students who have come to class unprepared. She is angry. In response to a simple question, a volatile student she knows to be suffering from poor self-esteem gives her an especially ill-informed answer. Min blurts out: "Idiot! That's the stupidest thing I've heard all year, and I've heard plenty of stupid things in this class!" The student hurl's a pile of textbooks in Min's direction and sobs. Min immediately realizes that her testy words to the vulnerable student were imprudent and wrong.

Min has forgotten herself. And forgetting herself has resulted in a breach of what many might regard as a role-related ethical responsibility. In contemporary American education, name-calling is considered intemperate behavior for teachers. Most teachers do not engage in it at all; but almost anyone can forget himself or herself when sufficiently provoked.

If forgetting ourselves involves innocuous behavior such as humming show tunes at work, it can win us approval as "spontaneous" and "original." But if forgetting ourselves involves injurious behavior such as demoralizing children or the elderly, it can damage our reputations, relationships, and self-esteem. The social realm is constituted such that we forget ourselves only at our peril.

For some, the peril is mortal. In the Jim Crow era, southern blacks who forgot themselves in spontaneous displays of passion in their dealings with whites risked being jailed or lynched. The film version of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* included a fictional account of a feisty young woman named Sophia who was beaten and jailed for swearing at the white mayor's wife. When dealing with whites, Sophia normally remembered her place, her communal role as a social inferior. But that day, the mayor's scatter-brained wife innocently insulted Sophia in the presence of Sophia's children—and Sophia lost her temper. She forgot herself, and then nearly lost her life.

Social norms of the Old South appear to have made it possible for one and the same behavior to count as moral misdemeanor or serious offense depending upon the race of the offender and victim. My impression is that a white man discovered to have made a spontaneous pass at a white or black woman rarely had cause to fear serious retribution in the hands of black or white society; but a black man discovered to have made a spontaneous pass at a white woman risked death in the hands of an angry white mob. In short, a racist society may construct a particular action as either "forgetting yourself" or "heinous crime" depending upon the race of the offender.

An Internal Conception

As social beings, our personal identities are intimately linked with our communities of origin and influence, and thus with the behavioral norms they prescribe for us. Individuals internalize (i.e., accept as binding) many of the behavioral norms that they learn from social interactions with others. When individuals conceive of themselves or others as having forgotten themselves, these internalized values are their points of reference. Forgetting oneself, then, entails failing to conform to behavioral norms of the sort we know to be constitutive of individuals situated in communal forms of life.

On what I shall call the "internal" conception of forgetting oneself, to forget oneself is to deviate briefly from an internalized behavioral norm. We can imagine that Pam and her friend from Case 2 have internalized the positive norms of the corporate world as their own. They do not regard humming show tunes as appropriate behavior during business meetings. If in a rare moment of distraction Pam audibly hums, she has acted inappropriately, against the norm. Pam's short-lived deviation from the internally endorsed no-humming norm is an instance of forgetting herself. But now compare Pam to Peter.

Case 4: On his first day with the company as a management trainee, Peter hums to himself during a lull in an important meeting with Pam and others. As it happens, Peter thinks nothing of public humming. He does it anywhere, everywhere, all the time. Peter is unaware that Pam and others regard such behavior as unprofessional. Pam, who is embarrassed for Peter, thinks "That man has forgotten himself."

From an internal perspective, Peter has not forgotten himself at all. He has not internalized the norms of the corporate world. The self that he is values public humming as an appropriate or neutral distraction.

Pam's attribution of "forgetfulness" registers her own values. Indeed, her value judgment has social determinants and is shared by most others in her corporate professional milieu. Her assessment of Peter tells us something about Pam and the social groups to which Pam belongs. Pam is not unlike the adults who say of mannerless children that they have "forgotten themselves," when the children have simply not (yet) grown to accept the norms of the adult world as their own internal social norms. Parents say "Behave yourselves!" and "Don't forget yourselves!" to children to exhort them to use good manners and adhere to social rules. They say these things despite the "truisms of the playroom and schoolroom" (Ryle 1994, 38) that adhering to norms of self-restraint is higher-order behavior and that "[h]igher-order actions are not instinctive" (Ryle 1994, 38). Learning to be a certain sort of disciplined self and learning not to forget that self are components of early childhood education. Sometimes when an adult says "You're forgetting yourself!" to a child displaying socially inappropriate behavior, the truth of the matter is that the child has not yet become a fully socially groomed self. The child cannot forget a self that he or she has not yet become. And like
Peter from Case 4, the child cannot breach a norm he or she does not yet recognize as binding. The admonitions of the parent are *ex cathedra*: “Do not forget yourself!” really means “Do not violate communal norms; do as you are supposed to do.”

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Euphemism, Metaphor, and Excuse

Aggregated in this section are the key features of my analysis of forgetting yourself, as suggested by the foregoing hypothetical cases. First, the expression “forgetting yourself” functions as a metaphor. It does so because when we say people have forgotten themselves, we fully realize that no such thing has literally occurred. There is no amnesia. It is only as if their memories of the socially or morally compliant people—the proper selves—we know they have slipped away.

Forgetting oneself is a deviation from a person’s ordinary patterns of behavior, which include a tendency to obey social rules of etiquette, morality, and law. People can forget themselves in the internalist sense and violate rules they think are silly; or forget themselves and violate rules they accept and judge to be sound. Whether forgetting oneself will be a source of regret or remorse depends upon the significance one attaches to the patterns or standards of conduct one has breached and their possibly adverse consequences. One might not regret having forgotten oneself and told an amusing off-color joke at a dull family gathering. But one might well regret having forgotten oneself and flown into a violent jealous rage.

Second, “forgetting yourself” functions as euphemism. “She forgot herself” or “He forgot himself” is a distinctly polite way of saying, for example, that a sophisticated person has been vulgar; a sensitive person, insensitive; a kind person, malicious; a calm person, passionate. Speakers normally reserve the “forgetting yourself” expression for situations in which an adult whose behavior, though generally in line, gets out of line, failing to be socially decorous or morally decent.

Third, forgetting oneself is a brief and infrequent deviation from practice. It is a temporary lapse. Forgetting oneself is not a persistent habit or pattern of ill-mannered or immoral behavior. Forgetting oneself involves short-lived inattention, absentmindedness, and similar lapses of self-awareness; it also entails “losing one’s head” to passionate emotion and similar lapses of self-control. The expression “losing oneself” can refer to longer-term lapses of self-awareness. An artist may “lose himself” or “lose herself” in work for hours or even days. Forgetting oneself is not unlike “acting out of character.” However, as the phrase is generally understood, people can “act out of character” for a period of time, but they cannot “forget themselves” for more than a few seconds or several minutes. If I join a week-long criminal conspiracy hoping to get money to pay off debts, I act out of character; I do not forget myself.

It seems basic to the concept of forgetting yourself that episodes of inattention (as in Case 2) or unbridled emotion (as in Cases 1 and 3) are infrequent and brief. A typically decorous teacher who experiences several outbursts of anger in one day could aptly report that she repeatedly forgot herself that day. Better yet, she could aptly report that she was not herself that day. But a typically decorous teacher who routinely began breaching rules of decorum and decency day after day would seem to have undergone a change of personality or moral character. Of such a person one might say “He is not himself.” Teachers who habitually lash out in anger at their students do not qualify as people who have forgotten themselves. Rather, they are insensitive people with poor self-control. Similarly, it would violate standard conceptual usage to say that people who always swear at the elderly, chew their nails in public, or hum the scores of musicals in meetings have “forgotten themselves.”

Fourth, forgetting oneself can be morally culpable behavior. Case 3 provides an example. The teacher’s behavior in that case is wrong, though perhaps forgivable and excusable, assuming certain familiar facts about the working conditions of the teaching profession. One reason for ascribing moral fault is the recognition that many human beings have the power to cultivate habits and virtues that make forgetting oneself (in the form of, say, absentmindedness and emotionality) less likely. Conversely, inadequate sleep, alcohol consumption, and the use of narcotics—all of which may be quite deliberate and intentional—can lead to lapses of self-control and self-awareness. But the essential point here is that it makes sense for us to hold one another responsible for bad conduct that results from predictable lapses to which we substantially contribute.

Forgetting oneself can have adverse consequences that are either trivial or serious, but not too serious. If, for example, the consequences of a person’s immoral behavior include very serious physical or emotional injury to others, the expression “forgot himself or herself” no longer comfortably applies. The reason is that saying someone “forgot himself” carries with it the sense that the person has made a mistake of the sort people are entitled to make occasionally. Of course, there is no set list of the kinds of mistakes people are entitled to make. But brutal murder surely should not appear on such a list. Indeed, to describe a vicious murderer as someone who “forgot himself” (as opposed to someone who was temporarily reckless, insane, or enraged) would be to trivialize the infraction in a way that would seem appropriate only in the context of sarcasm or satire.

Finally, the expression “forgetting yourself” serves to excuse or forgive apparently rare or inappropriate conduct. It conveys the message that people
who generally do as they are supposed to do are entitled to make a mistake. Every dog is entitled to one bite and every human being is entitled to an occasional social breach. People who forget themselves, then, are not ill-mannered or immoral people, vulgar or bad in essence. If they were, we would describe their misfeasance differently. "Forgetting yourself" presupposes a conception of the self as mannerly or moral. The people who forget themselves are thus understood to fall into the category of corrigeble people whom one fully expects to behave well in the future because they have generally done so in the past. We categorize their nonconforming conduct as forgivable, excusable, and rare by attributing it to metaphorical lapses of memory (of their rule-, standard-, or other norm-governed, mannerly, or moral selves) rather than to lapses of virtue. It follows that when a person sincerely declares, "I forgot myself," he or she is imploring others to forgive or excuse what that person regards as atypical, episodic misbehavior.

Forgetting Race

I want to set aside, for a moment, the concept of "forgetting yourself" and focus briefly on simple, literal forgetting. Forgetting is a kind of cognitive disassociation that occurs all the time. Most of the individual acts and events that constitute our lives are forgotten. Most of the things we happen to remember or try to remember, we eventually forget. And some of the things we forget are subject to later recall. Consider Marcel Proust's Remembrance of Things Past, in which the author narrates lush, subtle depictions of the sensory stimuli—tastes, smells, sounds—that lead one to recover pleasant and unpleasant memories of the forgotten past from seeming oblivion.

The capacity to forget is remarkable, as are the range and significance of what we humans are capable of forgetting. We have all heard of people who have forgotten to eat, to pick up their children from school, or to pay for merchandise before leaving a store. Lately, I seem to forget the names of my students once a semester has passed. I frequently forget where I have placed my car keys until "I retrace my steps." I once forgot that I had purchased a bag of ginger-candy of a sort I am wont to crave, until I discovered it in my pantry a week later. I even forgot that I had had a bitter argument with an old friend, until I telephoned him after fifteen years without contact and he (still miffed) reminded me.

Once, I momentarily forgot my race. I forgot that I am an African American in a situation quite like this one.

Case 5: Jan is a university student. She is planning a party. She is discussing possible guests with her close friend, Peg. Peg suggests inviting Bob, who is an African American. Jan likes the idea, but suggests that Bob might feel out of place as the only African American at the party. Puzzled, Peg reminds Jan that she, Jan, is also an African American and, therefore, that Bob would not be the only African American at the party. Bemused, Jan realizes that, at least for a moment, she had forgotten her race.

This case, and my own experience, would seem to indicate that race is a forgettable attribute. Yet I would conjecture that forgetting race is an unusual occurrence among African Americans living in the United States. African Americans who escape acute forms of what I call "racial self-consciousness" are still prone to "race-consciousness." These two modes of self-awareness ensure that forgetting race is rare. I would conjecture that even American blacks who are well assimilated into white or bi-racial communities are subject to episodes of acute racial self-consciousness and/or race-consciousness.

Racial self-consciousness is awareness of belonging to a putatively inferior racial group, aggravated by feelings of shame and inferiority. I first fell victim to racial self-consciousness back in the 1960s when, at the age of six, I learned that I was a "Negro," called "out of my name" as "nigro," "black," and "nigger."

Race-consciousness, by contrast, is the tendency to select one's race as a subject matter of thought and conversation, but without feelings of personal inferiority. African Americans dwell on race because our dwelling-place is a society with a history of heinous forms of legally enforced racial discrimination and residual racism. Although I seldom talked about race during my childhood and teenage years in mostly racially integrated schools and neighborhoods, I thought about it all the time. Race looms large in black thought, even when it is not a topic of conversation. Conversations among blacks of every social and economic class routinely focus on the causes and consequences of racial disparities in the economic, social, or legal spheres touched by their lives. Indeed, many African Americans develop race-consciousness when they are still very young; and many African American intellectuals possess a highly developed, theoretically sophisticated race-consciousness.

Racialized Selves

Not everyone has a significantly racialized identity. But I believe most Americans do. 'Race,' for present purposes, is a generic name for the familiar categories that we in the United States pervasively employ when identifying individuals and groups for varied public and private purposes. We use racial categories for everything from choosing friends and lovers to allocating employment opportunities.

Our conceptions of race are remarkably functional. They establish social boundaries and set behavioral norms, even though they are complex admixtures of color concepts (White, Black, Red, Yellow, and Brown); quasi-scienc-
tific divisions (Caucasian, Negroid, and Mongoloid); and bureaucratic groupings for data collection and census-taking (White, Negro or Black, Asian or Pacific Islander, American Indian, Aleut, and Eskimo). Further complicating matters is the fact that conceptions of race blend a miscellany of popular distinctions, some derogatory, reflecting beliefs about national, continental, or linguistic origins (Irish, German, African American, Korean, Hispanic, Chicano, Haitian, Cuban, Puerto Rican, Multiracial, Eurasian); physical characteristics (cracker, chink); and social or citizenship status (WASP, wetback, dago, nigger). Although our conceptions of race are ambiguous, inconsistent, and, as noted, often derogatory, racial identity becomes an element of personal identity over the course of our lives.

Racial self-consciousness (self-awareness of supposed racial inferiority) is a social pathology. Race-consciousness (awareness of the societal significance of one's race) is not. Indeed, some people regard the absence of race-consciousness as pathological, contending that for an African American to lose or fail to acquire race-consciousness is to lose or fail to acquire an appropriate identity. Without such an identity, they argue, the ability to flourish in contemporary American society is seriously impaired. A commonly lodged objection to the adoption of black children by whites is that black children reared mainly among whites will fail to acquire race-consciousness and racial identity. Similar concerns about the loss of racial awareness and identity are voiced about suburban and affluent black teenagers who associate with white rather than black peers; and about black adults who marry whites or members of other racial groups. Out-marriage by black women seems especially likely to raise these concerns, owing, perhaps, to the assumption that husbands dominate their wives. A white husband, it is assumed, will culturally dominate his black wife and mixed-race children, to the detriment of their identities and to the ultimate detriment of black culture.

It has been many years since the time I forgot my race. But against the background of pervasive concerns about the loss of race-consciousness, identity, and culture, it has been hard to forget that I once forgot.

Forgetting Race as Forgetting Yourself

I presented Case 5, involving the black student who forgets that she is black, as illustrative of ordinary literal forgetting. I suggested that a person can forget that she purchased ginger-candy until reminded and, likewise, that she can forget her race until reminded. But I now want to consider the possibility that forgetting race, as in Case 5, is forgetting yourself.

In some respects, Case 5 is like Case 2, the case of the humming vice president who, in the metaphorical sense elaborated above, “forgot herself.” In both cases, a friend brings to another’s attention a fact of which the latter was not mindful. In Case 2, a vice president is told that she is humming; in Case 5, a university student is told that she is a member of a certain racial group.

To distinguish the cases, one might begin by pointing out that in Case 2 someone is informed for the first time of a fact she did not know, whereas in Case 5 someone is reminded of a fact she knew but was not alive to at that moment. Yet the vice president is also, in a sense, reminded of something. She is reminded that she and others believe humming in a business meeting inappropriate.

Another effort to distinguish the cases might center on the argument that Case 2 involves inadvertent violation of a prescriptive norm (i.e., the no-humming rule), whereas Case 5 involves a mistake of fact and no such violation. For this reason, perhaps Case 5 is best characterized as illustrating an ordinary lapse of memory rather than the phenomenon of “forgetting yourself.”

Does speaking to another as if you do not believe you are a member of the race of which you are in fact a member violate a normative prescription? To clarify that the university student in Case 5 was violating a behavioral norm, I want now to look at her behavior, not from the standpoint of general morals and mores but from that of the morals and mores of her African American subgroup. From this perspective Jan is potentially culpable of breaching norms against “acting white.” Upon first consideration, it might appear that a black person’s ability to forget his or her race is a good thing. Isn’t the capacity to forget race, after all, a step toward the color-blind society that the United States Supreme Court has pronounced as our collective, constitutional ideal? If forgetting race is “acting white” and many blacks consider “acting white” bad, so much the worse for blacks’ values. They are an impediment to the color-blind society?

I want to suggest that Case 5 is no unambiguously hopeful sign that the color-blind society is on its way or even possible. The norm against “acting white” is indeed problematic for its tendency to stereotype African Americans. But by far the larger problem than that of blacks’ expectation that other blacks will not “act white” is the pervasive context of racism and inequality that makes continued segregation attractive.

Community Norms

Large communities—nations, states, and cities—generate complex behavioral norms applicable to members of the community. These communal norms generally include “universal” norms that prescribe behavioral standards for everyone in the community and “group-specific” norms that prescribe behavioral standards only for individuals belonging to certain groups within the community. Thus some communal norms may apply only to adults, women, the aristocracy, a religious minority, a race, or a segment of a race. Group-specific communal norms commonly privilege some groups
groups. For example, the African American community has generated norms that apply to all African Americans as well as norms that apply only to African Americans of one sex or the other. Indeed, black women were once expected to assume caretaking roles with respect to orphan grandchildren, nieces, and nephews that black men were not expected to assume.

In addition, as a matter of courtesy, African Americans in traditional neighborhoods in the South were expected to “speak” to other African Americans they met in passing (i.e., to acknowledge them with a polite greeting or nod of the head). Yet they were not expected to behave in this way toward members of other groups, nor did they expect members of other groups to behave in that way toward them. A black person preoccupied in thought, who on that occasion failed to speak, might be viewed as having forgotten herself or himself (although “forgetting” oneself is not, to my knowledge, an expression with much currency in black English or among blacks). The indignant query “Don’t you speak?” might also be posed to a person who forgot herself, to shame her into conformity. To cite another example of group-specific norms and their breach, a moral standard still applicable in some segments of the African American community discourages black women from having sex with white men. But a black woman can “forget herself” when passion unexpectedly presents itself.

Americans of all hues share core moral values relating, for example, family responsibility, theism, and other important matters. I do not assume that people of different races have altogether different behavioral standards. The African American custom of greeting others, known as “speaking,” doubtless applies with minor variations within other groups and in other regions of the country. Yet members of racial groups have (and are held to) at least some culturally specific standards of decorum and decency that are not shared with members of other groups. In this connection, a grave concern of the 1990s is that young blacks warped by the culture of crack are developing uniquely self-destructive, deviant subgroup norms that could undermine the well-being of vast segments of the African American communities.

Acting White

Inattention can lead one to “forget” that one is a professional in a business meeting. Emotion can lead one to “forget” that one is a caregiver for an elderly relation, or a teacher with responsibility for vulnerable teenagers. There is no limit to the kind of norms that can fall prey to inattention and emotion. However, some classes of norms may be especially resistant to breach when compared to others. Any class of well-internalized norms will be resistant to breach. Yet, quite possibly, well-internalized norms seen as binding but trivial (like some rules of etiquette) are breached more readily than those seen as vital (like rules of law).
We are not so much born with race as born into race as a feature of our social worlds. Yet our racialized social worlds exert such an influence that we seldom entirely escape the pull of constitutive norms. Whether generated by the larger community or by racial subgroups, race-related behavioral norms command such a degree of attention and self-control that noncompliance stemming from brief inattention is especially unusual. In the American context, which has been shaped by a history of colonialism, slavery, legal segregation, and prejudice, we may be particularly unlikely to “forget” the subset of manners and morals that shape the expectations and identities of people of our races. Members of minority groups are highly self-conscious about racial identity and the implications of racial identity for routine transactions with others. Indeed, minority-group members feel they are “different,” and that difference colors social experience so pervasively that being inattentive to the racial norms that apply to specific individuals is, for some, barely conceivable.

Jan, the university student in Case 5, forgot her race. Do we fault her, as someone who has wrongfully allowed her African American race to slip out of her mind? Has she forgotten herself—specifically, by failing to be attentive to the norms of her racial group? Jan discussed a party with a white friend. Participating in such a discussion was a form of behavior governed both by community norms and by a set of African American group norms applicable to Jan (like it or not) by virtue of her race.

Among many African Americans, communicating with whites is governed by a whole set of race-specific rules of engagement. Certain affects, topics, and aspects of vocabulary and body language are taboo. One rule dictates against “airing dirty linen”—that is, publicly criticizing other blacks. Another rule dictates against allowing frequent association with white people to cause one to “act white.” Jan’s behavior—namely, the fact that she thinks and speaks like a white liberal—violates African American social norms against acting white. And behind the norm against thinking and speaking “white” is the notion that to be as psychologically healthy, authentic, and useful as one ought to be, one is obligated to be race-conscious. One is obligated to be alive to being black.

The people condemned most severely for “acting white” are the blacks who are race-conscious but deliberately choose to act white. Acting white means dressing in certain clothes, attending certain events, living in certain neighborhoods, befriending certain people, and so on. Armchair psychology suggests that these individuals might act white because they are victims of racial self-awareness searching for self-esteem. Some blacks voice contempt both for light-skinned blacks who “pass” for white and for highly successful blacks who adopt conservative “white” ideologies, such as Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas. But fears about losing blacks who “act white” to white society are by no means solely connected either with passing as white or with political conservatism. On the contrary, Parents who value race-consciousness worry about sending their black children to white-dominated public and private schools. Teenagers who value race-consciousness worry about “interracial” dating. And policymakers who value race-consciousness in high culture and politics worry about the survival of historically black colleges, art forms, and civil rights organizations.

Moreover, some people who “act white” are viewed with empathy and concern rather than with contempt. The phenomenon of acting white is a by-product of the civil rights movement. In the present era of integration and affirmative action, which began in the mid-1960s, many blacks have existed in isolation from other blacks, in white-dominated neighborhoods, schools, and workplaces. Many middle-class and affluent young blacks are not thoroughly socialized as blacks. Marked isolation from majority-black communities has permitted some blacks to shed, or even fail to develop, a black identity, racial self-awareness, or race-consciousness. These young blacks act white because they are, in a sense, culturally white.

To know whether Jan’s episode of acting white in Case 5 merits contempt or compassion relative to the values and concerns of African Americans, we would have to know more about her. If she is full of self-hate and deliberately acts white to win white approval, she might deserve some of the contempt that would inevitably be heaped upon her by many of her black peers around the nation. But if Jan does not normally “act white” and her doing so on this occasion was inadvertent, her breach of the African American moral rule against acting white could be interpreted with compassion as an excusable instance of “forgetting yourself.” Rather than participating in the discussion with her white friend in a way that was mindful of the black person she knows she is, Jan participated (at least for a moment) as if she were white—as if she were a white person of the sort who befriends blacks and cares about their comfort.

Whether Jan forgot her racial identity in the literal or metaphorical sense, her example is troubling. An educated adult black should be race-conscious and, hence, incapable of making an assertion that logically entails that she is white. A lapse like Jan’s—and mine—is probably the result of having so closely and frequently associated with whites that one begins unwittingly to imitate the habits of mind and speech of white society, many of which entail that the thinking and speaking subject is white. For six years—all of my four years of college and two of the four years I spent as a graduate student in philosophy—I had little intimate contact with blacks and a great deal of intimate contact with whites. After all, it was the decade of the 1970s, the heyday of affirmative action, and I was bestowed with educational opportunity by elite white institutions. Given the liberal ideal of a color-blind society, it might have been a good thing that I forgot my race, had I not remembered everyone else’s. Whatever vision of race relations one holds dear—segrega-
Aliveness to Our Selves

The expression “forgetting yourself” is decidedly old-fashioned. However, the polite concept for which it stands is far from irrelevant to contemporary concerns. As I have shown, the idea of “forgetting oneself” bears an interesting relationship to concerns about group alienation and racial identity.

Overall, the United States is remarkably segregated by race. This is the context in which the group norms against acting white and forgetting race have emerged. Despite a constitutional jurisprudence that nominally promotes a “color-blind” society, most people seem to prefer single-race neighborhoods, schools, churches, and workplaces. At the same time, a special peril of displacement and disapproval flows to members of certain minority racial groups guilty of being dead to their own races.

Yet blacks and other minorities fearing political, economic, and cultural exclusion are not the only ones motivated to remain alive to race. Just about everyone is. Whites are motivated by the fear that inattention could threaten not only their personal safety but also their educational and cultural institutions. I am very drawn to the ideal of a society in which people of differing races enjoy cultural pride but have moved beyond racism, xenophobia, and turf wars (Allen, 1996). Yet it is by no means clear as to how this move is to be made, particularly at a time when racial self-consciousness and race-consciousness are so deeply embedded in our behavior and values. The choice facing African Americans today, then, is whether to think about race as black persons or as white persons, rather than not to think about race at all.

African Americans rigidly adhere to race-specific norms (even trivial formalities) internal to their racial communities as a means of sustaining communal bases of self-esteem in a seemingly hostile nation. And they rigidly adhere to race-specific norms external to their racial communities to avoid conflicts with members of other groups. These behaviors, along with continued racism, xenophobia, and discrimination, have proven to be powerful barriers to meaningful racial integration in the United States.

So many of the public policies debated today—everything from family values, to women’s rights, to gay rights, to rights for the disabled, to welfare, to racial justice, to religious and political expression—ultimately relate to the matter of defining selves in opposition to and in light of community and group values. No one wants to be forced out of communion with who and what they believe they really are. Yet with all the current focus on community, social ethics, and personal responsibility, people are more concerned than ever about the downside risks of failing to conform to reasonable social expectations. It seems that everyone wants to be themselves, but no one wants to be without some group basis for sustaining identity and moral self-esteem. Successful navigation of the world thus requires all the attentiveness and emotional control one can muster.

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