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Exploring How J. David Velleman's Theory of Mutual Interpretability Affects Our Personal Identity and Self-Understanding

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CLAREMONT MCKENNA COLELGE

Exploring How J. David Velleman's Theory of Mutual Interpretability Affects Our
Personal Identity and Self-Understanding

SUBMITTED TO
PROFESSOR ADRIENNE MARTIN

AND
DEAN NICHOLAS WARNER

BY
FELIPE PETERSON

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Everyone else, Tokyo (K)nights Cratz crew, Los pibes: you know.

Lastly, I'd like to thank you for your time.

*I Self Lord And Master
shall bring disaster to evil factors
Demonic chapters, shall be captured by Kings
Through the storms of days after
Unto the Earth from the Sun
through triple darkness to blast ya
with a force that can't be compared
to any firepower,
for it's mindpower shared
The brainwake, causes vessels to circulate
like constellations reflect at night off the lake
Word to the father, and Mother Earth
Seeking everlasting life through this hell for what it's worth
Look, listen and observe ...
Above the crowds
Above the clouds where the sounds are original
Infinite skills create miracles
Above the Clouds*

-Gangstarr, "Above the clouds"

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I. Arriving: an introduction

We are all on a quest for self-understanding. Think about it, it's not like we decided to appear into this world, we simply arrived into existence. Thus it is only natural for us to question who we are and what our purpose on this planet is. From a young age we question how the world works to try to get a grasp of what is going on around us, partly so that we can figure out who we are in relation to this outside world. As we age, this process of self-discovery doesn't stop or get any easier, in fact, life becomes more confusing the more we learn about the world; like the great philosopher Lao-Tzu once said, "the farther one travels, the less one may know."¹

When we are young we learn that an inch is a certain size and that a foot is 12 inches and that three feet is a yard and so on, and these answers are enough to satisfy our curiosity. But as we come to learn other perspectives – such as the metric system- we may come to question the validity of our previous beliefs. If there are two ways to measure, which is better? Well our own sense of identity, or our self-understanding, goes through a similar process. From a young age we are taught to identify with our names and our families and our cultural heritage, but at some point we will be called by something other than our name, and many of us will make friends and develop independence. And maybe a few years later we will start to question the same values we once so wholeheartedly believed. Thus, as we mature, and have new experiences, our identity and how we think of ourselves changes. And in consideration of today's global technology, which offers instant communication and streamlined global transportation, we are granted endless opportunities for new life experiences that consequently complicate how we understand ourselves.

¹ Lionel Giles, trans, *The sayings of Lao-Tzu* (Online, 1905), 31.

Writing this paper I have made progress in discovering more about myself, and I hope the topics I present also help others discover their own unique place in the increasingly interconnected world. My mother is from Buenos Aires, Argentina and my father is from Santa Fe, New Mexico but I've never actually lived in either of these places. I was born in San Jose, Costa Rica and then a few years later moved to Montevideo, Uruguay. When I was five my family moved to New York City and at the age of 13 we moved to Tokyo, Japan, where we lived until I graduated high school at the age of 18. From Japan I came to Claremont, California where I have been for the past four years. Thus from an early age I have wondered who I was and where I fit in.

Growing up I dreaded being asked, "Where are you from?" I mean, how was I supposed to answer this question? Most times I'd say I was from New York for simplicities sake but this response never felt genuine. And even when I did name the places I had lived, it still didn't feel like I was answering the question because I wasn't really from any one of those places. I guess because of my lineage I can say that I am American or that I am Argentine, but I've never lived in Argentina for a prolonged period of time and I still question how American I actually am; I can't run for president because I wasn't born here and I've spent about the same amount of time living abroad as I have in the USA. Consequently, I tend to identify with other cultural misfits whose similar upbringings have made them question their sense of belonging. Thus through this paper I aim to discover what we gain from learning where someone is from. In other words, I aim to understand what cultural identity is, especially in a world that is becoming increasingly more interconnected. I explore these topics using theories of mutual interpretability and ordinariness proposed by David Velleman, a professor of philosophy at New York University. First I propose his theories and explain his views. Then I present several hypothetical situations exploring how we could come to

understand ourselves if we accept his theories. Then I discuss the implications globalization or the coming together of communities has on our identities. Finally I conclude by arguing that instead of identifying with where we are from we should identify with the experiences we've had.

II. Velleman: Agency, Mutual Interpretability and Ordinarity

Obviously there is more to identity than one's cultural or communal background and there are many ways to think about who we are. Some philosopher's focus on personal ontology or what we are materially composed of, while others think about personal epistemology or how we know that we are the same person over time. My focus is different. I aim to understand who we are and how we should think about who we are based on the cultural or communal experiences we've had. To do this I use David Velleman's theory of mutual interpretability, which proposes that individuals aim to be understandable to themselves, and to others with whom they interact. Velleman, a Professor of Philosophy at New York University has published five books and several articles dealing mostly with ethics and practical reasoning. However, I will focus primarily on two of his books: *Practical Reflection* and *Foundations for moral relativism*.

In *Practical Reflection* Velleman forms a theory of agency, or free will, based on the human ability to think and reflect, which he thinks gives us the freedom to behave as we wish. Velleman lays the groundwork for his conception of agency by proposing a theory of interpretability. The theory states that in order to understand your own conduct, "you don't just try to make sense *of* yourself, you also try *to* make sense to yourself" and "hence your practical self-understanding is the product of a collaboration that you carry on with yourself, as both the subject and the object of

understanding.”² Though this seems confusing, he essentially says that when we humans objectively think of ourselves and reflect on who we are, we make ourselves our own object of understanding, similar to any object we try to understand, like flowers or trees. But because it is you who is thinking of yourself, even if objectively, that also makes you the thinking subject. Thus when you self reflect you are both the object of your thoughts and the subject that is having them.

In *Foundations of Moral Relativism*, Velleman pursues this idea of interpretability further by stating that not only do we aim to be interpretable to ourselves, but we also aim to be mutually interpretable with those with whom we interact. Mutual interpretability is simply the idea that agents, or humans, aim to understand themselves and others with whom they interact. Our ability to think objectively about ourselves enables us to think about how others see us, and this allows us to develop mutually interpretability. Velleman writes, “Without that objective self-conception, we would be parrot-like communicators, squawking at one another rather than conversing with one another.”³ To further illustrate this point he says, “personal interactions require mutual interpretation: you cannot deal with others as persons without trying to understand their actions and attitudes, and make yourself similarly understood.”⁴ In so far as we know, “humans are the only animals capable of considering themselves from the standpoint of a prospective interpreter. That capacity enabled us to develop forms of sociality that entail making ourselves interpretable to one another.”⁵ Thus it seems that Velleman realized that the theory of interpretability

² J. David Velleman, *Practical Reflection* (Stanford: CSLI Publications, 2007), 8.

³ J. David Velleman, *Foundations for Moral Relativism* (Open Book Publishers, 2013), 76.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 54.

⁵ Velleman, J. David. “Morality Here and There: II. Aristotle in Bali” (July 19, 2014) 12.

he established in *Practical Reflections* did not accurately portray how we form our self-conceptions. Thus he uses *Foundations for Moral Relativism* to explain that we learn to understand ourselves based on the beliefs and values instilled in us by the society we are brought up in. In other words, we learn to interpret ourselves based on how we are taught to interpret others and understand the social interactions we have.

While proposing this theory of mutual interpretability, Velleman argues that in order for people to be mutually interpretable with one another, there must be some domain of doables, or socially understood behaviors that make their actions ordinary and thus understandable to one another. The concept of doables and ordinariness go hand in hand. The term doables describes the idea that, “we act under concepts of what there is to do” and so “which actions we can make, depends on which descriptions or concepts are available for us to enact.”⁶ Besides from a few limited occasions we cannot invent actions. Most times we “choose [our actions] from a socially provided repertoire of action concepts.”⁷ And we needn’t look far to see that that different cultures and communities have different action types.

Ordinariness is essentially just a mode of perception or understanding. When we say that something is ordinary we mean that it fits into society’s set of doable actions. Yet ordinariness also refers to the idea that the experiences we have of something are ordinary, or similar to how others experience that same event. Velleman bases his theory of ordinariness on Harvey Sack’s notions that “no matter what we do, we are doing something else in addition, namely being ordinary.”⁸ And so everything

⁶ Velleman, *Foundations for Moral Relativism*, 26-27.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., 23.

we do, we do in a way that is ordinary, or in a way that is perceived as an ordinary way of doing it. Consequently if you pass up on staying home for the night in order to rob a 24-hour pawnshop, you will still do “robbing a 24-hour pawnshop” in an ordinary way⁹. Meaning that you will have the usual experience that others who have robbed a 24-hour pawnshop have had.¹⁰ But in order for ordinariness to exist there have to be socially acceptable or understandable ways for people to think, feel and act.¹¹ And for this to happen society must converge and agree upon which thoughts, feelings, and actions are acceptable. Velleman proposes that the acceptable thoughts, feelings and actions in a given community are comprised by the social *mores*, or socially acknowledged beliefs about how to correctly live your life.

Velleman writes, “when the Kikuyu say that there isn’t anything wrong with female circumcision and the Mbuti say there is, both may be speaking the truth, because one group is speaking of what’s wrong for the Kikuyu while the other is speaking of what’s wrong for the Mbuti”¹². So evidently Velleman thinks that the community we live in shapes the beliefs we hold, and also the actions we think are doable, or that we are able to perform. Therefore, someone who lives amongst the Kikuyu will be brought up to accept female circumcision as an ordinary doable action while someone who is raised amongst the Mbuti will not, and the distinct moral ideologies they are brought up with will result in them making different decisions if they have female daughters. But what happens if someone lives part-time with both the Mbuti and the Kikuyu; how would they think about this problem of female circumcision?

⁹ Ibid., 24.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., 55.

¹² Ibid., 46.

According to Velleman both views regarding female circumcision are valid, but their validity depends on what beliefs one holds. But one can only hold one belief about female circumcision; one can either agree or disagree with such practices. And so even if someone lives part time with the Mbuti and part time with the Kikuyu, they will only ever be able to practice one set of beliefs regarding female circumcision. And thus, it seems like this person can only ever be truly mutually interpretable in one of these place. Let's assume this bi-cultural person believes female circumcision is wrong, while he simultaneously adheres to some other distinct Kikuyu beliefs that don't align with Mbuti values. How does this hypothetical bi-cultural hybrid person who observes or accepts beliefs from two places, go about trying to form identity? Though Velleman discusses mutual interpretability, doables and ordinariness to propose the existence of moral relativism, I utilize these theories to study how we form our personal identities in relation to the people and places we interact with. Thus I try to understand the how globalization or the coming together of communities affects Velleman's views, as these are social nuances that his theory does not account for.

III. Conceptions of Self

Before I continue to discuss self-understanding I want to briefly define what I mean when I talk about the self. My conception of what, or who we are is very pragmatic for the purposes of this paper. Though philosophers theorize that may we be souls, brains, or animals, for practical purposes I simply accept the commonly held view that I am my body – or that a huge correlation exists between my self-understanding and my body. I also accept psychological continuity, or the idea that our memories and our ability to have future aspirations make us one individual across our lives. Lastly, I am a compatibilist, meaning I believe that we have free will though we

may be casually determined. I mention this because Velleman's view of mutual interpretability hinges on the idea that the culture or community we grow up in greatly influences, or causally determines our thoughts, and thus our behaviors. Yet, Velleman and I also say certain things that imply that we do have some degree of freedom regarding who we are, who we become, and what we do with our lives. Although philosophers continuously debate whether any of the assumptions I theorize are true, I accept them because they best represent how we identify and distinguish ourselves when amongst other people in society, and also how we objectively consider ourselves when thinking about our own identities.

Moreover, it seems to me that Velleman would agree with my pragmatic views. For starters, he works to construct a theory of Agency, or volition, which means that he believes that humans have the capacity to act freely, though how we learn to be mutually interpretable in some senses determines how we view the world. Furthermore, to argue for mutual interpretability, Velleman compares one's sense of identity in *Second Life*, a virtual video game, to the identity we construe to our flesh and bones. When comparing how players of *Second Life* control their virtual avatar's and how these same players control their real life movements he writes, "one says 'I hit the ball with my racket' as one might say, 'I hit it with my hand'; one does not say, 'I made my racket hit the ball'¹³. To Velleman, "I" hit the ball, and thus to Velleman "I" am the same as the physical body that hit the ball. Thus it is clear that Velleman also believes, or at least assumes that we are fundamentally intertwined with our bodies and our bodily functions.

¹³ Ibid., 13.

IV. Community and Mutual Interpretability

Though it is not exactly clear how communities come together to create values and moral attitudes, it seems fairly evident that cultural values affect how people behave and understand themselves. History, philosophy, religion, language and media all play vital roles in shaping communal attitudes, and this somewhat mysterious process seems to define what is doable and ordinary in a given society. But regardless of how mutually interpretability develops, we need it to interact with one another; “you need for people in your social vicinity to be able to tell whether you’re being serious, and just saying so won’t help unless they can tell that you’re being serious. So you need for there to be matters about which seriousness is the recognized default in your social vicinity.”¹⁴ If there were no set of ordinary actions that community members recognized, it would be extremely difficult for community members to communicate with one another. In Velleman’s words, “personal interaction with co-members of our community is made possible by mutual interpretability, which is made possible by convergence on ordinary attitudes.”¹⁵ For example, in Malagasy society “assertions are designed to be strategically uninformative, for various cultural reasons”, like the fact that life is very open so exclusive knowledge gives one power. Consequently people misconstrue the truth to maintain a position of power over others¹⁶. In most Western nations we strive to be as clear and coherent as possible when we communicate, but the Malagasy people “go out of their way to convey less information than they could conveniently convey.”¹⁷ So for whatever reason the Malagasy created and have

¹⁴ Ibid., 56.

¹⁵ Ibid., 59.

¹⁶ Ibid., 33.

¹⁷ Ibid.

accepted an opaque style of communication, which informs how they interact and understand themselves and the people around them.

In another example Velleman describes how the Ibo of Nigeria and the English differ in their greetings. The British shake hands, while the Ibo think of the hand as extending all the way to below the shoulder, and so their handshakes include a squeezing of the upper arm as well as the hand.¹⁸ Consequently, when an Ibo man and an Englishman meet they will have an awkward moment when first greeting one another. When the Englishman puts out a hand and the Iboman reaches for his arm both may be confused, at least initially, as to what the other is doing. In other words, the Ibo man and the Englishman's physical communication is not mutually interpretable. Now in cases like these, neither the Ibo man nor the Englishman has objective authority regarding what the proper way to shake hands is. However, if the Englishman is living amongst the Ibo, then the Ibo has authority to tell him how to be mutually interpretable, and if the Ibo man is in England, the Englishman can tell the Ibo man how he should greet in England so as to be mutually interpretable.

Inherently the goal of communication is to accurately convey what you want to express to another person in a manner that they will understand. But what this seems to imply is that depending on whom we are communicating with, we may have to change how we behave in order to accurately convey ourselves. So if the Englishman wants to be mutually interpretable amongst the Ibo he should learn how to greet and do all other things as the Ibo do. Or if an American were to want to be mutually interpretable with inhabitants of the Malagasy community he better learn to be ambiguous. If not, when he speaks in the direct way Americans speak the Malagasy people will try to decipher

¹⁸ Ibid., 29.

what he said, even though he meant exactly what he said, and so they'd completely misconstrue what he intended to communicate. And if the person from Malagasy wants to be interpretable by American standards, they better learn to be clear and direct, or else Americans will have no idea what they mean when he or she is purposefully ambiguous.¹⁹

Based on both of these examples we see that mutual interpretability and ordinariness are concepts that apply to both verbal and non-verbal modes of communication and action. In the Malagasy example we see how cultures can have varying forms of moral, or ideological mutual interpretability. In the Ibo example we see how cultures and communities develop different forms of physical or behavioral mutual interpretability. Thus it seems like the communities we are raised in or the values we are taught affect both our mental perspectives of the world and the physical behaviors we perform.

Furthermore, according to Velleman's theory it is possible for someone to learn to be interpretable in more than one place. Presumably the Malagasy person can learn to speak English and also the direct form of communication that comes with using the English language, or vice versa. And presumably the Englishman can learn to the proper greetings to be behaviorally mutually interpretable among the Ibo in Nigeria. To a certain extent you must learn the to be mutually interpretable wherever you find yourself because others "will try to understand you by assuming that you believe and desire as they do, and you must gratefully comply, so as to make yourself understood."²⁰ Although we can learn to be mutually interpretable in another place, we will always learn to understand this new culture in relation to, and in comparison to, the

¹⁹ Ibid., 33.

²⁰ Ibid., 55.

beliefs and behaviors you've already learned and adopted through your unique life experiences. Velleman explains it like this, "an inhabitant of one community can of course consider the option of relocating to another, but he can consider that option only under an act-description available within his own decision frame"²¹. Thus, even though the Malagasy person can learn to communicate in English and be interpretable by Americans, they will always understand themselves from a Malagasy point of view; or as a Malagasy person trying to adjust and learn a new culture. And so it seems like they will never fully understand the American perspective.

V. Community, Identity and Culture

But if it is possible to adopt the forms of mutual interpretability of a completely different society than the one you grow up in, is it possible to take up a new cultural perspective too? Today more than ever cultures and communities are converging and what we understand as doable or ordinary is expanding. Using chopsticks no longer seems like a novel concept to Westerners, and forks and knives are no longer strange tools in Asia. But not so long ago these different ways of eating would have seemed extremely bizarre wherever they were not the ordinary forms of consumption. But if both chopsticks and western utensils are more or less mutually interpretable to people around the world today, how should we think about these different forms of eating?

If a German hypothetically only ever ate using chopsticks, would we be inclined to say that this person is more Asian? Or since chopsticks are now mutually interpretable in the West, does this not affect his cultural identity? Just how are we supposed to think about culture and identity when it seems like anyone can learn how

²¹ Ibid., 44.

to be mutually interpretable in another community other than the one they learned from a young age?

Though it is unclear how exactly ordinariness, or forms of mutual interpretability develop, I think it would be useful to articulate attributes or features that we think go into making someone a true community member. When thinking of how one fits in with a certain community, language certainly plays an important factor as to how mutually interpretable we are; social behaviors such as greetings and manners are also tremendously important, and the foods we eat and the hobbies we have also demark us as being true members of a community.

Let's imagine that Teresa is born in Mexico to Mexican parents and that she is brought up speaking both Spanish and French. Let's also imagine that this girl has never traveled outside of Mexico and that other than her knowledge of French she has no connections to France or French culture. So what would we think about Teresa's identity if she moved to Paris at the age of 20? Presumably her sense of self-understanding would have already been shaped by whatever the Mexican cultural perspective is. Yet because she speaks French we may also be inclined to think that she would have a smoother transition into the Parisian community than someone who didn't speak French. However, knowing the language is only one facet of what it takes to be mutually interpretable in Paris; she would still need to adjust to the other cultural nuances of what is doable and ordinary in Paris. So surely she wouldn't consider herself French or Parisian upon arrival, but if she spent enough time in Paris and had enough Parisian experiences, would she have the right to consider herself French? What is it that ultimately makes someone feel "Mexican" or "French"?

A large part of what it means to be from a certain place is to actually have spent time living in that specific environment. Velleman claims that in order to understand the ordinary behaviors of a certain place people must “interact regularly, usually because they live in one another’s vicinity”²². But at the same time, that is not all that it takes for one to be part of, or identify as being part of a particular culture. I mean Teresa wouldn’t identify as French even though she speaks French and has moved to Paris. So maybe we can figure out what knowledge or understanding Teresa is lacking that makes her different from other Parisians. Initially Teresa wouldn’t know the streets or local landmarks; she also wouldn’t know the local slang or speak with the local accent, thus others would know she is not one of them, making her feel like an outsider although she fluently speaks their same French language. Additionally, upon arrival she wouldn’t have local friends, a job, or any of the other things that appear to make individuals truly part of their communities. But more crucially, she wouldn’t know the modes of mutual interpretability that are common or ordinary in Paris. Her understanding of what is doable and ordinary is framed by her 20-years in Mexico and so she’d inherently think about things and understand interactions in Paris differently than a Parisian would.

If she became mutually interpretable by learning all of the street names, shops and landmarks, and she got a fulltime a job, made friends and inherited the local accent could she claim herself French? In some sense once she accomplishes all of these feats, she is not much different than any other French person living in Paris. But at the same time she still wouldn’t strike us as really being French. Thus it seems like what defines Teresa as “Mexican” instead of “French”, is the fact that her ancestors come from

²² Ibid., 24.

Mexico instead of France, and that because of this she has developed with different rules for how to be mutually interpretable. Since every community converges on different values or beliefs regarding what is ordinary and thus what is mutually interpretable, it seems that Teresa may never quite be French because her cultural and moral perspectives will never let her be. How she perceives the world and herself is fundamentally shaped by her upbringing and what she was taught is doable and ordinary so as to be mutually interpretable.

Normally, we tend to validate whether or not someone is truly X (Italian, French, Japanese), by whether they grew up in X (Italy, France, Japan) or more importantly if their parents are from X and have instilled the cultural values from X place into them. We don't tend to think that people who have no familial or moral ties to a certain place X can actually then define themselves as being X because they haven't been taught how people from that place think about life. So when trying to understand personal identity with regards to culture there are certain moral beliefs or life perspectives that people must hold to be seen as being from a certain place. But, every French person has his or her own perception of what it means to be French. And though there are commonly accepted ideas of what makes one French, there is really no objective definition or universal understanding of what it means to be French. So even if we feel French others may not accept us as French, and maybe even if we don't feel French others will still define us as French, it just depends by whose standards we are being judged by.

The aforementioned hypothetical situation should have demonstrated that we tend to think of someone as being from a particular place if they hold certain ideological, or moral views, which are common for others from that place to hold.

Thus, unless Teresa is able to completely unlearn her Mexican perspective on life, she will never really be French. But if someone who would normally be considered from X completely adopts a local perspective of Y, would we be inclined to say that they are from Y?

Imagine someone gives a red-haired freckled baby to a Japanese couple the moment it's born. Now imagine the Japanese couple raises this baby as any other ordinary Japanese baby would be raised. He goes through the Japanese school system and has all the same experiences that an average Japanese child has. For good measure let's imagine that he's never seen his reflection or an image of himself, and that the Japanese for whatever reason never acknowledge the difference in his physical appearance. It would seem that the attitudes and behaviors this child grows up with and thinks are normal, would lead him to behave in ways that are only understandable or interpretable to the Japanese in Japan. Thus besides from his biological DNA, how this child behaves and how he thinks about the world is framed by the Japanese style of mutual interpretability; for all intents and purposes this child is socially and culturally Japanese. Different than Teresa who was raised in Mexico and then moved to Paris, the red-haired freckled boy seems to be authentically Japanese because he lives by the Japanese style of mutual interpretability and this frames how what he thinks about what is ordinary and doable.

Yet, if the redhead child were to realize that he didn't look like all the other Japanese citizens he would undoubtedly be brought question his identity. If he saw himself in the mirror he would see that he doesn't physically look like the other Japanese, and he'd probably start to question where he comes from and who he is. Simply because he doesn't look Japanese he is led to question his identity. Thus we see

that no matter how well we are socially integrated in society, physical factors significantly affect our identities; both by how others perceive us and by how these external perceptions teach us to perceive ourselves. Teresa's case showed that if we could learn to morally identify with a community's beliefs we'd culturally be from that place, yet physical appearance also seems to greatly influence how we think about ourselves. Thus even though this red-haired boy is culturally Japanese, his physical appearance still forces him to question his identity.

Combined these hypothetical's raise interesting points regarding how we form identity. Firstly, they demonstrate that the specific community you grow up in, and the forms of mutually interpretability you learn from a young age influence how you understand life and go about trying to understand yourself and others. Secondly, they show that your physical appearance affects the expectations others have of who you are, and what morals or modes of mutual interpretability they think you understand. Thus identity is informed both by how you are taught to think about the world and understand the experiences you have, and also by the experiences you actually have. The society you grow up in teaches you what is ordinary and what sorts of things are doable so that you can be mutually interpretable with those around you, and consequently this informs how you think about others and yourself. Yet you are judged, and you also judge others based on what we believe they will be like, based on their physical appearance or cultural backgrounds. Thus our identities are both internal and externally formed. The average Japanese person would most likely not treat the redhead boy in our hypothetical situation as they do other Japanese people because of his appearance. And because the redheaded boy is treated differently because of his appearance he would start to feel different, and his perspective of himself would gradually shift start to reflect this.

VI. Globalization: becoming local

Globalization forces us to question our understanding of culture or national identity. The modern conception of nationhood is only centuries old and most modern nations seem to be in a constant state of flux. The boundaries that separate countries are subject to change – consider the shifts in Eastern Europe post World War II, or Russia’s recent annexation of Crimea. So not only are national borders artificial, bringing us to question what national identity may even mean, but physical borders are also becoming more and more permeable, skewing how we understand national and cultural identity. You can find people of all cultural and racial backgrounds living all over the world. Even though at one point Asians lived in Asia, Africans in Africa, and Europeans in Europe therefore meaning that race provided some insight as to where one was from, and thus what forms of mutual interpretability they functioned under – this is no longer the case today. You can find Chinese individuals living in Argentina, and Nigerians living in Japan, and though surely their self-conceptions are informed by their cross-culturally perspectives, we still tend to judge what other people will be like based on their physical appearances. However, because physical appearance no longer defines where we live, it no longer serves to help us identify or even narrow down the values or modes of mutual interpretability that guide another’s actions and influence their self-conceptions. Yet we continue to use appearance to try to categorize others and try to interpret their actions, which only continues to perpetuate stereotypes. And these stereotypes seem to persuade people to identify with the external expectations others have of who they should be.

Though we concluded that Teresa from our hypothetical situation would not necessarily become French by moving to Paris, I think she would be considered a

“local” in Paris. Even if she is not “French” she inhabits this space; she speaks the language, knows the streets and has established a life in Paris by finding a job and making friends. Thus she has become part of everyday life and society in Paris.

Therefore we can conclude that she is a “local”. Thus, when I lived in Japan I was local in Japan, but I was by no means Japanese. However my existence in Japan made part of everyday local life. So by this logic it seems that we are “local” in whichever community we live in.

Think about it, being “local” entails living and interacting with the people in some community for some prolonged period of time. When we travel to new places we look for local tour guides and desire to have authentic local experiences we cannot have elsewhere. If going somewhere new were the same as staying in your hometown you wouldn’t dislike or enjoy traveling nearly as much as you do. The whole novelty and intrigue of going to a new place comes from the rare opportunity to experience life from the point of view of the people who live in that community. Often the way we try to have local experiences is by eating what locals eat or seeing local landmarks, but really the novelty of the experience simply comes from being in a place that has fundamentally different forms of mutual interpretability. That is why mundane everyday experiences appear to be so special and unique when we are abroad. Mutual interpretability changes when we go to new cultures and so what is ordinary also changes, and so how we understand others and ourselves also changes. And this contextual shift makes us think about and perceive routine experiences like dining at a restaurant, or riding the bus differently. When the “where” changes, the “how” and “why” dictating what is ordinary and doable also changes. And this new perceptual understanding affects how we understand ourselves.

So today, in the increasingly interconnected world, where people can move and become local in places other than their native home's relatively easily, we increasingly interact with people that hold different perspectives and forms of mutual interpretability than our own. The more diverse the people we interact with are and the more perspectives we must learn to so as to be mutually interpretable with others, the more we are pushed understand ourselves- remember that Velleman argues that to be mutually interpretable we must take on the perspective of the person we are interacting with. By taking on this different perspective we are pushed to think differently about who we are.

VII. Mutual Interpretability: rules and norms

You may be thinking you don't really care enough about the people you are interacting with to try to understand their cultural perspective. But regardless of what you believe we all inherently want to be interpretable. One way to be interpretable is to behave how others believe you will, or should behave, because that way both parties have some understanding as to how the interaction is going to take place. How others perceive you in some ways informs you of the expectations others have of you and this influences how you actually behave. Whether or not you aspire to meet these expectations, you must still confront them. So regardless of if you accept these expectations or not, they will influence how you think of yourself. Even after I had lived in Japan for years, most Japanese still treated me as the typical boisterous foreigner breaking traditions and cultural norms. This externally imposed expectation played an interesting role in forming my self-conception and the action-types I saw as doable. Knowing that as a foreigner I was expected to break the rules, I was offered a free pass from the Japanese society to do so. The low expectation meant that I

functioned under a different rubric of mutual interpretability, and so I could get away with doing things that ordinary Japanese people couldn't necessarily get away with. I wasn't super crazy or rebellious but I could do things like speak, eat, and drink openly in the silent compartment of the trains and subways, while traditional Japanese citizens complied with the silence to be mutually interpretable to other members of society.

Again, maybe you are thinking who cares? Well it matters because the low social expectations provided me with a different set of doable behaviors than the ordinary Japanese person. I had learned the rules, but because I wasn't expected to know them, I could more or less follow them as I pleased and decide when I wanted to be interpreted as a local who had somewhat learned the forms of mutual interpretability, and when I wanted to get away with breaking the rules. However, had I been expected to follow the rules, I would have most likely behaved differently. And so we see that the expectations others have of us affects how we behave and perceive ourselves.

In the infamous Stanford prison experiment Philip Zimbardo demonstrated the great impact that expectations have in shaping our behaviors. In this two-week experiment volunteers were assigned to be either inmates or guards in a make-believe prison in the basement of one of the buildings at Stanford. However, the experiment was ended after only six days because the guards took their roles too seriously and Zimbardo feared for the psychological well being of the make-believe prisoners. But what else would we expect to happen if we tell people to behave as if they were prison guards? If the participant's playing the role of guards didn't become aggressive and authoritative then they wouldn't actually be behaving like real prison guards. But the only way they could assume these behaviors is if they believed they were guards. In

actual prison guards have to be forceful and aggressive as inmates are literally locked up in small cells, and some are ready to kill to get out. However, in Zimbardo's experiment participants had to simulate this situation without these crucial realities being true in their case. Thus the only way for participants to behave like guards would be if they came to believe they actually were guards. In *Foundations for Moral Relativism* Velleman seems to suggest that in some senses reality is whatever we believe it to be. He writes, "in make-believe, a player is aware of his power to invent the objects and events so the fictional world, and his awareness affects his attitudes towards them... A monster that he has made up, and is aware of being able to kill by means of further make-believe, does not frighten him as a real monster would"²³. However, theoretically if we suspend our belief and forget that we have the option of opting out our make-believe worlds, we could be led to behave as if this make-believe world were real. Thus, it seems like the more strongly we believe something to be true the more it affects how we act in, and interact with, the world. Since the guards in this experiment were told to behave like guards, the only way they could successfully do this was to believe they were guards, and the only way to be a guard if you believe you are a guard, is to act like how you think a guard would act.

Thus this controversial experiment demonstrates that social expectations influence our behaviors. The expectations of what it means to be a certain person, in this case a prison guard, may leads us to behave like prison guards, but doing so may lead us to behave in ways that we would normally condemn.

²³ Velleman, *Foundations for Moral Relativism*, 10-11.

VIII. Second Life

When Velleman develops his theory on mutual interpretability, he argues that mutual interpretability is central for deciding how to portray one's avatar in Second Life. Second Life is a virtual reality in which players create an avatar and live out a different, or second life. For the most part, Second Life resembles the world in which we currently live in, with many, if not all of the same rules for mutual interpretability that exist in real life. Thus players can fully immerse themselves in this new community and create new online personas different from their real life characters based on their knowledge of how society works. So if somebody wants to become a Second Life rock star, he will adopt the personality he thinks will lead others to acknowledge him as a rock star. This means that whatever avatar one creates, be it a rock star or a banker, one will behave in ways that are normally associated with rock stars or bankers, if one wants to be treated as a rock star or a banker within Second Life. And the fact that the ordinary behaviors one associates with a rock star or a banker lead one to behave a certain way so as to be perceived as either personality demonstrates that we are constantly understanding ourselves in relation to how we think others will understand us.

Now let's imagine that a professor of economics has a Second Life account in which he is the lead singer of a death-metal rock band. Due to the need for mutual interpretability, and society's role in defining our actions, the economics professor and the rock star would have to act very differently in order to be treated how they'd want to be treated. This is to say, if the professor wants to maintain his position of authority over his students in real life, he should not act like the lead of a rock band, or else the

students won't take him seriously. Similarly, if he wants to be a bona fide rock star in Second Life he'd better not act like an economics professor, or he'll be seen as quite a bland rocker, and probably won't become the genuine rock figure he wants to be. But if we care about how others perceive us, then our behaviors are limited to those that allow us to lead others to perceive us in a certain way. We see this all the time in society. Just think of the people who buy fancy clothes and nice cars just to flaunt their wealth and make sure that others know they are wealthy. Or imagine that you are on your way to an entrance interview with Harvard. You wouldn't show up wearing sandals, shorts and a T-shirt. Some would see this as self-sabotage; I mean most of us know that that you must dress in a certain way, according to the mutually interpretable standards of professionalism, if you want to appear "professional" and be taken seriously during this interview.

Now I'm not saying societal norms are worthless and that we should become free-spirited hippies condemning social constructs, there are definite downsides to disregarding the culturally established rules of mutual interpretability. If we disregard social conventions and no longer care how others perceive us we may completely lose our ability to be interpretable. I mean most of us have encountered social pariah that seem to have fallen out of society and float around unable to get a job or really become a functional member of society again. Or consider individuals who spent time in jail and are having trouble finding jobs. Regardless of why they went to jail, the fact that they were locked up negatively impacts their reputation, and the expectations others have of them. Consequently, this label lowers the general public's expectations for these individuals and unfortunately they remain forever marginalized by society.

IX. Society, Culture and Expectations

We all must understand ourselves in relation to the expectations others have of us; and there seem to be numerous expectations or requirements we must meet in order to be considered as truly being from some place. There are aesthetic and physical requirements, geographic or local requirements, behavioral requirements, and mental or moral requirements that other use to judge where you are from, and thus understand how to relate to you. Such varied social expectations inform how others in society see you and treat you, and also inform how you perceive others.

For example to be considered truly Chinese one must look Chinese and more importantly one must also live up to external expectations of what Chinese people behave like. However, in the globalized world we face are increasingly different expectations regarding what it means to be truly Chinese. To be considered Chinese in China, individuals may have to meet a different set of expectations than if they were to be considered Chinese in America. So to be seen as Chinese in China, one may have to have experience of life in China and understand the theoretical or moral framework that makes one's actions interpretable and understandable in china. Whereas to be labeled Chinese in America may only require that one look Chinese. Obviously when we talk about Chinese identity in from these two different perspectives we are actually speaking of two distinct things. In one we are speaking of being culturally Chinese, and in the other we are simply referring to being racially or ethnically Chinese. Yet either way, these external expectations affects how a Chinese individual understands himself or herself.

X. Globalization and Modern Interactions

Originally I thought that Velleman's failure to address globalization or the coming together of communities and cultures was a problem because I thought that if Velleman didn't address this fact, he was missing how community or culture functions in the world today. People of all backgrounds and ethnicities can be found across the globe and the Internet has given us access to more information about cultures and modes of mutual interpretability than ever before. So intuitively it seems like the increased access to information and cultures would fundamentally to change how we form communities. However, I've come to realize that the increase in travel and cultural interaction does not necessarily affect how communities are built or how they function, but instead it affects how we think about culture and how we think about ourselves. The more people we interact with who hold inherently different perspectives on life than we do, the more we are forced to try to understand ourselves. Interacting with people from different backgrounds and life experiences forces us to question whether we understand life correctly and are living in the right way. It exerts yet another expectation of how you should behave. Interacting with a Southerner may force one to face certain expectations of what it means to be American, while interacting with someone from New York would surge a different set of expectations regarding an American identity. Furthermore, both of these expectations will be different than the expectation a Japanese person may have of Americans. But with each new interaction I may come to hold a new understanding of what it means to be American, or at least how, and what others expect Americans to be like, and this informs how I then understand myself.

Nonetheless, we also have a hand in shaping our identities by deciding how much emphasis or importance we place on these external expectations. Though we may

never be able to shake our physical appearances' and the judgments they may cause, we can decide to not care about meeting the expectations others have of us. So even though others may not treat the red-haired boy like they would treat another Japanese person, the red-haired boy doesn't necessarily have to define himself based on what the social definition of being Japanese is. Though others may not see him as being Japanese, he may feel Japanese and think he is Japanese, and no one can refute these sentiments.

So how much should we care about living up to external expectations? If we care to be interpretable then we must to a certain extent care about the expectations others have of us, so that we can be mutually interpretable. But in conforming to these expectations, we also uphold stereotypes of how others think we should behave, which restricts our capacity for self-understanding and limits how we can behave. If one must behave in a certain way to be interpreted in a certain way then living up to certain expectations clearly limits our domain of doables, and self-understanding comes to be restricted by how others think we should behave. But even though these perceptions and attitudes affect our self-conceptions, what seems most important to identity and self-conception is personal experiences.

Most fundamentally mutual interpretability refers to the sharing of similar experiences and attitudes. The more experiences we share with another person the more we will identify with them and the more interpretable we will be to one another. Just think about the people you feel closest to. For the most part, those who you relate with the most are those who've had experiences most similar to your own. For example, my brother and I share a really close relationship and I feel this in large part due to the fact that we've shared so many similar experiences. Of course we both have our own ways of reflecting on and understanding our lives, but the sheer similarity of our overall

experience – from the lessons our parents instilled in us, to the schools we’ve attended, has lead me to share with him a unique outlook on life I share with no one else.

If you ask someone “who are you?” you would not be surprised to hear something like; I am Juan, I am from Uruguay, and I play tennis. Although none of these responses actually answers the deep philosophical question of whom or what we are fundamentally, we accept these common responses because they help us identify a person’s life experiences and that helps us get a better sense of why they are how they are. However, learning about someone’s personal experiences allows us to understand the formation of their perspectives a little bit more, but it does not necessarily mean that we will identify or relate to them. We can learn the history and experiences of some president’s life before and during his tenure in the oval office, but that doesn’t mean that we will identify with, or truly understand what it’s like to be president. Only those who have been president can truly understand what that experience is like. Thus the more similar or shared two people’s experiences are, the more relatable they will be to one another, and the more mutually interpretable they will be to each other. Thus, an American and an Indian whose mothers passed away at an early age, may understand one another, and identify more with each other because of this specific experience than they might identify with people in their immediate communities that did not endure such a traumatic experience. And to some extent it seems that one of the first things we ask someone when we first meet is, “where are you from” because we assume that the answer to this question will inform us of the context through which this person matured and thus will inform us of how they approach life, and what they believe to be mutually interpretable. But when we ask, “Where are you from” what we really seem to be asking is, “What experiences have most shaped your outlook on life, and your personal identity?” Today I can live and be local anywhere, so it is no longer

where I am from, but the experiences I have had, and the morals I've been taught, which shape my identity and make me interpretable to others. Now I don't mean to say that locality doesn't matter, but it's just that locality or where you are from no longer defines the beliefs and perspectives you use to frame your self-conception. We form our self-conceptions in relation to all of the experiences and interactions we had.

XI. Shared Experience and Identity

Though how exactly communities and modes of mutual interpretability develop is unclear, what I've hoped to make clear is that one's experiences define one's sense of self and sense of belonging. Many of us have had the experience of meeting someone from our hometowns when not in our hometowns and felt a sense an immediate connection or understanding with that other individual. Maybe we feel this connection because meeting others with similar experiences as ourselves validates our own existence. When you realize that you have a shared experience with another person, like sharing a hometown, you usually end up discussing the local bakery or some unique experience only had in that town. Talking about these shared experiences unites us at least partly because it validates our own personal experiences. Sharing an experience with another person seems to connect you with something greater than yourself; sharing an experience means that there is some external thing which you and some other self-conscious individual experience, and presumably experience similarly. And this shared interaction validates our own experience and makes us feel alive. Even though the blue I see may be slightly different than the blue you see, the fact that we both think we see blue means that we are actually seeing something, and in turn that we are something. The thing is that we can only learn that the thing we are seeing is "blue" if someone teaches us what blue is. Thus, ultimately no matter what we do, it seems that how we understand ourselves is framed by how we were taught to see the world.

You may try to break out of this social framework by being purposefully misunderstood, but even when we want to be misunderstood we still must know how society functions to be accurately misunderstood. So, knowing how to be misunderstood may require an even deeper knowledge of one's community because to be purposefully misunderstood one would have to know what types of words and actions are intelligible and which are not, and then act accordingly. For Velleman, the crucial point is that only by understanding the local mores can you behave the way you truly want to behave. To some extent this conclusion seems to say that freedom is in part socially constructed, or at least socially perceived and the ability to act freely is based on knowing how to act within a certain society. But if we must understand local mores to behave how we want to behave, or have our behaviors be perceived as what we want them to be perceived as, then our freedom appears to be directly related to the values and mores of our society. So I guess what we have to do is learn how to be mutually interpretable and relatable to others, without worrying what they expect us to be, and how they expect us to behave. Instead of trying to identify as some label, for example "Japanese", we should try to identify with the life-experiences we've shared.

XII. Conclusion

You may still be wondering how exactly this exploration of mutual interpretability globalization and identity should affect our self-conception and self-understanding. Thus I conclude by synthesizing the different ideas I discuss throughout this paper to hopefully demonstrate how we can learn to be more comfortable being ourselves. Finding ourselves and truly understanding "who we are" is hard. We are one entity, but we have so many experiences that trying to comprehend them all through, as a singular being seems impossible; we must choose one experience or a few

experiences to frame our self-conceptions. For example I can perceive myself as a Male or from the perspective of college student or of that of a Spanish speaker or a younger brother, but none of these single experiences defines me. I can also think of myself as being defined by what I am not; so I can identify with the fact that I don't play hockey or that I am not Indian. But in trying to synthesize our experiences and get a better understanding of who we are we run into a great paradox; we are one person trying to understand countless experiences. Thus one or some of our experiences simply doesn't define us, we are the collection of all our experiences. Yet we tend to strongly identify with just a handful of experiences and so we form relations with those who've had similar experiences to ourselves, and thus have a similar perspective on life. Consequently we tend to relate with others based on race or political ideology or hobbies because we assume that others who share in these experiences will better be able to understand us. But in letting artificial labels like race define who we are we impede our ability to actually learn more about ourselves and have more life experiences. The fact that we all fundamentally grapple with trying to understand the mysterious experience that is life, should be enough of a shared experience to unite people of all cultures and experiences.

You are not just your race or your sexual orientation. You are not just a stoner or a gamer. And most importantly you don't have to let these labels frame how you understand yourself. The labels we use to define ourselves don't really mean anything. They simply help us organize the world and make sense of our experiences. But in seeking to meet the expectations ascribed to some label (Mexican, black, gay, hipster, whatever) we limit our self-understanding and what actions we think are possible. To be mutually interpretable as X you must behave as others think X would behave. And

further to be mutually interpretable as X in Y community we have to behave how those in Y expect an X to behave. But, in reality if you are X, or feel like you are X you already know that and you don't need to prove it to anyone, so you shouldn't worry about being interpreted as being such thing.

If you are an investment banker, you don't have to do live up to the expectations of what others believe investment bankers do, or try to behave like a stereotypical investment banker behaves, because you are an investment banker. If you work as an investment banker then you are an investment banker! So anything you do is what investment banker's do, or at least what one investment banker does. But by trying to live up to the expectations or stereotypes of what society thinks investment bankers do, you may forgo things you actually care about doing. Now, I'm not saying that there is a correct way to behave to be true to oneself or to really do as one pleases. And there is nothing inherently bad or wrong with identifying as an investment banker, or wanting to be seen as a typical investment banker, whatever that is, if that is truly what we want to do. The problem is that many times we unassumingly change our behaviors so as to fit in with those around us, so as to be perceived as part of the group, when in reality we are defined solely by our interactions with that group.

As humans we are worried about fitting in, and being accepted by our peers, so much so that we can lose our sense of selves trying to be accepted by others. I'm sure we've all found ourselves interacting with people from different communities or who hold different beliefs and behaving differently than we normally would, and then thinking to ourselves, "what the hell am I doing? This isn't me". None of us are immune to the effects of peer pressure and social conformity. Even entire nations have lost their way and have fallen victims to these pressures. Just think of the standards of

mutually interpretability that existed across Germany and Japan before and during the World War II. In Germany Hitler created a social structure that accepted the persecution and execution of millions of people because of their religious and social beliefs, while in Japan the *bushido* ideal regarding the Japanese warrior spirit persuaded the Japanese to continue fighting a war they knew was over. Today we may look back to these communities and peoples and think, “I can’t believe they did that” how did they let that happen? Yet today humans still do all sorts of mind baffling things to be socially accepted. Just think of fraternity hazing. The desire to be accepted by the people around us and feel like part of something greater than ourselves is powerful, but if we aren’t careful about who and what we identify with we can quickly become people we never intended to be. Simply associating with people whose definitions of ordinariness or what is doable is different than our own may lead us to act in ways we never thought we would.

Thus when we realize that are a conscious collection of experiences and memories that are intimately related with material bodies and that identifying ourselves with just a few of experiences, like where we are from, we limit how we understand ourselves, and frankly make the world a lonelier and more divided place. Instead of trying to understand others by where they are from, or what they identify with and thus what experiences we think they’ve had or what beliefs we think they hold, we should to try to learn of their experiences and then form a judgment their character, and try to understand who they are.

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