How We Come To Be: Identity, Memory, and Trauma

Many of us find ourselves living in societies that, through technological evolution, biomedical innovation, sociopolitical power, and various intersecting systems of oppression, are constantly trying to define us -- to offer us versions of ourselves that are often difficult to recognize as our own. But how do we figure out who we are? Is it according to our own stories about ourselves, the stories of (often powerful) others, or some combination of the two? What role does memory, or its lack, play in our ideas about who we are, and does it matter morally if we have the ability to choose what we remember? How does trauma -- medical, social, public, private, and so on -- affect how we form ideas about ourselves, and about the identities of others? Do we have a moral responsibility (to ourselves, to others, to society in general) to remember that which we would rather forget?

This seminar addresses these, and related, questions at the intersection of moral psychology, bioethics and neuroethics, and feminist theory. We will read and discuss established and emerging scholarship, both philosophical and interdisciplinary, that often takes radically different views on these issues. The objective is not to find a single, all-things-considered response, but to wrestle with the difficulties, contradictions, and moral dilemmas inherent in asking some of the most important questions about the constitution of our identities, the moral and psychological connections between our past, present, and future -- and how suffering can impact them all. Emphasis will be on class discussion, including student presentations.

If you have any questions or concerns about the course, please feel free to email the instructor at agotlib@brooklyn.cuny.edu.