

Identity Crisis

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At the same time that Americans have had problems with personal identity in the everyday world, they have suffered an identity crisis at the intellectual level. The difficulty is that theoretical discussions of personal identity typically have failed to provide an adequate framework for understanding the concept, especially its importance for education. While analytic philosophers during the past two decades and more have extensively and profoundly examined issues about the identity of physical objects,¹ they frequently have ignored crucial questions about personal identity. When they have addressed personal identity, they have been very tentative, sometimes holding that the concept might not be important, other times leaving a definition of the concept up in the air.² Even though academic ideologues occasionally have made pretense of defining personal identity, they have left the concept quite vague.³ Libertarian philosophers, who have maintained that people should be free to choose and reshape their individual identities, have discounted the social importance of such identities.⁴ Communitarian philosophers, with their emphasis on the social origin of selves, have failed to distinguish personal from social identity.⁵ While Post-Modernists have advocated that we should listen to other “voices” and be mindful of our “horizons” when we establish our identities, these philosophers have failed to articulate principles for choosing among voices and responding to horizons.⁶

A major practical significance of these problems in recent philosophical theorizing about personal identity is that such theorizing provides educators with little or no guidance. More specifically, recent philosophical inquiries into personal identity do not help educators answer two key questions:⁷ To what extent, if any, should education form the personal identities of students? Should the education of students distinguish between worthy and unworthy personal identities? I wish to attempt to answer these questions. In settling these questions, I shall try to clarify what a personal identity is, explain why persons logically might choose identities for themselves, and discuss what choosing one’s personal identity entails.

THE MEANING OF PERSONAL IDENTITY

There are widely varying kinds of identity, for instance, mathematical, metaphysical, physical, biological, anthropological, social, and psychological. The only commonality among the different senses of identity is that they all follow the etymological meaning of the term. Specifically, each sense of identity involves sameness (L., *idem*, same; *is*, it or that. E. tr., samazdat). The value of a mathematical symbol is the same as the symbol’s function. A physical object is the same as all the physical properties that it has at a given space-time intersection. The social identity of an individual is the same as the institutional positions occupied by that individual. An individual’s psychological identity is the same as certain personality traits.

Some kinds of identities cannot apply to human beings, for instance, mathematical and semantical identities. Many other kinds, however, may apply, for

example, metaphysical, physical, biological, anthropological, social, and psychological. Nevertheless, an identity is not a personal identity simply because it refers to an individual human being. Any identity that applies to a human being consists of a set of properties that is affirmed, truly or falsely, of that individual. A set of properties, however, is not necessarily a personal identity, even if the set is truly affirmed of someone. Properties truly affirmed of an individual might be nothing more than facts about that individual, and statements of fact about human beings are notorious for frequently being impersonal. Doubtless, the files of the IRS and the FBI respectively contain accurate descriptions of me which in effect are bureaucratic identities of me, but it is highly doubtful that either of those descriptions is a personal identity of me. In other words, some identities tell us what people are rather than who they are.

An identity of a human being is a personal one if and only if the identity defines that individual as a person. However, it is not a personal identity if it simply defines the individual as a person in the generic sense. As usually understood, a person is a self-conscious and rational being who acts voluntarily and has interests, worth, rights, and duties as such a being.⁸ Thus, a personal identity consists of a set of properties that are affirmed of an individual with respect to his or her specific or particular self-consciousness, rationality, freedom, value, rights, and duties. The affirmation of that set of properties describes, explicitly or implicitly, the individual's self-perception, rationality, freedom, interests, worth, rights, and duties. We gave Mother Theresa a personal identity when we referred to her as a living saint, as the epitome of a charitable being. As long as my sexual or racial identity is nothing more than a scientific or bureaucratic fact, it is not an identity of me as a person. It becomes a personal identity of me only when it is meant, by whomever gives me the identity, to delimit my life as a person.

WHY GIVE ONESELF A PERSONAL IDENTITY?

Personal identity may come from different sources, with the most commonly mentioned ones being God, nature, society, other individuals, and oneself. It is conceivable, therefore, that an individual may have a personal identity that stems from various sources. However, because diverse sources may use different predicables for that individual's personal identity, they might provide the individual with multiple personal identities. While multiple personal identities might be largely compatible with one another, they need not be. Thomas Jefferson is a patriot and an advocate of human rights to many people, but a coward and a hypocrite to others.

There are several reasons why sources external to a person might give him or her an identity. One reason is to facilitate communication or record keeping. Identification of persons by their names or physical appearance expedites communication. Identification of them by name, birth date, parentage, social security number, and so forth, enable bureaucracies to keep vital and personnel records and to locate people if need be. Another reason why an external source might give a person an identity is control. By identifying people according to their race, sex, or religion, societies frequently have sought to establish class structures, distribute jobs, and allot wealth and honors. The identities that a society furnishes its members

in order to control them often become internalized; that is, those identities frequently become accepted by its members. I presume that social identities have been easily internalized by those members likely to benefit the most from the identities accorded them. I also assume that some members have internalized demeaning identities for reasons of survival. At the same time, other members seemingly have quietly refused to accept demeaning identities at the expense of suffering inner turmoil and sorely repressed hatred. A fictional person of this kind was Bigger Thomas, the central character in Richard Wright's novel, *Native Son*.

Why, then, does a human being give him or herself an identity? It is sometimes claimed, by some social scientists as well as by some ideologues, that human beings naturally seek to identify their respective selves.⁹ According to this position, human infants develop according to Hegelian logic; that is, they emerge from unqualified being by differentiating their respective selves from those things that are other than their selves. By accomplishing this dialectical feat, they give themselves identities. It is enough for self-identification that an infant perceives him or herself as not the Other, or, if you like, as other than mother. This view suggests, then, that being anti-Semitic, anti-Catholic, anti-Communist, anti-homosexual, anti-pollution, anti-sibling, or anti-whatever else is perfectly natural. Being "anti" is simply nature's way for us to obtain identities. In other words, bigotry is good for identity. But even if this naturalistic explanation does not intend that self identification is ultimately fragmenting, as Plato and other communitarians have held that such identification is, the explanation is limited. Its major strength is pointing out that there is a natural basis for self identification. Its inadequacy is that it fails to go beyond that basis and indicate why a person might willingly give him or herself an identity.

The reference to willingness is a reminder that willfulness, or voluntariness, is an ingredient in the common notion of a person, and is at the heart of all the recent discussion about the imposition of identities in the course of education. Accordingly, it might help us to understand why a person might willingly provide him or herself an identity if we regard a person as a voluntary agent. According to the theory of voluntary action, the agents of such action act freely and knowingly and have values, rights, and duties as agents.¹⁰ As voluntary agents, consequently, persons are in control of their respective actions. No one makes them do what they are doing; they know what they are doing. More specifically, they choose their goals according to their own rational judgments and decide upon their actions according to their own rational deliberations.

So, if persons freely and wittingly pursue their own goals through their own actions, why might they want to give themselves identities? The answer is threefold. First, being voluntary agents, persons want to be in control of their identities. Second, as voluntary agents, persons might want to identify their individual selves with sets of properties that enable them to enhance control over their respective actions. Personal identity can enhance control in this respect because it can provide a stable framework within which a voluntary agent may choose goals and decide upon actions for now and the near future but also anticipate goals and actions for unforeseeable circumstances. Such identity can further enhance control in this

respect because it can help a person to be especially aware of character and personality traits and social conditions that will enable him or her to choose goals and decide upon actions. Third, voluntary agents might want to give their selves identities in order to establish the values, rights, and duties that are special to their individual selves. If, for instance, a woman willfully identifies herself with the properties of being a physician, she is in a position to esteem herself as a physician, to assert her right to confidentiality with her patients, and to recognize her duty to help protect the health of the community as well as that of her patients. Finally, a voluntary agent might desire to choose an identity for him or herself in order to make sense of his or her life as a whole. A personal identity would do this if it reflected the concerned agent's character and personality, recognized the significance of past actions for his or her character and personality, and pointed toward further development in character, personality, and action.

CHOOSING A PERSONAL IDENTITY

If we may appeal to the theory of voluntary agency in order to understand why persons might want to furnish themselves with identities, we also may appeal to the same theory in order to understand what a person's choice of his or her identity entails. The choice includes more than one might initially suspect.

The obvious ingredient in a person's choice of an identity is freedom. The choice must be free, not compelled. The person making the choice is ultimately the cause of the choice. But even if voluntary agents unforcedly choose something, they do not choose it freely if they do not have more than a minimal range of alternatives from which to choose. A Hobson's choice is not a free choice.

Voluntary agents, however, do not make their choices just freely. They make their choices wittingly as well. Thus, another element in a person's choice of identity is knowledge. The person must know what alternative identities are available for consideration. More specifically, the person has to be informed of at least the general features of each available alternative. Those features consist of the propositional knowledge, abilities, attitudes, norms, and activities that characterize the alternative.

An additional ingredient in a person's selection of an identity is a rational judgment. A choice by a voluntary agent, we have mentioned, follows from a rational judgment, specifically, a determination of which alternative under consideration is best. That determination presupposes a review of all facts relevant to all alternatives and an application of standards for assessing the values of the given alternatives. Hence, persons logically do not choose identities for themselves simply because they like them. They choose them, rather, because they judge them to be most worthy for themselves. Accordingly, persons do not accept or reject identities that have been imposed on them simply because they do not like those identities. They accept or reject such identities on the basis of rational judgments. When people voluntarily reject identities that have been imposed on them, they assert themselves as voluntary agents. Moreover, even when people willfully keep identities that have been imposed on themselves, they assert themselves as voluntary agents despite their retention of the identities.

Finally, a person's choice of an identity necessarily contains certain principles of judgment. These are the prudential and moral norms to which all persons are logically committed as voluntary agents. From the standpoint of prudence, each voluntary agent esteems freedom, knowledge, purposefulness, deliberativeness, and all other features of voluntary action insofar as they pertain to his or her agency. Also, each agent asserts, on rational grounds, rights to these prudential values. From the standpoint of morality, each voluntary agent necessarily prizes the traits of voluntary action in the respect that they pertain to all other voluntary agents. Moreover, each agent has to respect the rights of all other voluntary agents to these matters and has to help support and encourage the social conditions favorable to voluntary action. If prudential and moral judgments conflict, the moral must prevail for the reason that moral principles conceptually are superior to all other action guides. When, therefore, persons choose identities for their respective selves, they have to consider, on prudential grounds, which alternatives before them are valuable to their individual agencies. In addition, a person choosing an identity has to consider, on moral grounds, which alternatives might lead him or her to respect the rights of other persons or to perform the duties that he or she has to maintain, and foster the social conditions favorable to voluntary agency. Thus, whichever set of properties a person affirms of him or herself for the purpose of directing and giving value to his or her life, that set should contain none of the properties that have been trademarks of Hitler, Stalin, or Pol Pot.

EDUCATION AND PERSONAL IDENTITY

Having determined what a personal identity is and what is involved in one's choosing such an identity, we now are in a position to answer the two questions of ultimate interest here: To what extent, if any, should education shape the personal identities of students? and, Should the education of students distinguish between worthy and unworthy personal identities?

In response to the first question, education should shape the personal identities of students to the extent that it ought to help them become occurrent voluntary agents. While people are not born actual voluntary agents, they tend to be born prospective ones; that is, newborns generally show promise of becoming, over a period of about two decades, occurrent voluntary agents.¹¹ The development of youth as voluntary agents requires social structures and practices supportive of voluntary action. It also should proceed according to the educator's estimates of what students variously need for their growth as voluntary agents and according to the respective interests of students.

What they need to learn as voluntary agents are certain intellectual and affective virtues. The intellectual virtues include theoretical reasoning and knowledge and practical reasoning and knowledge. The theoretical intellectual virtues are to respect the practical relevance of the methods, principles, and conclusions of the theoretical disciplines; whereas the practical intellectual virtues, which are to have both prudential and moral dimensions, are to utilize the methods, principles, and conclusions of theory that have practical significance. The affective virtues are to be self-regarding, such as those of health, moderation in pleasure, courage, hopefulness, and self-respect. They also are to be other-regarding, such as those of justice,

honesty, politeness, care, and friendship. Just as the intellectual virtues involve affective elements, such as positive feelings toward rational knowledge, the affective virtues entail intellectual elements, such as judging what counts as moderation in different situations. By developing in students the intellectual and affective virtues appropriate to voluntary agents, education will provide students with the generic character of such agents.

This character, however, is not all that education should attempt to develop in students by way of shaping their identities. The formation of the personal identities of students should proceed according to the development of the interests of students. The formation should proceed in this way for several reasons. As particular agents, students have their respective interests, which in turn orient students toward the world. Moreover, by developing the interests of students within the framework of voluntary action, education appeals to the positive attitudes of students. Finally, by appealing to such attitudes, education encourages students to develop freely and knowingly.

A couple of qualifications have to be mentioned here. Some students are likely to have interests that run counter to the values, rights, and duties of voluntary agents. For reasons of prudence and morality, interests of a student that oppose the principles of voluntary action should be restrained and reformed with respect to the student's prospect of acquiring the character of a voluntary agent. Moreover, while education is to broaden as well as deepen the interests of students, it should not strive to get students to acquire perfected interests in everything compatible with the principles of voluntary action. Such a goal is unfeasible. Also, it is enough for education to help students develop their interests within the framework of their learning to become occurrent voluntary agents. Upon becoming actual voluntary agents, students will have the knowledge, skills, and appreciations that will enable them to pursue and expand their interests on their own.

As for the second question, by now it is apparent that in preparing students to choose their own identities, education logically encourages students to distinguish between better and worse personal identities according to specific norms. Those norms are the values, rights, duties, and virtues of voluntary agents. Students should learn to choose to be persons who appreciate freedom and knowledge, and purposefulness and deliberativeness; who assert their rights as voluntary agents and respect the rights of other voluntary agents; who accept their duty to support the practices and conditions favorable to voluntary action; and whose character consists of the virtues of the voluntary agent.

But, by equipping students to choose their identities according to the principles of voluntary agency, does not education impose upon students the foundation and framework upon and within which they choose their respective identities? Thus, is not the major part of their personal identities imposed upon them; is not their choice of personal identities rather restricted, perhaps insignificant? I readily concede that the development of students as voluntary agents entails the major elements of their personal identities, but I do not grant that education necessarily imposes these elements upon students. As we have mentioned already, if education proceeds

according to the interests of students as well as according to the principles of voluntary agency, it is more or less a consensual undertaking between students and educators. Moreover, even if students become occurrent voluntary agents through education, they still may be in a position to reflect upon their selves as voluntary agents and wonder if they should choose to be other than voluntary agents. If they conclude, which I think they logically must, that they should not forego their voluntary agency, they in effect will have chosen to be voluntary agents.

Upon becoming occurrent voluntary agents, students will be versed in practical reason and thus will choose for themselves those identities that are best, not in the ideal sense but in the sense of the best available alternative. To make their choices, students might find it helpful to try on different identities; but as occurrent voluntary agents they will really experiment with only those that are consistent with the principles of voluntary agency. Voluntary agents logically do not experiment with being heroin addicts or AIDS victims, even though they might imagine what such lives might be. People who are voluntary agents, but who nevertheless violate the norms of voluntary agency, have to be ashamed of themselves. Finally, as occurrent voluntary agents, students will recognize that there are time constraints upon the choice of personal identities. The ultimate point of choosing one's identity, we have indicated, is to provide meaning and direction for one's life. Thus, one cannot wait indefinitely to choose an identity. As Hamlet never quite understood, decisiveness is a virtue of the voluntary agent. After assuming an identity, of course, a person might find it unsatisfactory and want to take on another. Nevertheless, there are practical limits as to how often one might change one's identity.

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