

Eight pieces on identity

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8. Identity

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Behind a number of political debates, for example on immigration, the re-emergence of nationalism, and European unification, there lie issues of identity: personal and cultural. I give a series of five pieces to deal with the different aspects involved.

There is *individual* identity ('who am I') and *collective* identity ('who are we'). Also, there is *categorical* identity ('to what do I/we belong') and *existential* identity (how do we experience ourselves). For the individual, existential identity is *personal* identity, and for a group it is *cultural* identity. Existential identity is connected with the question 'What do I/we want', associated values, and the question 'how do I/we think'. Individual identity does not stand alone from collective identity: I can hardly belong to a group that is completely at odds with what I think that I am and what I want. And collective identity contributes to the formation of individual identity. Here I consider individual identity.

'Identity' here is an intriguing term. It suggests that in having an identity one is identical to oneself, remaining equal to oneself. Thus Schopenhauer, for example, assumed that character is fixed. But the self is wobbly and fragmented, opaque, and changes, develops, within limits. Nevertheless the self has a certain stability. Where does that come from?

It comes from the body. In that body the individual has its own unalterable potential in innate dispositions, and a personality or character as a whole of attitudes, responses and behaviours that develop from that potential. Without body there is no identity and in death we lose it. In the body all impressions, movements, and experiences come together. Those form dispositions, impulses and ideas on the basis of experience, and that experience is bound to that one body along its unique life trajectory.

How does that work, more precisely? According to Antonio Damasio the brain forms images or 'maps', in neuronal structures, of the interior body, of organs. Those internal images in the brain are fed by the physiology of organs, and in turn play a role in the regulation of those organs. Next, from observation of external objects and experience with actions those body maps are affected, and a new level of images or maps arises. Here, from interaction with the outside world the notion arises of the self as an independent player in that world. Next that leads to the build-up of a biographical self, with memories of earlier experiences, and expectations and plans for the future, and the whole of all that forms the identity of the self.

Now, if the self is in ongoing development, what then is authenticity, being true to one's real self? What 'real self'? Where in time does that lie? How can one be true to something that is under development and that furthermore one knows imperfectly? The idea of the self as something that is given beforehand and manifests itself in life without change is not only unrealistic but also creepy. Then one is condemned to that original self. Is authenticity, perhaps, giving oneself the opportunity of *developing* identity, in the realisation of one's potential for it, in interaction with one's environment?

9. Cultural Identity

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Culture has several meanings. First, as something *opposed to nature*: mind as opposed to body, spirit as opposed to the matter, morality as opposed to natural drives. Second, in the *anthropological sense*: the way of life of a group, with its habits, values, norms, rules, ways of doing things. Third, *cultural products*: architecture, art, music, theatre, science, laws, etc. One might call the latter 'civilization'. In this piece, the second, anthropological notion is central, but it is connected with the other two meanings. Civilization forms the basis for ways of life, and cultural products are the expression of both.

Now, then, does every arbitrary group have its own culture? It has culture in the anthropological sense to the extent that it shows clearly distinctive behaviour that is rooted in the other dimensions of culture, i.e. distinctive mental and moral categories and cultural products, such as language, buildings, music, sports, art, myths, symbols, etc. The Dutch are supposed to be tolerant, pragmatic, frugal, and to distinguish themselves in ballet, swimming, skating, and water works. Some of these features tend to more myth than fact. Presently the tolerance of the Dutch is questionable. Cultural features can be more or less distinctive, shared, taught, and celebrated. In other words, culture can be more or less strong.

This characterization of culture includes not only ethnic or national cultures but also organizations, such as firms. There, one can encounter fairly strict distinctive features (which in earlier work I called 'organizational focus'). Next to a function of sense making that also has one of establishing goals, procedures, attitudes, and a division of roles, without at each step having to negotiate the order. Entry is formally free and voluntary but is in fact subjected to selection and socialization, and is conditional on adequate conformity.

Bonding to a group (nation, organization), can have a strong emotional loading, which is connected with a romantic longing for fusion with a larger, organic whole to which one is subservient, which transcends the puny, mortal and vulnerable self. We can see this in nationalism, sects and some organizations.

People have numerous, overlapping cultural identities. One can be Dutchman, European, employee of a firm, member of a sports club, of a profession, belong to a municipality, a religion, or a political party. Nationality is just one of the stronger ones to the extent that it entails unity of language, history, political structure, etc. In Belgium one is not so much a Belgian nationalist as a Flemish one.

10. Culture is not essential

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We are inclined to put things and people into conceptual boxes, in *categorization*. That yields *categorical identity*: To what does a person or a group 'belong'. People are European or Dutch. That thinking in terms of boxes is useful, up to a point, but next we have a strong inclination to accord an *essence* to the box. To 'belong to' the box one must have certain characteristics, and everyone in the box has them. There can be no doubt whether or not something belongs the category. You are inside or outside. You are a Dutchman or not. That essentialization of cultural identity is a source of imperialism and nationalism that blocks tolerance of immigrants and integration of states because that requires mixed bags of culture.

We have the inclination to think in boxes on the basis of a fundamental metaphor that we do not see as a metaphor: the idea that a concept is like a container of objects. That metaphor arises from our dealings with things in the world, in a struggle for survival in evolution, which has been imprinted on our thought. A chair is in one room or another, never in two at the same time, and it does not change when we carry it from one room to another. Ambiguity concerning inside and outside is as uncomfortable, confusing or even threatening as a home with holes in the roof, or the sabre-toothed tiger that is half inside and half outside the house, or being half inside and half outside your car. However, for concepts and identities that thinking does not apply. If you move a word from one sentence to another its meaning changes. One situation calls forth another aspect of identity than another. One can at the same time have several identities.

Essences are often difficult to determine because they do not exist. What is the essence of a chair? Once I saw a photo in the newspaper of someone sitting in a stuffed cow, saying: 'See me sitting in my cow'. For natural kinds, such as species, one can say that their genes form their essence, but different specimens of the species have different configurations from their gene pool.

Personal identity is derived from biography, depending on what one has come across along one's life path, and on expectations and plans one may have. One belongs to different groups, is in different boxes, at the same time. If those boxes had essences one would have a collection of essences, which is difficult to reconcile with the notion of an essence. Your identity flies off in all directions. What aspect of identity counts depends on the situation. In church you belong to one community, and when getting a passport to another.

Perhaps the cultural identity of a person is a collection of positions in networks that intersect in it.

11. European identity?

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Europe needs something like a European identity. If there is no essence to culture or identity, as I claim in a previous piece, what does identity entail? Among other things, identity is associated with a shared destiny. European integration was started to prevent further wars in Europe. Next, Europe was needed for the economy. Now it is needed above all to achieve a coherent financial, fiscal and foreign policy. However, while some shared destiny is necessary it is not sufficient. We should not only need each other but also be willing and able to collaborate. We should not only share interests but also values and views. For example: the relation between citizen and state (democracy), rule of law, separation of powers and of church and state.

On a deeper level there is more at stake. At the basis of culture lie fundamental mental categories according to which people see the world and themselves. Is knowledge of the world objective or constructed, are rationality and emotions separate or entwined, are we at the mercy of our environment or masters of it, oriented towards risk or towards certainty, is the human being fundamentally good or evil, can perfection be reached in this world or only in a hereafter, is stability or change central, unity or diversity, are people primarily individuals or members of groups, is there only self-interest or also altruism?

In such basic categories people in Europe are as different as they are equal. They largely derive from classical Greek and Christian traditions. But those themselves yield opposites.

The ancient Greeks fought on the question whether stability or change are fundamental: fixed elements or a flowing river? Plato was oriented towards absolutes and universals, and Aristotle towards specific circumstances. In Europe we have been arguing for a long time about the primacy of reason or emotion, nature or culture, unity or diversity.

Mental categories shift during the development of knowledge, society and economy. In traditional societies people are more one with the (familial, local) group and trust is more personal, while in economically more developed countries people are more autonomous and trust is more based on impersonal arrangements of laws and other institutions.

Any two people will not have the same points in common as any other two. With some we have this in common, with others something else. There may not be a single basic idea that is shared by all. Then there is no essence. That does not mean that we do not form a community. The philosopher Wittgenstein spoke of *family resemblance*: Pete looks like John, who looks like Charles. Pete does not look at all like Charles, but is nevertheless connected to him through John. Instead of essence we have spots of coagulation of unity in fields of diversity. This coagulation is perhaps more dense within Europe than beyond it. But not as dense as within nations.

12. Tracing identity

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Do Europeans have more shared mental categories within Europe than outside? They also have a number of things in common with the US, though perhaps not to the same extent. They share a penchant for individualism, change rather than stability, and the idea that we can shape our environment. That leads to entrepreneurship and innovation. And to pollution and excessive consumption.

More than many Americans many Europeans have a sense of tragedy, in the classical Greek sense, and an awareness of the danger of overconfidence (*hubris*). That makes Europe less inclined to intervene in the world. Americans see that as indecision and lack of moral courage, and Europeans prefer to see it as wisdom. What Americans see as fatal relativism Europeans see as beneficial tolerance of difference.

In the emergence of the Netherlands a war with Spain was central. Do the Dutch still define themselves as enemies of Spain? How does one decide that the Netherlands does and Turkey does not 'belong to Europe'? Must we take into account history, and how far then does one go back?

Far enough back in evolution we all, humans and animals, were a kind of virus. Later we became animals and next as mammals split ourselves from birds. However, in the platypus there still is an intermediate species. Evolutionary scientists trace the identity of a species along paths of branching in descent, with nodes where new species split off from a common ancestor. Along that branching the Neanderthal was not an ancestor of Homo Sapiens, but they had a common ancestor.

In a similar way we might trace cultural identities. We might look where for Turkey the points of contact lay, with the Netherlands or another European country, in time, place, and type of contact, including war, domination, alliance, trade, migration, and other exchange of people or ideas. There have been contacts between the Netherlands and Turkey for 400 years. Tulips

originally came from Turkey. As points of contact arise more frequently and more recently there is more similar identity. In the 16th century the Turkish Ottoman empire included the Balkans and Hungary and reached up to Vienna. The French made a pact with the Ottomans against emperor Charles of Habsburg and a joint fleet bombarded the Riviera.

Part of European identity lies in the fact that in varying coalitions there have been so many wars within it. The Dutch will no doubt be closer to the Flemish than to the Hungarians, but a shared essence there is not. Whether Europe has more of a shared identity with the US than with Turkey would have to follow from further scrutiny. And for the Netherlands as the home of the Pilgrim Fathers that will turn out differently from Spain, as the home of a Moorish-catholic civilization.

134. Notions of the self

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It is a common thought that promises and commitments require a self that is constant, being in future what it is now and wanting what it wants now. I find that a suffocating notion of self and other. In my view, commitment is aimed at ongoing interaction with someone for mutual growth, mentally, spiritually or economically. Some stability of relationship is required to utilize its potential, but not fixity of self.

According to Buddhism and David Hume, who appears to have been inspired by Buddhism, the self is an illusion that results from misguided thinking in terms of substance. There is only a flux of momentary perceptions, thoughts and feelings without a self. There is as little underlying substance behind 'I think' as in the phrase 'it rains'. Montaigne also had this insight.

In Buddhism one can surrender the illusion of self in intense, disciplined meditation, freeing oneself from the miseries of life that follow from the thirst and cravings of the self, in peace of mind and feeling at one with the world, in *Nirwana*. Here, there is a parallel to Schopenhauer's notion of the will to life as the source of all misery.

In eastern philosophy there is also a stream, but not a dominant one, that does not surrender but seeks the individual self (*purusha*) but that was static, eternal, and autonomous.

While I accept that the self is not unitary but fragmented into multiple, shifting aspects of self, and is 'on the move', constructed and reconstructed in experience, I do think there still is a workable notion of identity, as I discussed in item 8 of this blog. If we surrender all notions of the self, how can we, indeed, still talk of intentions and agency? What remains of character? The self is the seat of action in the world, and we live to employ it in that way.

For Kierkegaard also, as for me, the self is not a compound but a process, in a dialectic of inside and outside. He said: the self is a relation that relates itself to its own self. That may sound mystifying, but I think it is exactly right. It can be explained if we turn to Damasio's account, discussed in item 8 of this blog, and repeated here, as follows. The brain forms images or 'maps', in neuronal structures, of the interior body, of organs. Those internal images in the brain are fed by the physiology of organs, and in turn play a role in the regulation of those organs. Next, from observation of external objects and experience with actions those body maps are affected, and a new level of images or maps arises. Here, from interaction with the outside world the notion arises of the self as an independent player in that

world. Next that leads to the build-up of a biographical self, with memories of earlier experiences, and expectations and plans for the future, and the whole of all that forms the identity of the self.

In my argument for *otherhumanism* I did plead for *kenosis* or ‘emptying the self’, in the sense of opening up to the other human being, in empathy and benevolence, and inviting its opposition. But I pleaded for that not to lose the self but to enhance its flourishing.

The self needs the other to free itself from its prejudices and to grow, intellectually and spiritually, on the basis of opposition from the other to which one must learn to open up, in empathy. I argued that this even yields economic advantage by utilizing differences between people to create innovation by *novel combinations*.

265. What is identity?

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Previously in this blog (items 8 and 9) I discussed personal identity, cultural identity, and the relation between the two. I also proposed that identity has multiple elements that can be in conflict with each other, and that identity is subject to development, and can fall apart or grow stronger.

A good old friend of mine is developing a form of Alzheimer disease. Is he losing his identity? Eventually he will. That is the tragedy of Alzheimer’s. Now he can no longer be coherent in telling a story or conducting an argument. He can’t find the words, and connections are lost. But he is still clearly the person he was, with his demeanour, gestures, quips, laughter, expression, etc., in other words in what is called his ‘habitus’. Such habitus, style of exercising and expressing identity, is part of identity.

Here I want to look in more detail at what constitutes identity. Is identity what we do, how we act? No: that is how identity manifests itself. Identity drives conduct, but is also formed by it, in response from the environment.

One needs the means to express identity and enact it, and from that form it, such as, among other things: a home, work, family, friends, access to education, freedom of movement and expression. In detaining refugees in centres, we rob them of the means to express and develop identity.

How does it work, this formation of identity in exercising it? Earlier in this blog (item 35) I discussed the notion of ‘neural Darwinism’: mental, neural patterns of connection may compete with each other, and those are reinforced that yield perceived success. What is perceived as success is also part of identity.

What, then, are the things that constitute identity: drive conduct and develop from it? Is it fundamental drives or needs? The most fundamental needs are shared by all people, while identity should individuate people. But there are differences between people in what they want and prefer. I would say that individual preferences are an important part of identity.

But apart from preferences there are also distinctive ways in which people exercise and execute them. I think that here we arrive at ‘character’. That consists of dispositions to act,

such as courage, commitment, imagination, enterprise, and ability to suffer and overcome disappointments.

Now, the exercise and development of identity, and of character, depend on interaction between self and other, and between self and social systems. For this, there are relational features of character, such as empathy, self-control, preparedness to listen, ability to understand, willingness to share and to give and take, but also the strength to stand up for oneself.

Much of what we do is automatic, in routine conduct, about which we usually do not consciously deliberate (see item 5 on free will). This yields what I would call 'behavioural inertia'. This is also how the brain works: it does not tell us what to do, but what not to do, when to step out of a routine.

And this is a good thing. Life would be unlivable if one had to consciously deliberate on everything we do, every step of the way. It is by surrendering to routine, e.g. in driving a car, that we can reflect on other things, such as what we are going to do where we are driving to. In emergencies, however, such as a traffic accident in the making, we need to be catapulted from routine into consciousness to take appropriate action.

In social inertia we routinely go along with what people usually do and say, in a variety of circumstances, or what one is expected to do, without much reflection. Now if identity entails individuation, not being identical with others, an important part of identity is to act against this inertia, to step out of social routines. The challenge is how to balance the drive of authenticity with the need to conform, going along with what is normal or socially required.

Here we are back at the 'Foucault problem' that I discussed before in this blog (in items 50, 212, 258): how to exercise autonomy while being assimilated in, and assimilating into oneself, social systems as 'regimes of truth'? How to be an effective rebel?

272. How do you find your selves?

published 19-7-2016

In the present series on foundations and language games, this item is an intermezzo on the self.

Richard Rorty defined the person, the self, as an 'internally coherent cluster of beliefs and desires'¹. The question remains of course, what 'coherent' means.

This definition allows for multiple selves, each with a form of coherence. I proposed earlier (in item 134 of this blog), that there is not only one single, fixed self, but multiple selves, constructed by internalizing experience by adapting neural structures, possibly in a variety of ways.

Against David Hume's denial of any coherent, stable identity I claimed that there is more or less stable coherence due to the condition that mental and endocrinal processes occur and arise together in a single body that survives or not as a whole, and functioning for survival requires some coherence. Images that produce fear trigger hormones that serve action, which feeds back in forming mental images.

According to the Freudian psycho-analysis there are different ways to assimilate one's past, yielding several, often conflicting, selves, some of which may be suppressed and hidden in the subconscious.

Psycho-analysis may help to tease the spooks of hidden personality out of the dark. Does one need this? Or can one do it by oneself? But one put them in there, in the dark, to begin with.

Might the ability to do this teasing out of hidden selves be nursed with reading literature? Earlier (in items 92, 120) I proposed that literature can help to develop the ability of ‘moral simulation’, imagining what consequences one’s actions might have, which sustains the feeble free will (92), and in that sense may make people better (120). In good literature, one also witnesses how the hide and seek of selves happens to other people, or how the author teases hem out. Or would one have to write a novel oneself, where one can project one’s hidden selves as the novel’s characters? Is writing used for therapy?

What self or selves does one want? Usually, morality is associated with obligations to others, but there is also a morality concerning the self, a duty to preserve oneself, perhaps to realize one’s potential, not to let the precious gift of it go to waste. Or that, at least, is what I think, my credo of life.

Rorty offered a choice. Does one want to go for a pure, single, self, freed from the encumbrances of life in the world, seeking one’s ‘true self’, illusory as it may be? Or does one opt for what Rorty called ‘enlargement of the self’, in developing novel selves from the richness of experience, harvesting it rather than retreating from it?

Note the Nietzschean, Dionysian streak of this.

The first choice is akin to the Platonic urge to purify ideas from the rich hubbub of experienced reality, to contemplate ‘underlying fundamental reality’.

The second choice is akin to latter day philosophy that does not seek pure, distinct, fixed ideas behind appearance, or any pure, essential self. As I put it in this blog, it is ‘imperfection on the move’, including development of the self.

ⁱ Richard Rorty, *Essays on Heidegger and others*, Cambridge U. Press, 1991, p. 147.