

# Fifteen 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?

published 3-8-2012

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

published 3-8-2012

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 16<sup>th</sup> 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.

## 265. What is identity?

published 12-6-2016

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?

## 326. Values, identity and democracy

published 31-7-2017

An individual is socially constituted, from interaction in its environment. Thus, individual identity feeds from cultural, group identity, and is loaded with shared values one holds dear and is prone to protect.

Democracy aims to achieve compromise, settling differences in interest. In liberalism (in the European, not the American sense), values are not a matter of public concern, but are to be left to individual choice. Behind liberalism and economics lies a utility ethic, looking only at outcomes, regardless of underlying intentions and processes that lead to outcomes. This focus on outcomes facilitates democracy, avoiding conflicts of values that may obstruct negotiation on interests.

However, the increasing sway of neo-liberalism, leading to effects of globalization that are perceived as unjust, perverse effects of markets, and self-interested conduct of leaders ('elites') in politics and business, have bred growing protest, and demands for a role of values, and attention to process and intentions, as a matter of public debate. And with that, politics is becoming more a matter of cultural identity.

The problem with an identity-based politics, however, is that to the extent that the values concerned are more absolute and exclusive, identity becomes sacred, and compromise on the

sacred is sacrilege.<sup>i</sup> That obstructs democracy, which requires sober, reasonable debate, in moderation, in search of a golden middle. Identity politics does not seek the middle, but hails the extremes that demand its recognition.

In this blog I also have pleaded for a shift from an ethics merely of outcomes to an ethics also of process and intentions, in the form of a virtue ethics. Now the question is this: does the problem indicated above undermine my plea for a virtue-based politics? After all, ethics is informed by values, associated with views of what ‘the good life’ is. Is there a danger, then, that my plea intensifies the problems of an identity-based politics? I have a solution to this potential problem. It is twofold.

First, as I argued early in this blog (in item 10), identity should not be seen as having some essence, which you either have or don’t have, being inside or outside. That makes identity unique and exclusive, blocking democratic debate. Instead, identity is to be seen as multiple, with partial overlaps, and subject to development.

One is member of a variety of groups to identify with, to a greater or lesser extent. Family, neighbourhood, profession, organization where one is employed, sports club, etc., and, yes, also of a nation with its language and history. I proposed (in item 209 in this blog) to see identity as a node in a network of relationships that overlap, more or less, with those of other people.

Those relationships yield access to resources<sup>ii</sup>, and people with more sparse, constrained networks have less access. The narrower the network, as in the case of economically, cognitively, socially, culturally and symbolically less endowed classes, the narrower and more pronounced the focus of identity is.

The point here is that when identity is not seen as corresponding with an essence, but as being multiple, there is a basis for openness to others with partly overlapping sources of identity.

The second part of my answer to a possible problem for virtue politics is as follows. I define virtues as competencies for living what one thinks is the good life. Now, not to provide an obstacle to democratic debate and negotiation, the virtues should be procedural, not substantive, about how people deal with each other, not about what the true good life is. That is indeed, and here I preserve a core of liberalism, to be left to individual choice.

And that is, in fact, as I argued before (in item 305), what the classical, ‘cardinal’ virtues are: reasonableness, courage, moderation, and justice, which are procedural, leaving open the choice of the good life.

Now, formerly society was also segregated, even more radically than now, in blocks, according to religion or political ideology, each with their own churches, schools, unions, regions, neighbourhoods, even shops. Was that not a problem? Somehow the elites at the top of those blocks managed to compromise, run democracy, in varying political coalitions.<sup>iii</sup>

I wonder: could it be that the old ‘elites’, whose job it was to negotiate democracy, had those cardinal virtues, but have been losing legitimacy as a result of losing them, in unwillingness to be open to other views, lack of courage to take political risks of not satisfying the prejudices of their constituencies<sup>iv</sup>, lack of moderation (in pursuing excessive remuneration), and lack of

justice (in looking mostly to self-interest, as they were told to do in the economics classes that gained them a position).

### 333. The curse of identity

published 16-9-2017

In my treatment of identity in this blog (in item 8) I distinguished between individual and collective or cultural identity. Note that the term 'identity' entails sameness, in being identical to oneself, or identical to others belonging to the same cultural identity.

It is becoming a curse how people take collective identity as the basis for life, and for their outlook on society. The trouble with such identity is that it is exclusive: excluding, judging, discriminating, rejecting those that do not belong to that identity.

The notion of identity steps into the trap of essentialism, which, I have argued in this blog (in item 10), derives from an 'object bias' in thought (item 29). That bias bases abstractions such as identity, culture, justice, human nature, good and bad, virtue, etc. on metaphors of objects in time and space.

Particularly catching is the container metaphor: one treats a concept as a box in which something is in or out. Here: you have a certain identity or not, and if you do that is because you partake in some essence belonging exclusively to that identity. You are an Aryan or Jew, white or black, male or female, member of a nation or not. You cannot be in two boxes at the same time, or partly in and partly out.

As I argued earlier in this blog (item 209), an alternative conception of identity might be that of a node in networks that is more or less distant from other nodes, in terms of connections that are shared directly or indirectly, yielding a notion of identities that overlap more or less.

As I argued in item 265, individual identity is formed in interaction with other people, and their being different helps us to escape from prejudice and myopia.

I proposed that human cognition has adopted the object bias as a result of a long evolution where adequate identification of things moving in time and space was a prerequisite for survival. In present society it is working against us, jeopardizing the survival of humanity.

Psychologically, and also as an outcome of evolution, identitarianism arises from, and enhances, the 'parochial altruism' that I also discussed in this blog (in item 205). Humans have an instinct for altruism within their group, at the price of suspicion against outsiders.

In the notion of identity, I propose, parochial altruism and the container metaphor form a vicious pair. You belong to a identity or you do not, and if you don't you are suspect.

We should try to loosen the noose of parochial altruism with cultural means, extending the perceived boundary of the group, to extend the reach of altruism, but we are doing the opposite, in the present re-emergence of nationalism and other forms of identitarianism.

There are several ideas of identity formation. One is that of the autonomous individual, emerging from the Enlightenment and liberalism, as a footloose, cosmopolitan, hedonistic individual from nowhere and anywhere. Another form is that of identifying with some single-



issue group: pro- or anti- abortion, white supremacists, black supremacists, gender supremacists, animal rights activists, environmental activists, and so on. A third form is identification with a nation's mythical 'blood and soil'. On the whole, then, individualism is either supreme or it is lost in group identity. If you are not black you carry the guilt of slavery, if not a female the guilt of male domination, and so on.

What happened with tolerance, recognition and acceptance of differences of opinion, race and religion, with empathy and solidarity across groups, needed for democracy? That was found in forms of both liberalism and socialism that now both seem to be in eclipse. Now, tolerance of other identities comes to be seen as betrayal of one's own identity.

There is more to identity groups becoming segregated and inimical. I will discuss that in the next item.

### 395. Individual and social

published 3-11-2018

*The theme of self and other has been discussed extensively in this blog, and a bundle of items on that theme can be downloaded from my website [www.bartnooteboom.nl](http://www.bartnooteboom.nl) A combination of elements from the blog and my 2012 book 'Beyond humanism: the flourishing of life, self and other', and my 2015 book 'Beyond nihilism: imperfection on the move', with the title 'Beyond nihilism: self and other between Nietzsche and Levinas' can also be downloaded from that website. Here I give only a brief summary.*

The human being is individual but not autonomous, as economists would have it. It is socially constituted, on the basis of interaction with others, and shared culture. Culture here is anthropological: habits and customs, but also an ethic and morality. While those may be shared, what is made from it becomes individual, along a personal path of life.

That yields diversity, or what I called 'cognitive distance', and that may hinder mutual understanding but also offers an opportunity, to learn, and to escape, more or less, from personal prejudice and myopia. For this, one needs to develop the ability to understand people who think differently, intellectually and morally. That also yields economic advantage, in a better ability to innovate by combining different ideas.

For its development, the human being needs recognition, acceptance and respect, in local communities with some stability, needed also to develop and maintain trust, but those communities also need some external contacts and some entry and exit of inhabitants, not to get mired in rigidity, myopia and prejudice.

Strong bonds of interaction and mutual understanding are difficult to achieve on a national level. That requires decentralisation of governance to municipalities or city neighbourhoods, with an elected mayor, council and citizen panels, with or without political parties. That carries problems, as discussed earlier, but those are not insuperable (see item 347 of this blog).

A second need is to put an end to the present excessive flexibilization of work, with more continuity of work and teams. That is good for the quality of labour and the quality of products, which require 'specific investments' in mutual understanding and trust, for which

some continuity of relationships is needed, in order to recoup those investments, which otherwise would not be made.

For this, and for innovation, the environment, and a just future for the young, a perspective of the long term is needed. No longer the obsession with profit in the next quarter. If shareholders cannot muster this, then they should not have a majority in supervisory boards. Those would also contain membership from employees, customers, suppliers and the local community. The latter especially with a view to protection of the environment.

Economists will comment that then the price of capital will increase, because opportunities for profit are foregone, which would lead to lower prosperity. Yes: that would have to be accepted: a bit less prosperity for the sake of a more humane and sane society.

## 412. Identity in economics

published 2-3-2019

Earlier in this blog (items 8, 9, 10, 265) I noted that identity is personal as well as social/cultural. I also proposed that both individually and culturally identity is not single but multiple, and that it is not fixed but subject to development. There is no given, fixed essence that constitutes identity.

Socially, identity arises, in particular, from one's being held accountable for one's actions and utterances. Individually, identity develops from interaction with others, with their contrasting ideas and actions.

David Hume argued that there is no coherent personal identity; only a buzz of experience without coherence or stability. In item 8 of this blog I used the work of Antonio Damasio, arguing that the brain develops representations, embodied in neural connections, first of internal, endocrinal processes, in the body. Those, in turn, are regulated by means of such representations. Next, there arise representations from sensory impressions from outside, coalescing into concepts.

According to Gerald Edelman, concepts arise in analogy to evolution, in 'Neural Darwinism'. In mutual competition between emergent mental structures, those that produce success, in satisfying urges and passions, are reinforced at the cost of others. Such processes can produce a multiplicity of selves.

Is Hume, right, then? Is there no coherence in some sort of identity, even if multiple? I proposed that some coherence arises from the fact that what emerges in the brain is connected with survival of the body in which it forms thought, because that survival requires functional coherence, and that constitutes identity. Individuality is next produced by the assimilation of experience, and accommodation to it, along one's individual life trajectory.

How does all this sit in economic theory? It doesn't. In economics, identity is only individual, not social, and it is assumed as given, in sets of preferences. To include identity, economics needs to include preference formation. For that, it would need to include the interaction between people by which preferences and identity are formed. For that, economics would have to integrate with sociology and cognitive science.

Liberal individualistic market theory prides itself on yielding the widest possible scope for individual freedom. But, as I argued in item 49 in this blog, the highest form of freedom is freedom also from one's own prejudices, and for that one needs the opposition from others. To profit from that, one needs to develop empathy: understanding what makes other people tick.

For partnership in development one also needs trust. The most fundamental reason for this is that the development of identity, and of relations needed for it, entails radical uncertainty: one does not know in advance how even one's own preferences and options for choice will develop, and this renders calculative rational choice concerning relationships inoperable. One has to dare the leap faith of trust or forego the social and cultural sources of the development of identity. However, in economics trust that goes beyond rational control, in the exercise of hierarchy, contracts or incentives, cannot exist.

In sum, for an answer, the apparently simple question of identity in economics requires a fundamental revision of economic theory. The crux of it lies in the social and cultural sources of identity, and the radical uncertainty involved in identity formation.

In present times of 'filter bubbles' or 'echo chambers', many people take note only of opinions similar to their own, in social media. That robs them of the opposition from contrasting views, as a source of identity development. That development will then be stunted.

With its view of the individual as autonomous, economics has contributed to this.

#### 416. The thirst for recognition: where does it come from? published 30-3-2019

In a recent book<sup>v</sup> Francis Fukuyama traced present identity politics to a fundamental human need for recognition and respect.

I agree that there is this fundamental urge towards recognition and respect, and it is enlightening to look at it as a source of identity politics. However, I think it is an error to identify this with 'thymos' as a fundamental human urge, as Fukuyama does.

The notion of thymos goes back to Plato, for example, who used the image of reason as a charioteer who has to keep in check two wild horses: eros (desire) and thymos.

Thymos is spiritedness, an urge to manifest oneself, in excellence, anger, battle, discovery, heroism. Often this is indeed accompanied with the thirst for fame, recognition, but that is not necessarily so.

Nietzsche is an example of someone who valued thymos in the form of creative destruction, in transcendence of the self, while I am sure that he would despise the urge to gain recognition for it. Thymos can be its own goal and reward, for the intrinsic value of it, in 'making something of oneself', of one's life, not necessarily for the extrinsic value of using it to gain recognition. Also, everyone has the urge to recognition and respect, while not everyone is driven by thymos.

Also, why, then, should the urge for recognition be accompanied by the urge to conform to group expectations and values, in group identity? Doesn't that go against thymos as the urge to distinction?

However that may be, I do grant that the urge for recognition is fundamental and probably quite universal, and if it does not derive from thymos, where does it come from?

I have a proposal for that. Earlier in this blog (item 205), I discussed the notion of 'parochial altruism'. That is the inclination of people, established in much empirical research, to be loyal, solidary, altruistic, with regard to people considered to belong to one's own group, while being suspicious, distrustful towards outsiders. Here I define altruism as being prepared to sacrifice something to someone else even if one cannot count on an adequate return.

I proposed that parochial altruism is an outcome of evolution. For the survival of a group internal solidarity helps, but genes are in the individual, not the group. The risk of a 'gene for solidarity' is that the group is vulnerable to entry of opportunists without the gene, who prey on the altruism of people in the group, and ultimately compete them away until no-one with the altruistic gene survives. In order to survive, the gene had to be accompanied with a gene for suspicion and fear of outsiders. That, I propose, is the foundation of fear and discrimination of outsiders, xenophobia, particularly of those who are manifestly different, in race, religion, or culture.

Now, if this hypothesis is true, and there is much evidence for it, then in order to survive in the group one should not be seen as an outsider. For that reason an urge has developed towards recognition as a legitimate member of the group, on pain of exclusion. That, I propose, is the source of the urge for recognition, and, I would add, for conformism. It also, I suspect, is 'in the genes', in a package with parochial altruism and xenophobia.

Note that the combined urges of recognition and of conformism form an ideal bedding for nationalism and for submission to authoritarianism.

#### 417. Networks, credence and identity

published 6-4-2019

In this blog I used the distinction between specific/individual and general/cultural identity and discussed the relation between them. The crux was that people develop individual identity in interaction with others, in given culture.

I denied that cultural identity entails some essence, some property that all members of a nation share, identically, and all non-members lack.

I proposed to see cultural identity in terms of roles people play and positions they have in different networks of relations. Those can overlap, for different people, and hence are shared more or less. There are, for example, networks of family, neighbourhood, region, job, profession, sport, religion, political affiliation and, yes, also nation or state.

Note that individual identity is not fully determined by relations in networks. The individual retains its identity as an actor operating in such networks. While its development depends on action in networks, the actor has its own constitution that is continuous across those relations.

The network view of cultural identity allows for European next to national identity. Less educated and less globally involved people have fewer network extensions across borders, and hence their identity is more nation-bound.

What, then, remains of national identity? For interaction between people in networks more is needed than the mere structure of those networks. There needs to be a behavioural basis to enable interaction. The task now is, in my view, to specify what is needed for that while allowing for as much diversity as possible. One thinks, in particular, of the need to have common laws, language and institutions. Some of those will not apply to a nation as a whole but to specific industries or markets. And some will be shared between nations.

What I object to is national identity in terms of religion, race, ethnicity, provenance (land of birth), and ideology or set of ideas, such as the 'Judeo-Christian tradition', or the Enlightenment. Systems of thought are too diverse and mixed for that. Note the division, in Christian heritage, between Catholicism and Protestantism, and rival streams within them. English is a mix of Saxon, French and Latin. European cultures have further sources, next to religion and enlightenment, such as Romanticism, and Roman, Germanic and Keltish, even Arab influences.

Reading Francis Fukuyama's recent book on identity<sup>vi</sup> I came across the notion of 'creedal identity', identity based on a 'creed', apparently going back to Samuel Huntington.<sup>vii</sup> A creed is a set of opinions and directions for action, or a philosophy of life (so I read in the Oxford Dictionary). It is not the same as 'belief' or 'faith', but something more oriented towards practical conduct. It can follow from a belief, but it can also arise as no more than some pragmatic rules of conduct. For the US, it would include, for example, a work ethic, personal initiative and responsibility, civic and family values.

This is rather broad and vague, and here I want to make it more specific. Again, I aim to make it as sparse as possible, reduced to what is needed to enable relations.

Here, I connect with the discussion, at several places in this blog (items 96, 289), of Aristotelian multiple causality, which I have used as a causality of action.

To recall, the different causes are:

Efficient cause: who are the actors (here: where do they come from, who is recognized as a citizen)

Final cause: with what aims (material, intellectual, spiritual, existential, ..)

Material cause: what are the resources used (land, water, energy, finance, ....)

Formal cause: how (with what knowledge, competence, skill, language, ...)

Conditional cause: under what enabling and constraining conditions (markets, laws and regulations, infrastructure)

Exemplary cause: with what models (role models, symbols, myths, ...)

I need to separate the formal cause into two types: the behavioural, which needs to be widely shared, and the cognitive/spiritual, which can be and preferably is diverse.

I now propose that what is shared, nationally, more or less, lies in the following causes:

The behavioural/formal: what enables human interaction, mostly in morality: trust, honesty, openness, loyalty, empathy, ..

The conditional: climate, laws, regulations, institutions, public services, a constitution, and,

for liberal democracies: freedoms of expression, association, religion, voting, and separation of powers (judicial, executive, parliamentary).

The exemplary: some canonical examples of good conduct. Nelson Mandela, Ghandi.

I think every country will be distinct, have its own creedal identity, when scored on these dimensions. However, this still does not constitute an essence that all people within a nation share and outsiders do not. In continental Europe, for example, in a number of countries law is based on Roman law, imposed by Napoleon. Liberal democratic norms are still widely shared, though authoritarianism is eating away at it here and there (Poland, Hungary). Moral principles and moral role models are widely shared.

Within a country there is variety in the following causes of action:

The efficient: the provenance of people, access to citizenship, ..

The material: resources that come in and flow out, in trade

The final: what aims, goals and other values people have

The cognitive/formal: knowledge, competence, skill, morality, ...

In sum, I see important commonalities within nations, but I still do not see any national essence.

I grant that next to this utilitarian approach to culture as enabling relations, culture also has an intrinsic value in giving people a sense of belonging, of community, with local roots.

However, I think that is stronger on a regional and local than on a national level. Consider France. I had a house in the department of the Corrèze, south of Limoges, in the region of the Limousin. The department, I learned, yields a strong sense of identity, stronger perhaps than feeling French. At some point there was a policy initiative to abolish the level of the departments, but that yielded an outcry of protest, with this argument of identity.

#### 418. Identity within and between communities      published 3-4-2019

At several places in this blog I have argued for substantial decentralisation of governance to small local communities. The goal is to involve citizens as much as possible in political decision making, and that is more feasible on a local than on a national level.

This goes back to Athenian democracy, it was proposed by Rousseau, it is part of African political philosophy (item 414), and it is being tried out in several countries, in a variety of forms.<sup>viii</sup>

However, the virtues of local ties should not be exaggerated. They can have a downside of rigidity, constraint, social pressure and closure, exclusion, lack of liberty in choosing relations, and, consequently, economic stagnation, and internecine strife between communities.

So, how can the virtues be realized while avoiding the drawbacks? For this I offer a solution taken from network theory. Here I connect with my earlier proposal to associate identity with networks and collective enablers of relations, rather than with characteristics of individuals.

In sociology there has been a debate between the view that strong social ties favour societies and the view that, on the contrary, weak ties do.

Strong ties entail frequent, durable, and ‘multiplex’ interaction (concerning a variety of resources or issues). Typically, they go together with strong trust and relation- or community-specific investments (in knowledge, skill, construction, solidarity, mutual support and trust).

Specific investment is a concept from economics, and was used before in this blog (59). It is investment tailored to specific relations and therefore has value only, or mostly, there, and has to be made anew in new relationships. They make for high quality of a relationship, but also create dependence. They create power dependence when the investment is one-sided: the least dependent party can threaten to exit, leaving the more dependent side with a useless investment, unless incentives are granted to make him stay. Such power play may be sanctioned by social pressures, but those can contribute to the rigidity of relationships, causing stagnation.

Weak ties entail less frequent interaction, limited content, and less specific investment. They are less enabling but also less constraining. They can be more easily broken, making for greater flexibility. They are more transactional than relational. They are used for trade, for diplomacy, for exploring networks, to find out about the resources and opportunities involved, and to develop entry to them, building contacts and reputations.

Network theory offers the notion of ‘small worlds’, which I used before in this blog (209): small communities with strong internal ties and weak ties between such communities. And that, I propose, is the solution to the problem of small communities. The strong ties make for internal coherence, solidarity and trust, and the weak ties between communities yield access to a greater variety of knowledge, skill, and other resources, prevent internal rigidity, and may serve to contain misunderstanding, rivalry and strife between communities. Those links may also yield avenues for exchange of people, which favours the turnover of population that prevents biological, intellectual and spiritual inbreeding.

There is evidence that the small migrant communities of hunter-gatherers, during the long period (400.000 years) of evolution of the human species before its settlement into agrarian communities (some 7000 years ago), engaged in this practice, with strong ties within the tribes and weak ties, in occasional contacts, between tribes.

In an earlier item (414) I noted the African idea and practice of ‘Ubuntu’, which implements the idea that individuals are constituted socially, requiring a sufficient degree of solidarity, and favours small communities. I now aim to find out whether this also has been combined with weak ties between those communities, and how that worked out. In how far was it able to contain inter-tribal strife?

Note the remarkable solution adopted in the past, if I am correct, by Australian aboriginals: let potential rival tribes reside at one’s own holy sites. One does not attack one’s own holy sites, and hence not the rival tribes. Unless they damage those sites, and this yields an incentive to maintain them well. This has the same logic as offering a hostage.

419. Essential capacity

published 20-4-2019

A central issue in ontology is whether in order to exist a thing must have an essence, something that it must have to be what it is. At several places in this blog I discussed the

question whether essences exist. Here I sharpen my arguments, based on reading a debate between Graham Harman and Manuel DeLanda<sup>ix</sup>, and a book by DeLanda on ‘assemblage theory’.<sup>x</sup>

I am suspicious of essences, for ontological but especially for moral reasons.

The essence of swans was their whiteness until black swans were found. The essence of cars was that they burn some form of gasoline, until electric cars came about. The human being was defined as a rational animal until its irrationalism became clear. The essence of democracy was elections, until autocratic regimes manipulated them.

Too often, essentialism imposes a familiar category on unfamiliar contexts. The freedom of markets is imposed as the essence of democracy. Essentialism feeds the identity politics that present society is suffering from. It reduces people to membership of a category, with a corresponding imposition of shared views and conduct. It hides, even disqualifies, variety between individuals.

There is a distinction between the *general* essence of a universal, or general concept, say that of ‘chair’, and the *specific* or *individual* essence of a specific chair, say the one I am sitting on. In earlier items in this blog (e.g. 36, 416) I rejected the notion of a general essence. Here I focus on the possibility and nature of a specific essence.

The most straightforward idea of such an essence is that of a quality that an object actually has and always has had, in fact or by necessity, during its existence. But this is open-ended: if the object has had the quality until time  $t$ , this does not prove that it will have it at  $t+1$ . In that sense one can never know for sure whether any quality is essential. In that sense one cannot know (for sure) what an essence is (as Graham Harman has argued).

This problem is similar to that of causality. As David Hume argued, consistent sequence does not prove causality. For a claim of causality, or essentiality, one needs an argument, or theory, of why or how it arises as causal or essential.

Now, how about a feature that is not actual but virtual, a *potential* to manifest a quality, or a range of them, depending on the context in which the object manifests itself. Could that be the essence of an object? I adopt the argument from DeLanda that an object has actual properties that yield the potential to produce features, in events of interaction with other objects.

Now there are several possibilities. One is that the range of possible manifestations is pre-established, as a repertoire of possible qualities from which one is selected according to the context. DeLanda talks of tendencies, understood as repetitive, limited in variation.

Another possibility is the *capacity* to *produce* new qualities, depending on the context. This is more flexible and adaptive than a tendency. As DeLanda noted, and I agree, this requires that the capacity to affect is coupled to the capacity to be affected.

Harman objected to potentialities and capacities because they would yield an excess of possible manifestations, a ‘slum of possibilities’ as Harman called it (quoting Quine). DeLanda accepted capacities only if one had a way of clearing the slum by separating ‘significant from insignificant’ manifestations. That seems a bit odd to me. What is significant



appears to depend on purpose and context, and so one would quickly repopulate the slum with possible significances.

I see the problem of the slum only if one postulates that all possible manifestations have to be there (where?) from the start. But in my view possible manifestations are not predetermined but *produced* in context, in interaction with objects, while the range of possible interactions and their effects is open-ended, open to new interactions, and appearance of new objects and forms of relations.

However, the potential of capacity is limited by the structure and properties of the object's components and those of objects it interacts with, and laws of nature, logic or mathematics, legal laws and other institutional conditions. I think this may have to do with DeLanda's notion of 'relevance'.

One of DeLanda's proposals is to think of capacity in terms of possible trajectories in the state space of the object. The dimensions of that space are features the object can have. There is some process or logic that determines trajectories.

This notion of possible and actual trajectories in some space of possibilities is the kind of notion needed for the dynamic ontology that I try to pursue.

It is this constrained potential, I propose, that constitutes identity, the continuity of an object across contexts and relations. Perhaps one can call this constrained capacity its essence, if one wants.

DeLanda used the example of water. It has the capacity to be a fluid, which can have different structures, a piece of ice or a gas (steam), depending on outside temperature and atmospheric pressure, but it cannot turn into gold.

Earlier in this blog (item 8), I associated the identity of a living thing (human, animal, plant), with the coherence of different features in the 'body', needed for the body to exist. It must maintain homeostasis, keeping metabolic variables (temperature, fluids, feeds, disposals) within certain ranges for the organism to maintain existence. DeLanda also used that example.

The genome is a good example of a capacity, with neurons generating amino-acids, yielding cells, building organs, and thereby 'expressing' themselves, in interaction among neurons and their local metabolic environment as well as external conditions of the organism.

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<sup>i</sup> I pick this up from a comment made by Ian Buruma in a discussion, on Dutch TV, on the future of democracy, on July 2<sup>nd</sup>.

<sup>ii</sup> And to different forms of capital, as suggested by Bourdieu: economic, cognitive, social, cultural, and symbolic. He looked at identity in terms of positions in 'fields'. I think that networks is better, more specific.

<sup>iii</sup> This is another comment I pick up from Ian Buruma, made in the debate mentioned above.

<sup>iv</sup> Made more difficult, I must admit, by demands for transparency of political deliberation, which earlier could be more secluded.

<sup>v</sup> Francis Fukuyama, 2018, *Identity: Contemporary identity politics and the struggle for recognition*, Profile Books.

<sup>vi</sup> Francis Fukuyama, 2018, *Identity: Contemporary identity politics and the struggle for recognition*, London: Profile Books.

<sup>vii</sup> Samuel Huntington, 2004, *Who we are; The challenges to American national identity*, 2004.

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<sup>viii</sup> See, for example, the community of Frome in the UK, and Saillance in France.

<sup>ix</sup> Manuel DeLanda and Graham Harman, 2017, *The rise of realism*, Cambridge UK: Polity Press.

<sup>x</sup> Manuel DeLanda, 2016, *Assemblage theory*, Edinburg University Press.