

Personal Identity and its dark side

Identity is about what and you are and it is linked to your self-view and necessarily includes how you want others to treat you. It is possible to see yourself as a teacher and be wrong so caution is necessary.

Sexuality, religion, faith, political party are too unstable to base your identity on. You change tomorrow. The thing you make your defining feature today may not matter much to you tomorrow. The gay person for example may lose interest in dating and sex. And thus cease in that way to be gay in any meaningful sense. And identity will be undermined by those who tell you that you are not just or even mainly a religious or sexual label or whatever. We all know that identity is not that stable and we may not be aware that we know. But you will protect your identity and sense of identity. What happens then is that people set about trying to force others to accept their identity or perceived identity. It is an attempt to make stability where it cannot exist. If you cannot force others to accept your identity you will force them to say nothing about how it is not really your identity.

PERSONAL IDENTITY

Identity is about what and you are and it is linked to your self-view and necessarily includes how you want others to treat you. It is possible to see yourself as a teacher and be wrong so caution is necessary.

People care deeply about their identity as identity is linked to goals – big goals. Its about how they wish to fit in in life and society. This in practice leads to people working out who and what they are and making choices that reflect and show this sense of identity. People know and fear that if they fail to be true to what they are they will end being unhappy or missing many opportunities to be happier.

Personal identity these days can be seen as a description of how you have and make and define your identity by yourself and need no input from anybody else! That is taking the definition too far. Seeing what you are does not mean you can do it on our own in isolation from everybody else. I do not and cannot create my identity that way. You do choose and make your identity but this is done with other people so a criteria appears and is applied. It is planned with others and they validate it. I should not be trying to do it without any regard for others and how I fit in. My personal identity is not an island. If I am an island then I don't need a personal identity apart from being an island. For example, I cannot be Catholic if I am not baptised. I have to interact with the Catholic Community and I cannot say, "I turned myself into a Catholic by saying a Hail Mary and it does not matter what they say." The formation of personal identity is a two-way process.

There is personal identity to worry about and also group identity.

A danger with identity is how you can be conditioned or overly included by what others what you to be. You can think this is your choice and not see that it is not or that there is very little choice involved. The group identity, how it sees itself and its purpose, can overwhelm the identity of any individual in the group. At the other extreme, one individual can try to force his or her sense of identity on others and even on the group. We see this happening when a person ruthlessly drops friends, job and family to "find myself."

You can get carried away with with how you see yourself. You may have a wrong sense of self-identity or exaggerate one identity or role at the expense of all the rest. A huge danger is that one identity role may be taken by you while you forget there is more to you than just that one identity. A father may forget he is also a friend to others. You are in trouble if you only care about being a nurse and your relationships and other identities such as your chess player identity are sacrificed.

To feel your life has value or enough value you need to respect your many identities and the roles they grant you.

Identity is healthiest when you experiment and freely choose or make sure that you are not internalising what others want you to be. This means making sure it is really you to be a Catholic/Muslim etc. Really you to be a doctor not a factory worker. Really you to eat chips or healthy food. Really you to be a parent.

The reward will be a huge responsibility but at least you will have the final say in your life. You don't want to be forced into something by picking the wrong or less than idea life circumstances.

You like to feel that you and what you are about is cherished by others. Thus if you see yourself as smart you will want to be around smart people. It will make you feel good and confirm what you see yourself as being.

Identity can be stable or changeable. It depends. A Catholic can become a Protestant. A surly man can become a kindly transgender woman. Serious and prolonged illness is a terrible way your identity can be changed for you. Change can be rapid or be one tiny step after another that is barely noticeable.

A personal identity can be a complete fiction. Your identity as a Muslim or child of God is utterly wrong if there is no God or if Islam is manmade or you are not a child of God. Yet certain religions insist that your identity as granted by God is ultimately all that matters. It is the basic identity - the basic not a basic. If atheism is true, then our identity is to be self-made parts of nature. There is no common ground here between identities. It does not matter how happy a religious identity makes you if it is not real for it is too important to get wrong. Your right to the truth overrides all else and you must listen to those who tell you you are wrong.

ALZHEIMER'S AND PERSONAL IDENTITY

It seems that scientifically, having your memory erased by illness is not the same thing as ceasing to be the person you were. You are the same person despite the differences. The loss of memory is not the loss of your identity. Psychological Science published findings that as long as your moral outlook and inclinations stay the same it does not matter how much memory you lose. The loving mother with dementia will be rightly perceived by her children as still being the loving mother she was in her prime before the neurodegenerative disease struck. The reasoning is that we all forget huge bits of our lives and that does not change who we are - turning from honest person to thief for example does.

The findings certainly indicate that those who say they love sinners and hate sins are lying for they see the root problem as the person being bad. You cannot really hate a sin without hating it in so far as the person is the sin. Its personal.

THE DARK SIDE

Personal identity has two components or sides.

It is the sense of self – what is my career? Am I a family member? It is the thing that is true of me all the time.

Identity is also about a second thing – how you see yourself as important and worthwhile as a person.

The latter is dangerous because if you see your core and your identity as being religious you will have it in for the non-religious.

It is dangerous because if you see your core and your identity as being moral you will have it in for those who fall short of your moral standards.

It is dangerous for you see yourself as an intelligent person you will disdain those who are not as smart as you.

What if you see your identity as a valuable person in terms of how somebody else loves you? Then if they abuse you and you tell them then it will rip your heart out if they don't care or criticise you or blame you for the abuse. You have made them a tool for your sense of self and the relationship will get toxic and will die. You are in fact trying to control them like things. You end up seeing their faults or evil deeds as threats to you as a person even if they are not directed at you at all.

If God alone really matters or comes first then it only matters how God sees you and if he sees you as wonderful it does not matter how many people think you are dirt. Christianity manipulates you to tie your sense of self-worth to God as it wants to see God. The idea that God is infinitely perfect and rules the universe and loves you for you are incredible leads only to grave trauma in the end. It can lead to isolation - no wonder so many in the past imprisoned themselves in convents. You suffer the arrogance of thinking you control God and can try to. You suffer the pain when it goes all wrong. You will see somebody who seems to be treated better than you by God as a threat and hate them. You will be unable to bear anything that contradicts your faith in case this God who you use as an object to make you see yourself as special gets debunked. You will set out with your religion to destroy freedom of opinion and regard blasphemy laws as a godsend.

Is our identity about what we feel inside and what we desire? All the feelings you have are part of you. Nevertheless we don't identify with all our feelings. We pick out the ones we consider valuable and worthwhile. Feelings change and come and go so it seems that what we believe about our feelings is what gives us identity. Feelings often lie to us or cloud our vision and they do this more than we realise!

Instead of asking religious people to prove their views contrast and check religious beliefs along sideline beliefs that say they are wrong. Help them to see their inconsistency.

Burke Peter J., Stets Jan E. (2009), Identity Theory. New York: Oxford University Press.

Jongman-Sereno, K. P., & Leary, M. R. (2016). Self-perceived authenticity is contaminated by the valence of one's

behavior. *Self and Identity*, 15(3), 283–301.

Stets, Jan E. and Richard T. Serpe (Editors). 2016. *New Directions in Identity Theory and Research*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Swann, W. B., Jr. (1983). Self-verification: Bringing social reality into harmony with the self. In J. Suls & A. G. Greenwald (Eds.), *Social psychological perspectives on the self* (Vol. 2, pp. 33-66). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Waterman, A. S. (1984). Identity formation: Discovery or creation? *Journal of Early Adolescence*, 4, 329-341