

“Some thoughts on Identity”

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1. Introduction

Wikipedia says Identity is: “whatever makes an entity definable and recognisable”. True but not very helpful! Identity is not the same for everyone or everything! Let’s go back to basics.

Identity is a description, or categorisation, we attribute to people and to things – and which other may attribute to us. As we shall see, identity is non-unique and non-permanent attribute.

There are two main types of identity: personal identity and the identity of things.

2. Personal identity

Personal identity has two main aspects:

- how you think of yourself to yourself. Identification with where you live (by location, country, language, religion, ethnicity, etc)
- how you are seen by others (by where you live, language, religion, ethnicity, etc) & how do your life activities identify you (occupation, income, etc)

This raises the question of whether it is your thoughts or your actions that determine who you are. My view is that it is your actions. These may be the expression of the thoughts or may be making something. Doing something in the ‘real’ world exposes your thoughts for feedback to yourself and for consideration by others. Without this there is no assessment of the validity of the thoughts.

There is no one single and unchanging identity. Both the above aspects of your identity are valid and while each may overlap others to an extent, each remains a partial view. Each would benefit from awareness of the other’s views. Our view of ourselves may be changed, for example, by discovery of family history.

Some aspects of your feeling of identity may seem significant, other less so. For instance, you may be particularly concerned about your weight, but others think you quite normal. Or, others may think you very sociable, but you may feel nervous in new company and need to work hard to be sociable. You may tick the box for ‘Church of England’ for your religion, but your interest and involvement may be minimal or you may a committed church member. Your work may be as a scientist and you may have a public image as that, a simple direct label, but you may have additional major interests that are significant to you for your own identity but are not known to colleagues at work. This emphasizes the risks, and unfairness, associated with the use of neat labels and categorizations!

The identity of each of us to ourselves is an aspect of self-consciousness. It is something built up over time and varying with time on the basis of the input we receive from our actions, involvements and observations – the feedback we receive that refines our view of how we fit into the world around us.

I would find it very difficult, if asked, to define ‘my identity’. I would want to relate it to some context – like work, or hobbies, or past activities in some particular area or time. I would also want to relate it to some guess as to why and by whom the question was being asked. I do not feel I could give a simple straightforward and unique answer. I think one also needs to be aware that the identity one reveals to others is, to some extent, a ‘front’ – a prospectively acceptable image that leaves quite a bit of yourself as private. In a similar way that one aims to ‘look one’s best’ in a photograph.

Some thoughts by philosophers may be of interest:

Locke’s proposition for the identity of the ‘self’ (Locke, J. [1690]) is that it relies on consciousness and resides in and depends upon what is remembered. Locke believed it is memories that provide the continuity of the image that one has of one’s self over time.

Locke did realize that memory may be discontinuous, as for example during sleep, but felt that it was consciousness that linked memories together. Both Locke and Hume thought of the self as invariable.

Reid [1785] and Mackie [1976] added to Locke's view by recognizing that memory and the image of self are flexible and while they may well change over time there is, within one's self, a strong feeling of continuity.

It is not true that, as Hume claimed, the mind is only populated by perceptions and impressions. The mind does have the ability to link together memories and perceptions and create ideas that did not directly or completely exist before. This is the power of the imagination.

One's national identity is usually defined by birth within geographically defined boundaries. But what if both parents are from another country – or from two countries?

To identify oneself as a member of, or a visitor to, a particular country means being prepared to match in with the social mores of that country and acceptance of the legitimacy of laws and regulations set out by the parliament of that country (hopefully democratically elected!).

The situation in many countries is not clear-cut. In the Balkans, for example, definitions of identity are confused as there are geographical areas that have been won in earlier conflicts and present day country borders often do not match religious, ethnic and linguistic differences. There may also be pressures from neighboring countries that feel politically threatened (for instance the present problems in the Ukraine). There is no one clean boundary for any of these features. This proved a particular difficulty at the Peace Congress following the First World War in relation to the attempts to use 'self-determination' to define appropriate country boundaries – and we are living with the consequences of what may seem to be arbitrarily drawn boundaries.

Then there is the question of assuming or simulating an identity: - for example, acting, being a spy or for on-line dating!

3. Identity of things

The main aspects to the identity of things are:

- identity of use
- perceived identity (visual, acoustic, taste, etc)
- historical
- country (personal and political)

These are not unique features. A piece of paper may be used for recording an image – or for making a paper aeroplane. A hammer may be used to drive nails – or as a doorstop! A piece of music may be inspiring to some – confusing to others.

An interesting question is whether identity the identity of things is changed by reconstruction or by change of context.

The 'Ship of Theseus' has been used as a thought experiment. If the ship was used by Theseus himself and throughout its progressive repair or reconstruction then it would rightly, and uniquely, be identified as Theseus's ship. However, to what extent is it Theseus's ship if the reconstruction was all carried out after being used by Theseus? And what if new parts needed to be added to replace some lost? The ship might be functional and visually the same but it would not be forensically the same.

With an oak tree, the visual identity to an artist would change as the leaves fell in the autumn - but to a tree specialist the tree identity would remain unchanged, even if the particular tree was transplanted or pruned.

4. Conclusions

No individual or thing has a unique and permanent identity. Categorizing people and things is a common activity – particularly by Governments and official bodies. This is fine and necessary, but the limitations on the interpretations need to be appreciated.

We use the word 'identity' freely, but the term covers a wide range of subtleties.

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