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### Identity

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## IDENTITY

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The West has a rich history of identity discourses, going back to golden age narratives developed in ancient Israel and Greece. Modern understandings of identity, which build on this history, emerge in early modern Europe. The most comprehensive study of selfhood is by Jerrold Seigel (2005). The term "self," Seigel suggests, means "the particular being any person is, whatever it is about each of us that distinguishes you or me from others, draws the parts of our existence together, persists through changes, or opens the way to becoming who we might or should be" (2003: 3) The concept of the self is more or less identical to that of identity, as understood psychologists and political scientists.

The nature of selfhood has been one of the most enduring questions of Western culture and central to its attempts at self-definition. Seigel contends that at least since the time of Descartes, Western selfhood has three dimensions: bodily or material, relational or social, and reflective. Each gives rise to different understandings of self, not all of which are compatible. This multiplicity and the tensions it generates is a key reason why the concept of identity is so difficult to define and operationalize. Seigel's categories are intended to capture the diversity of philosophical thought about the self, but they are equally useful empirically as they capture key dimensions of what constitutes identity for ordinary people.

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**Physical Identity:** Bodies are more than platforms for our minds as they define our capabilities and often our sense of who we are. This is most evident when they begin to fail us. Ill people are routinely announce that they are not "feeling themselves," implying that a healthy body is a key component of their persona. This is also true of elderly people who feel an increasing disconnect between what they think of as still young minds and spirit but fast-aging bodies. Such tension between reflective and physical selves is even more extreme in people who feel trapped in a body of the wrong gender; some of them put up with considerable pain and great expense to become transgendered. For those of us content with our gender, the simple thought experiment of putting ourselves into a body of the opposite sex should drive home how much our sense of who we are is a function of the platform we inhabit.

**Social Identity:** Our relational or social identity refers to the sense of self that arises from social interaction. It can be attributed in the first instance to socialization by family and the various institutions of society. In the ancient world, it is frequently asserted, people conceived of their identities largely in terms of the roles they performed. Some social scientists maintain that little has changed, that our identities are still social even if we have come to believe otherwise. Marx and Durkheim subscribe to a strong social ontology and modern sociology is based on this premise. Sociologists like Erving Goffman (1959) have documented the extent to which and how roles and their performance constitute a "public self."

Society shapes identity by encouraging individuals to develop certain kinds of affiliations and assume certain kinds of roles. Affiliations refer to objects of attachment – this includes ideas and institutions as well as people -- and roles to proscribed ways of

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3 behaving. Whether we recognize it or not, affiliations and roles account for much of the  
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5 selfhood we feel. We generally self-identity in terms of them (e.g., born again Christian,  
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7 mother, psychologist) and others invoke them to define us. Together, affiliations and  
8  
9 roles do much of the analytical work for which the concept of identity is mobilized.  
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13 Affiliation has emotional and often institutional components. We can feel part of  
14  
15 a social unit and may or may not have an official relationship to it. Marriage, arguably  
16  
17 the oldest and most important form of affiliation, is an institution in most societies. In  
18  
19 some societies, affiliation comes first and is considered prerequisite to institutionalization  
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21 of the partnership. In societies where marriages are arranged, emotional attachments are  
22  
23 expected to follow institutional recognition. Affiliations exist at every level of social  
24  
25 aggregation; people identity with partners, families, clans, social and professional groups,  
26  
27 organizations, communities, religions, nations, regions and the human race. Such  
28  
29 affiliations are markers of selfhood and achieve deeper meaning for actors when they are  
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31 repetitively enacted in practice.  
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37 Most practices are associated with roles. They are prescribed behaviors, some  
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39 simple and clearly defined, others complex and more ambiguous or with more leeway in  
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41 how they can be enacted. All involve performance of some kind. Roles are socially  
42  
43 assigned or validated. We cannot credibly declare ourselves fire fighters; we must have  
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45 some training and professional experience, and better yet, work or be a volunteer for a  
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47 fire department. Only then, will we be recognized as fire fighters by others. Most  
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49 institutions encourage members to develop emotional attachments to them, and some  
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51 (e.g., marriages, platoons) only function effectively when this happens. In other  
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53 institutions, positive identification is not required, but becoming emotionally attached and  
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3 loyal to one's boss or organization -- or at least giving this appearance -- often brings  
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5 practical rewards.  
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8 Affiliations do not require roles. People feel strong attachments to collectivities  
9  
10 like sports teams, religions and ethnic groups without those feelings being recognized,  
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12 reciprocated or validated. Roles often generate affect. Many people love or hate their  
13  
14 jobs and most feel positively about roles for which they volunteer. Strong attachment to  
15  
16 roles can shape people's understanding of themselves, especially when their roles have  
17  
18 high status. This also happens when roles require considerable time, intellectual  
19  
20 resources, courage or emotional commitment. Like affiliations, roles are powerful  
21  
22 sources of self-identification; as noted earlier, we routinely encounter people who define  
23  
24 themselves in terms of their profession. To the degree that roles generate positive affect  
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26 toward the social unit that confers or legitimizes them, roles and affiliations will become  
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28 mutually reinforcing pillars of self-identification.  
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34 Social identity has another important component: labels that powerful groups in a  
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36 society impose on actors. Categories of this kind can confer high status and related  
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38 advantages, as it has done historically for Brahmins in India, aristocrats in Europe and  
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40 currently celebrities in the United States. Other labels consign people to low status and  
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42 deny them opportunities or privileges. Dalits, Jews, African-Americans, Catholics, the  
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44 Irish, Asian-Americans and colonized peoples of all kind were -- and some still remain --  
45  
46 the objects of prejudice and discrimination. Labels are independent of affiliations and  
47  
48 roles but they can consign actors to particular roles. The power of socialization is such  
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50 that some members of groups created or assigned labels inevitably internalize the  
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52 stereotypes of them. Stereotypes also have the potential to be made self-fulfilling, and  
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3 when this happens, labels appear valid to many people, increasing the hold of the  
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5 stereotype.  
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8         **Reflexive Identity:** Cultural systems are learned through imitation and reflection  
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10 on the meaning of this behavior. We learn to behave in accord with social expectations  
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12 and recognize that this is usually an efficacious way of achieving our goals. These  
13  
14 goals are also generally products of socialization. Reflection also enables agency. If we  
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16 are unhappy about our behavior, its consequences or goals, we may behave differently in  
17  
18 the future. Our reflexive self is constrained but also enabled by our physical and social  
19  
20 selves and can be considered to some degree self-governing (Seigel: 7)  
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24         There are multiple levels of reflection. The simplest is about one's affiliations and  
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26 roles or any other component of self-identification. We reflect on these roles, their  
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28 requirements and what they say or communicate about who we are. We also reflect on  
29  
30 who we would like to be, and often frame this inquiry in terms of roles and affiliations we  
31  
32 would like to have but are not currently available to us. Such reflection can be an  
33  
34 incentive for doing what it takes to achieve these goals. Self-identifications can be  
35  
36 socially self-defeating if they are unattainable or greatly at odds with the understandings  
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38 other have us.  
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43         Second level reflection about self-identification involves choice in the sense of  
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45 creating a hierarchy of our many self-identifications. Such reflection is often triggered by  
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47 the need to describe oneself. If someone who is identifiably foreign asks "who are you?,"  
48  
49 many people will define themselves in terms of their nationality. If the interlocutor is a  
50  
51 fellow-citizen, we might emphasize our regional or local affiliations. Some people might  
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53 put their religious affiliations first, or combine them with national or ethnic ones.  
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3 Members of minority groups might foreground these later identifications. Context is all-  
4 important. If the interlocutor happens to be wearing a Yankee cap, many people in my  
5 community would proudly self-identity as members of "the Red Sox nation." Such  
6 questions make us aware of our self-identifications and the need at times to make choices  
7 among them.  
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15 This also happens when we confront role conflicts, divided affiliations or  
16 tensions between roles and affiliations. In these situations, people want to dissonance,  
17 which encourages them to make choices when they cannot be finessed. Alternatively,  
18 people strive to make their self-identifications acceptable to others or upgrade them in  
19 status. African-Americans have been largely successful in the latter enterprise. New  
20 roles and identities have accordingly opened up to them. In this case and others, we  
21 observe on-going interaction between individual and social level reflections that can be  
22 provoked by reflection about identity or changes in its practice by individuals or groups.  
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34 A third level of reflection is about the categories of affiliations, roles and other  
35 forms of self-identification. Many affiliations develop naturally, although most are to  
36 some degree authorized and regulated by society. Roles and self-identifications depend  
37 on the prior existence of categories people use to characterize their behavior and  
38 themselves. Existing categories can often be stretched or modified to suit actor needs.  
39 The creation of new categories and the self-identifications they enable is a daunting task.  
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48 One of the most moving scenes in Western literature is book twenty-four of the *Iliad*  
49 where the Greek warrior Achilles and Trojan King Priam together lament the war that has  
50 killed the former's beloved and the latter's son and will soon claim them both. They lack  
51 role models for new identities or a language in which they could construct them. Despite  
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3 intense desires to escape their fates, they are trapped in roles that will ineluctably bring  
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5 them about.  
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8 Homer is offering, if not a new language, an incentive to find one that will enable  
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10 new affiliations, roles and self-identifications. His narratives – commonly considered the  
11  
12 work of multiple bards – provided a chap book for later Greeks to construct a cultural  
13  
14 identity built around a shared literary language and a particular understanding of honor.  
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16 Achilles and Hector were the first of many role models thrown up by Western literature.  
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18 Rousseau's Julie and Goethe's Werther performed a similar function in late eighteenth  
19  
20 century. More recent role models come from film, television and the sports world.  
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22 We also gain access to new practices, roles and forms of identification when we  
23  
24 encounter other cultures, as the ancient Greeks did through trade with other peoples of  
25  
26 the Mediterranean basin. Cultural contacts create the possibility of using a highly  
27  
28 stylized account of another culture as a vantage point to interrogate one's own. This  
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30 strategy was pioneered by Herodotus, who deployed it to demonstrate Greek superiority.  
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32 He portrays Hellenes as the happy means between various extremes represented by  
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34 Beginning with Montesquieu (1993), the use of "proximate others" was widely used for  
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36 the opposite goal: to critique one's own society and its practices. Today, multi-cultural  
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38 settings, education, travel, and above all, the media, expose people to numerous  
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40 alternative practices and identities and concepts about them.  
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48 Affiliations, roles, practices and identities can be questioned in the absence of  
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50 conceptual categories. Children do this all the time. Critiques nevertheless benefit from  
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52 abstract conceptions that facilitate comparisons of affiliations, roles and self-  
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54 identifications with other representatives of these categories. Third level reflection of this  
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3 kind has the potential to develop into a critical discourse about social values, practices  
4 and even the nature of identities. Identities, like practices, no longer function the same  
5 way when they are understood as social constructions rather than something natural.  
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7 They undergo further stress when they become the subject of discourses that allow their  
8 functional and comparative analysis. Criticism of identities or practices make people  
9 more aware of the and can easily generate role anxiety. Heightened awareness and  
10 anxiety can change how or why a role is performed and how people understanding its  
11 meaning and consequences. When roles evolve, acquire new meanings, or simply  
12 become controversial, these changes provide a stimulus to develop discourses that help to  
13 explain this process. Discourses in turn affect practice. A similar recursive process  
14 characterizes the relationship between roles and self-identifications.  
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29 **Autobiographical identity:** Seigel's categories map nicely on to various forms of  
30 identity, but they are incomplete. Understandings of the self invariably include an  
31 historical or biographical component that cuts across Seigel's categories. Our biographies  
32 are social and reflective, and for some people physical as well. For most of us, our  
33 biographies begin before we are born. We are raised as members of families, ethnic  
34 groups, regions and countries and are generally taught something about all of them. To  
35 the extent we assimilate this information the historical triumphs and tragedies of one or  
36 more of these units become part of our lives and sense of who we are. Our biography  
37 consists of life experiences, the emotions they generate and reflections on both. As we  
38 shall see, there is a heavy social component to personal memories and efforts to construct  
39 autobiographies.  
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3 The physical component of biography concerns the history of our body and the  
4 ways it has made us who we are. The most obvious example concerns handicapped  
5 people, whose life trajectories and personalities are almost certain to be influenced by any  
6 kind of major handicap. Handicaps, physical traumas or disease can have profound  
7 effects on the life choices people make and their resulting self-definitions. So too can  
8 exceptional physical features and abilities that make certain kinds of career choices  
9 possible. For some people the body is much more than a platform, but an important  
10 persona – perhaps the most important one – they present to the world. The phenomenal  
11 increase in recent years in the US of breast enhancement, liposuction, eye makeovers,  
12 cosmetic surgery and use of botox can be offered in evidence. For people who avail  
13 themselves of these procedures – and for most of us in less dramatic ways – our bodies  
14 and their histories help make us who we are.

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17 This cursory exploration of identity indicates that it has "horizontal" and  
18 "vertical" dimensions. The former refers to the self-identifications we develop in  
19 response to our affiliations and roles, and the latter to our autobiographical  
20 understandings. The horizontal dimension connects us to the social world by making us  
21 more like others. The vertical dimension confers a sense of uniqueness and continuity  
22 across time and space. It is unclear how these several dimensions of reflectivity are  
23 related. The scholarly literature is largely mute on the matter. Empirical evidence  
24 indicates that when asked who they are people sometimes refer to affiliations and roles  
25 and sometimes to their personal or group histories and the identifications they generate.  
26 Conceptually, philosophers sometimes incorporate all three dimensions but more often  
27 emphasize one at the expense, even to the exclusion, of others. Descartes postulated the  
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3 self as purely reflective, while Diderot (1776) had a speaker in *D'Alembert's Dream*  
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5 attribute moral and social selves to bodily constitution. Some contemporary biologists  
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7 and neuroscientists follow Diderot, while others (Edelman 1992; Damasio, 1994) argue  
8  
9 against reducing our drives and emotions to material processes. For Hegel and Marx, the  
10  
11 self is largely social, although the late Marx allows workers to gain reflexive agency after  
12  
13 the revolution. Nietzsche and Heidegger, Freud and Proust, all attempt to integrate the  
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15 three dimensions of self into more comprehensive understandings or to explain them with  
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17 reference to some deeper power or principle. In theory and practice alike, identity is a  
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19 many-headed hydra, and which head we see depends very much on how we frame the  
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21 problem and the social context in which we choose to ask or look.  
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### 30 INTERROGATING IDENTITY

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32 Identity is a universal phenomenon it does not necessarily follow that the concept  
33  
34 of identity is a useful vehicle for its analysis. Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper  
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36 (2000) rightly accuse the social sciences and humanities of surrendering to the word  
37  
38 “identity,” and of paying a considerable price in doing so. They object to the use of  
39  
40 identity as an analytical category because it is defined in so many different ways as to  
41  
42 denude the concept of any rigor, rendering difficult, if not futile, any comparison across  
43  
44 empirical studies. Many studies fail to distinguish between identity as a practice and an  
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46 analytical concept. The use of identity as an analytical concept legitimizes it as a  
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48 category of practice and, by extension, the political projects with which it is associated.  
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53 The concept of identity becomes more problematic still when we examine its  
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55 genealogy. Identity turns out to be the secular descendant of the soul and conjured up for  
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3 much the same purposes. It was initially invoked to provide uniqueness and continuity to  
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5 individuals, important to philosophers for moral and legal reasons. Like the soul, identity  
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7 has no physical presence; nobody has ever seen one. Nor can the conceptual construct of  
8  
9 identity be inferred on the basis of its behavioral consequences. More troubling still, it is  
10  
11 not anything like the neutral analytical category its advocates suppose. It is a component,  
12  
13 expression and prop of highly politicized identity discourses.  
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17 The concept of identity rests on three dubious assumptions. The first is that we  
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19 are somehow able to maintain continuous identities even though their personalities and  
20  
21 characters, affiliations and roles change over the course of their lives. The second is that  
22  
23 our ideates are somehow unique. The third is our potential to remake ourselves, or at  
24  
25 least to discover our "true" selves. All three beliefs are deeply ingrained in the modern  
26  
27 Western psyche and scholarly literature.  
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32 The continuity assumption is central to Locke's (1995) construction of identity  
33  
34 which made memory the source of individual continuity and continues to resonate with  
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36 more recent authorities who associate it with autobiography. Paul Ricoeur (1991)  
37  
38 maintains that identity is little more than a continuously reconstructed biography.  
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40 Charles Taylor (1989: 47) insists that "In order to have a sense of who we are, we have to  
41  
42 have a notion of how we have become and of where we are going." Anthony Giddens  
43  
44 (1992: 54) maintains that a person's identity "is not to be found in behavior. . . but in the  
45  
46 capacity *to keep a particular narrative going*." Erik Erikson (1959: 2), arguably the most  
47  
48 influential late twentieth century writer on the subject, tells us that "The conscious feeling  
49  
50 of having a personal identity is based on two simultaneous observations: the immediate  
51  
52 perception of one's selfsameness and continuity in time; and the simultaneous perception  
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3 of the fact that others recognize one's sameness and continuity." He associates a healthy  
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5 personality with a strong ego and group identity and both with a continuous biography.  
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8 From everything we know about memory, the assumption of continuity is  
9  
10 unsupportable. Psychological studies reveal that memory is based on a highly selective  
11  
12 representation of internal and external stimuli. It is an abstract recording, ordering and  
13  
14 reordering of only some of these experiences. It misrepresents experience in three  
15  
16 fundamental ways. We process only part of the stimuli received by our sense organs,  
17  
18 remember only a fraction of those experiences and a sharply declining percentage of  
19  
20 those over time. Memory is highly selective. There are distinct biases in what we  
21  
22 remember or choose to remember. Nor do we necessarily recall events accurately or in  
23  
24 proper sequence. The more often a memory is recalled, the more likely it is to evolve.  
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26 Psychologists find it useful to distinguish among *episodic memory* (recall of a past event),  
27  
28 *autobiographical memory* (a recalled event that seems to play an important part in a  
29  
30 person's life) and *life narratives*, which incorporate a series of autobiographical  
31  
32 memories and are important means of defining the self (Neisser and Fivush, 1994).  
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34 Extensive research on all three kinds of memory highlights their subjective nature and  
35  
36 changing substance has led some to question the utility, and even the epistemological  
37  
38 status, of "original events." Derek Edwards and Jonathan Potter (1992) suggest that  
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40 reality is not something out there that can be used to validate memories, but a mental  
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42 configuration created by memories.  
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50 The second assumption, about uniqueness, can also be traced back to the soul, and  
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52 like continuity, finds no empirical support. Individuals are unique in the sense that  
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54 everyone – identical twins aside -- has a different genetic makeup. Even twins have  
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3 different life experiences that make them different people. It is not self-evident how  
4 biological uniqueness confers identity, and it is not the usual grounds on which people  
5 claim it. For some years I have asked my students if they are unique and they all insist  
6 they are. When I ask them what makes them unique they routinely cite the same  
7 constellation of qualities: intelligence, creativity, caring, feelings for others, sense of  
8 humor and, of course, idiosyncratic life experiences. Their life experiences, they readily  
9 concede, are mediated by memory, and they are confident about the accuracy of their  
10 memories in spite of all the research to the contrary.  
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22 One of the most compelling critiques of uniqueness builds on the pioneering work  
23 of Maurice Halbwachs (1925), a French sociologist and student of Durkheim (2001),  
24 who, like his mentor, maintained that individual memory was often socially constructed.  
25 Durkheim and Halbwachs argued that memory is “created” through communications with  
26 other members of society and thus heavily stylized and a reflection of its dominant  
27 discourses. It helps people find meaning in their lives and create bonds of solidarity with  
28 others. Collective memory and its ritualization form the core of communities Durkheim,  
29 2001; Deutsch, 1953). Numerous subsequent studies reveal memory to be as much a  
30 social as individual practice.  
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43 At the neurological level our ability to store, recall and reconfigure verbal and  
44 nonverbal stimuli is mediated by patterns that we have learned from our social and  
45 cultural environments.(Schacter, 1996, 1999). In the process, more general memories are  
46 typically simplified and condensed in their representation. Their detail is reduced and  
47 aspects are emphasized that more readily allow their assimilation to widely used narrative  
48 schemes (Rubin, 1986; Conway, 1992; Allport and Postman, 1997). So-called “flashbulb  
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3 memories” are a case in point. They refer to vivid memories: where we were, what we  
4 were doing, what we thought at the time of dramatic events like Pearl Harbor, the  
5 Kennedy assassination or the fall of the Berlin Wall. Although reported in exquisite  
6 detail, such memories are notoriously unreliable (Neisser, 1982). This may be because  
7 “flashbulb memories” are not fully established at the time, but only later when the  
8 significance of the event for society has been established. For this reason, such  
9 memories, diverse at their onset, gradually converge as months and years pass (Bohannon  
10 and Symons, 1992).  
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22 Current events more broadly affect the way in which we remember earlier events.  
23 Commemorations of past events lead people to make upward revisions in memories about  
24 the event or the individuals involved (Schwarz, 1982). These revisions appear to help  
25 people assimilate such events cognitively, and once this happens they have no further  
26 need to ruminate about them. Conversely, when people talk less about an event, they  
27 remember it *more*, dream about it more and feel it more intensely. The problem of recall  
28 aside, narratives of the past are not static, but evolve and may change with each retelling.  
29 Psychologists have discovered multiple “remembered selves,” whose evocation depends  
30 on the nature of the trigger and the social milieu in which the person is situated at the  
31 time (White, 1989; Polkinghorne, 1991; Neisser and Fivush, 1994). To the extent that  
32 identity is socially conferred and memory socially constructed, it is something we share  
33 with other people. Identities are also shared to the extent they derive from affiliations  
34 and roles, as the demonstrably do in part. For these reasons, claims of uniqueness are  
35 more ideology than reality.  
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The third questionable claim about identity is our ability to remake ourselves. It was a goal of Rousseau and the Romantic movement. More recently, Abraham Maslow (1968) popularized the concept of "self-actualization," which holds that people have a responsibility to discover and develop their inner selves. This project finds expression in the literature on "authenticity" in philosophy and psychology that stresses the alleged self-shaping powers of the self and its potential to commit itself to value-based action. Contemporary advocates claim to Rousseau, Herder, Schiller, Kierkegaard or Sartre as their intellectual forebears. Some claim that authenticity is more important than ever given the "toxic levels of inauthenticity" that constantly barrage us in ads, emails and blogs (Gilmore and Pine, 2007: 43).

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Socialization is undeniably imperfect and leaves room for agency. Even strong social ontologists like Durkheim (1951, 2001) acknowledge its importance. He maintained that human passions routinely ride roughshod over socialization. This "flexibility" is responsible for positive changes in society as well as various pathologies, including suicide. Agency, as Durkheim understood, does necessarily imply freedom. Throughout history people have rebelled against the affiliations and roles their families and societies expect them to have or fill. It is revealing that many people who reject their socialization quickly affiliate with other communities and willingly assume the roles they assign. Individuals who join countercultures are likely to find themselves under just as much social pressure to conform to another, no less rigid, set of values, practices and dress codes. Chapter six examines this dynamic in the context of millenarian movements. It is unclear how far we can – or actually want – to purge ourselves of external shaping in the hope of discovering or becoming ourselves.



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3 For ancient Greeks, who, it is claimed, conceived of identities entirely in terms of  
4 social roles, the quest of self-discovery would have appeared nonsensical. They pitied  
5 people like slaves and the stateless who, deprived of social roles and the status they  
6 conferred, were thought to have lost a key enabling component of their humanity.  
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8 Thomas Hobbes, a close reader of the Greeks, also thought such a quest chimerical. His  
9 state of nature can be read as a thought experiment intended to demonstrate that human  
10 beings removed from society become nothing more than a collection of raw appetites and  
11 are accordingly a danger to themselves and everyone around them. Robert Musil (1995)  
12 makes the same claim in *A Man Without Qualities*.

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There are also logical objections to the self-actualization project. If we can reshape our identity, we are no longer the same people we previously were and our continuity is ruptured. The very possibility of transformation requires some other, deeper layer, of mind that inspires and helps us accomplish this change and overcome the identifications that constitute our identity. If so, identity cannot represent our core essence. Multiple identities points to the same conclusion. Some of these identifications are mutually supporting, but others are not, and all of them rise and fall in salience depending on the context. Here too, the concept of a unitary identity requires something superordinate to all our internal heterogeneity. In its absence, the struggle between or among competing identifications can only divide one's sense of being.

### **IDENTITY RECONSIDERED**

Most understandings of identity envisage it as something constitutive of the person. Constitution can have causal consequences, but they are never direct in the way

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3 mental states are imputed to be. The deeper the level of constitution – and identity is  
4 presumed to operate at the most fundamental level -- the more important the causal  
5 consequences, but the fewer empirical traces they leave. To get a handle on this  
6 relationship scholars must engage in process tracing and counterfactual analysis (Lebow,  
7 2009). This is exceedingly difficult to do for a level of constitution that is seemingly  
8 responsible for most cognitive and affective orientations.  
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18 It is worth considering the heretical proposition, first voiced by Alice B. Toklas  
19 about Oakland, California, that “there is no there there.” Like the soul, identity can  
20 neither be observed nor its existence be established by other means. In and of itself, this  
21 is not an insuperable obstacle as social science routinely uses concepts whose presence  
22 can only be inferred. Anxiety, dissonance, self-esteem and cognitive consistency are  
23 unobservables central to the field of psychology. They differ from identity in two  
24 important respects. They are imagined mental states and defined in ways that make it  
25 possible for us to determine their “presence” by carefully specified behaviors to which  
26 they are said to give rise. Identity does not meet either requirement. It is not a mental  
27 state but a meta-mental organizing principle that allegedly provides guidance and  
28 coherence to a wide range of cognitions and affects. There is absolutely no consensus  
29 about what identity as definitions of it vary enormously. With no consensus about its  
30 meaning or specification of its behavioral consequences it is useless analytically.  
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49 The fascination with identity goes deeper than epiphenomenal trends in popular  
50 culture and academic disciplines. Self-identifications address fundamental human needs.  
51 Identity in the first instance, is a vehicle for achieving status and self-esteem. The  
52 ancient Greeks considered the motive of self-esteem different from but a co-equal drive  
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3 with appetite. It was achieved by excelling in activities valued by one's peer group or  
4 society. By winning their approbation we in turn feel good about ourselves (Lebow,  
5  
6 2008). Self-esteem can also be achieved vicariously, through the achievements of one's  
7  
8 city state, or today, through those of one's sports team or nation. Psychologists have  
9  
10 discovered that membership in high-status groups enhances self-esteem and that people  
11  
12 will go to great efforts to enhance the standing of their group or seek membership higher-  
13  
14 status groups (Ellemers and Barreto, 2001). Fans whose sports teams regularly lose are  
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16 more likely than others to switch allegiances (Castano, Yzerbyt and Paladino, 2001).  
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18 Affiliations and the identifications associated with them are attractive because of the ends  
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20 they serve.  
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27 If high status groups confer esteem, membership in low status groups, or  
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29 exclusion from higher status ones, can engender humiliation. In Orhan Pamuk's novel,  
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31 *Snow*, Blue, a Muslim fundamentalist, tells Ka, a Westernized Turk that "Most of the  
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33 time it's not the Europeans who belittle us. What happens when we look at them is that  
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35 we belittle ourselves" (2004: 75). Each of these characters has a different route to  
36  
37 achieve self-esteem, and neither is happy with his choice. Such dilemmas are  
38  
39 commonplace in the contemporary Middle East as they are elsewhere in the world. It is  
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41 difficult, although by no means impossible to change national affiliations; people not  
42  
43 infrequently do so for reasons of status, wealth or security.  
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49 Identifications serve as a vehicle for increasing wealth and mobility. Changing  
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51 churches puts someone into a different social circle where it may be possible to make  
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53 more useful professional and business contacts. Karl W. Deutsch describes nationalism  
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55 as an "implied claim for privilege" in a world dominated by group competition for wealth  
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3 and standing. By joining a nationality and individual could help the group advance and  
4 benefit economically and psychologically from its success (1953: 102). Much of the  
5 enthusiasm in Eastern Europe for entering the European Union following the end of the  
6 Cold War was fueled by aspirations of this kind (Bache and George, 2006: 549-50).  
7  
8 Degrees from high status institutions open all kinds of doors as do the contacts one makes  
9 while a student. John F. Kennedy, a Harvard alumni, was awarded an honorary doctor of  
10 laws degree by Yale in 1962. Yale was famous for colonizing New York banks, law  
11 firms and other prestige professions with its graduates. Upon receiving his degree, the  
12 courageous President announced to the assembled multitude of Elis that he now had the  
13 best of two possible worlds: a Harvard education and a Yale degree (Kennedy, 1962).  
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27 Identity can provide security. Individuals have strong incentives to associate with  
28 groups to protect themselves from human and other forms of predation. Security  
29 concerns were probably a core motive for the formation of tribes and clans, which  
30 became the basis of hunter-gatherer societies. In historical times, people have had  
31 incentives to associate with or assimilate to politically dominant groups, especially when  
32 they are otherwise vulnerable. The same is true for states. Security was a key concern  
33 for many Eastern European countries in the aftermath of the Cold War, especially the  
34 Baltic states, which had formerly been a part of the Soviet Union and now anxious to join  
35 NATO. Gangs serve a similar function in communities where the police or incapable of  
36 maintaining order. In some countries, Donald Horowitz (1995), observes, identity can be  
37 a matter of life and death. Attempts at genocide and ethnic cleansing confirm this  
38 unpleasant truth.  
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3 Affiliations and roles help us make sense of our lives and impart meaning to  
4 them. Psychologists have discovered that these and other experiences form the basis for  
5 life narratives. More recently, terror management theory bases itself on the Heideggerian  
6 assumption that identity is a means of coping with mortality. Pioneered by Greenberg,  
7 Pyszczynski and Solomon, it seeks to develop and test a general theory of human  
8 behavior based on the existential dilemma posed by mortality (Greenberg et al, 1995,  
9 1997). It assumes that the inevitability of death would give rise to paralyzing terror in the  
10 absence of psychological mechanisms to cope with it. The most prominent of these  
11 mechanisms is a cultural system of meaning, or worldview, that imposes meaning, order,  
12 stability and continuity on life. It confers symbolic immortality on those who perform  
13 well the social roles derived from this worldview, or live up to its behavioral standards.  
14 The second mechanism is self-esteem, also derived from performing roles well and acting  
15 consistently with the expectations of a shared worldview. It has been described as a  
16 stimulus for our species to develop and sustain complex social orders and to improve the  
17 quality of life through a range of social and scientific innovations (Greenberg et al, 1994).  
18 Terror Management Theory has stimulated considerable research, much of it lending  
19 support to the claim that culture is an important buffer for anxiety associated with death  
20 (Greenberg et al, 1994, 1997).

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22 Finally, identity enables relationships and intimacy. This is true in all groups that  
23 bring people into closer personal contact, but may be easier and more important for  
24 people in low status and marginal groups. Examples include the Amish, orthodox Jews  
25 and recent immigrants who congregate in the same neighborhood. Lebow (2011)  
26 maintains that identity involves integration as well as separation, making close  
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3 relationships and intimacy means of building and maintaining identities rather than  
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5 constituting threats to them.  
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8           Self-identifications entail emotional commitments, and these commitments are  
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10 often intensified by the practices and social relationships they involve. When this  
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12 happens, people can find it difficult, perhaps inconceivable, to imagine themselves as  
13  
14 someone else and can come to believe that renouncing their identity represents nothing  
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16 less than renouncing themselves. Such people are likely to defend their identities even  
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18 when it threatens, or actually involves, external punishment rather than rewards. For two  
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20 millennia, Jews resisted efforts to convert them although it could mean expulsion or  
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22 death. Other religious and ethnic groups have done the same.  
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27           Analytical use of identity tends to reify the concept and direct attention to its  
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29 seemingly stable attributes. Alberto Melucci (1995) observes that identity "is  
30  
31 semantically inseparable from the idea of permanence." In practice, even forms of  
32  
33 identification that have social, political or legal substance are ambiguous and pliable and  
34  
35 have varying degrees of salience for actors. What people and many scholars call  
36  
37 identities are always in the process of evolving, often gradually but sometimes quite  
38  
39 dramatically. Like institutions, even seemingly stable identifications must undergo  
40  
41 constant evolution to retain the appearance of stability. This is equally true of social  
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43 collectivities, whose politics generally entails internal struggles over what they are, what  
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45 they stand for and who may belong.  
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