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# Who Am I? Transforming Our Understanding of Identity and Moral Education

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**Abstract:** When I was invited to edit a special issue of *Education Sciences* on the theme of “Moral education and identity”, I saw an opportunity both to gain a better understanding of how scholars across a range of disciplines construed the task of moral education in terms of identity and—I can now confess—to defend the claim that moral education, when properly understood, depends upon an account of identity which is quite different from that which dominates the social sciences, the media and popular opinion. My aim here is to provide such an account and, thereby, to suggest how we might construe the challenge of moral education in a world, and at a time, in which self-centered, short-sighted and narrow-minded thinking dominates much of the socio-political landscape. I argue that the dominant view of identity—that our own identities are constituted by those collectives and institutions with which we *identify*—actually reinforces narratives which bind us to *tribal* perspectives—in national, religious and cultural terms—in which we increasingly see ourselves and others in terms of who is “in” and who is “out”. I propose a relational view of identity in which each person sees her/himself as “one among others”, where the relationships in question both bind us in familiar and concrete ways to others—i.e., other persons but also other objects in the world—and transcend the boundaries imposed by belonging to this or that nation, religion, culture, or tribe. This idea of what it means to be a person goes hand-in-hand with a framework for moral education which is also both concretely relational and appropriately transcendent. Put briefly, we need to create the conditions in which young people engage one another *dialogically* in taking responsibility for tackling what I term “the Big Questions”, including: “What do I/we stand for?”, “What/who really matters?”, “What kind of society/world do I/we want to live in (and leave for future generations)?”, and “What is my place in the world?”. (In taking this approach, I aim to address at least some of the questions posed in the original *call for submissions* for this special issue, as outlined at the Special Issue “Moral Education and Identity”).

**Keywords:** identity; person; morality; community; inquiry; dialogue

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## 1. Introduction: The Idea of Identity

As a student of Anglo-American analytic philosophy and pure mathematics, I quickly realized the central role of identity in both disciplines. What I did not realize until fairly recently was that a different interpretation of the term “identity” had become prominent in the social sciences—not just psychology, but sociology, anthropology, politics and cultural studies and, indeed, some branches of philosophy (e.g., Continental and Postmodern philosophy). Moreover, the use of the same word (“identity”) belies the fact that it was actually being applied in quite different ways across these disciplines. Given that identity is seen as providing an answer to such pivotal questions as “Who/What am I?” and “What is my place in the world?”, this equivocation—I should say *confusion*—threatens our best attempts to deal with these and related questions.

Over the past several hundred years, the concept of identity, particularly with respect to persons, became prominent largely as a result of several events or processes, including:

- (i) The reaction against the idea of a fixed (Cartesian) self who both controlled, yet remained outside, a fully determinate natural world. Eighteenth Century philosophers such as Locke, Hume and Kant rejected this idea on the grounds that the self could not be defined beyond the bounds of experience. Subsequent (western) philosophy proceeded in several directions, roughly divided between the Anglo-American analytic school—which, to this day, proposes accounts of (personal) identity grounded in what I term the “strict” concept of identity (to be defined)—and the Continental stream (including post-modernist philosophy)—which abandoned the idea of a unified or fixed self and was grounded in a more “qualitative” understanding of identity. The latter conception of identity became embedded in the social sciences due, largely, to developments described under (ii) below.
- (ii) The emergence of a range of civil rights movements (particularly in the United States during the 1950s and 1960s), in response to years of persecution and discrimination perpetrated against the members of groups that threatened the dominant status quo characterized largely—then and now—as white, male, heterosexual, Christian and able-bodied. Recognizing that groups and collectives working collaboratively are usually more effective than individuals working alone, these groups began to fight—both literally and politically—for their own “identities”, borne out of a sense of “belonging, about what you have in common with some people and what differentiates you from others” (Weedon [1]): hence the birth of what became known as “Identity Politics”. One’s *identification* with others based on race, gender, religion, nationality, ethnicity, culture, sexuality, class or tribe, became especially salient to the extent that members of these groupings were—and saw themselves as being—victims of discrimination, prejudice, anger and hatred. Further, in those contexts, one’s own sense of identity was taken to be bound up with such groups; this is *qualitative* identity.

Today we see an exacerbation of old divisions and grievances stoking the fires of identity-related disputes, sparked by the ever-widening “wealth gap” both among and within nations (itself a direct consequence of market-based economics), the contested impact of globalization, the perceived rise in both religious extremism and secularism, and geo-political shifts such as the Global Financial Crisis, and the mass movement of refugees fleeing war, oppression and climate change.

The developments outlined above highlight a problem which requires resolution before we can move forward; namely, the widely-held assumption that personal identity is dependent, in some sense, on group or collective identity. It is my contention that the failure to challenge—and, in due course, reject—this assumption has distorted to the point of incoherence ways in which ordinary people are encouraged to “see” themselves in relation to others and the world of which they are a part. To proceed I need, first and foremost, to go back to the concept of *identity* itself and the distinction between quantitative (strict) and qualitative identity.

Conceptual questions about my own identity—like “Who/What am I?” and “What is my place in the world?”, and even “Am I the same person I was 20 years (or 20s) ago?”—have provided much food for thought over the last several hundred years. (An important qualification here: such questions about the nature of the self—“I”—have been less important in non-Western thought traditions, partly because these traditions have emphasised the value of the collective over that of the individual.) In the analytic philosophical tradition, going back to John Locke at least, answers to these questions have, in part, been informed by an understanding of identity which I shall label “strict” or “literal”. Strict identity is just *numerical* or *quantitative* identity, sometimes called “the smallest equivalence relation” or “that relation which satisfies the conditions of reflexivity and Leibniz’s Law”. (A relation R is reflexive when it holds between any given object and itself; i.e., “aRa” is always true. Leibniz’s Law (aka “The Indiscernibility of Identicals”) asserts that if a and b are numerically identical, then they share all their properties, qualities and characteristics.) It holds between any given object and itself, and fails to

hold between any object and a different object. It is, logically speaking, *unambiguous, absolute, precise* and *completely determinate* (borrowing terms from David Wiggins, [2] (Chapter 6)), although these features have not deterred philosophers from asking questions such as those mentioned above. However, this is because the real conceptual puzzles about numerical identity emerge when we consider in what the identity of particular *sorts* or *kinds* of object consist, especially when the sort or kind happens to be that to which each of us belongs, i.e., *human being* or *human person*. Indeed, contemporary analytic thought subscribes to the maxim, articulated by the logician W. V. O. Quine, that we do not understand what an object is—what it means for that object to exist—unless we understand its identity or, more precisely, the *criterion* of identity appropriate for objects of its kind.

## 2. The Common View of “Identity”

As I have remarked, questions about identity are not the sole province of logic and analytic philosophy. Philosophers from non-analytic traditions, including post-modernism, hermeneutics and phenomenology, as well as scholars from the social sciences, have also wondered about identity in general, and personal identity in particular. However, the concept of identity that is the object of their concerns in the vast majority of cases is not the strict and austere one of numerical identity, but the broader concept of qualitative identity. Still, simple logic is clear about the distinction here: qualitative identity is not strict identity but mere *equivalence* or similarity, where a relation of equivalence is one that is reflexive, symmetric and transitive. (A relation  $R$  is symmetric when “ $aRb$ ” implies “ $bRa$ ” in every case; it is transitive when “ $aRb$ ” and “ $bRc$ ”, taken together, implies “ $aRc$ ”.) Numerous (i.e., many distinct) objects will be equivalent with respect to some property or quality, such as colour, shape, texture, design, size, etc. In the domain of persons, such properties include all (or most of) these plus others which are more salient from a socio-political perspective, e.g., nationality, religion, ethnicity, gender, sexuality and culture. Where strict identity has, at best, a derivative interest in grouping objects together—since its significance lies in distinguishing each object from every other object—qualitative identity serves to group like-objects (i.e., those that share the quality in question) *and*, thereby, to distinguish those objects that are unlike (i.e., that do not share the quality in question). Familiar collectives and groups—including nations, religions, cultures, cults, casts, gangs, tribes, sexualities, and genders—contain as members all and only those individuals who are qualitatively identical in the appropriate sense. Consider nations, religions and sports clubs as examples; hence the equivalence relations of *same nation as*, *same religion as* and *same sports club as*, respectively. I am a co-national with each and every Australian, so that *with respect to nationhood*, we are equivalent or identical to one another—where the identity here is purely qualitative. Similarly, for all those who share my religion or who happen to be members of the same sports club(s) as me.

Matters become more complicated when we ask what role identity plays in determining the answers to such questions as: “What makes me *me*?” and “Who/what am I?” Here it is important to distinguish between the concerns of analytic philosophy with respect to my numerical identity (both at a given time and over time) and those of scholars and commentators outside analytic philosophy who seek to identify *me* uniquely on the basis of the concept of qualitative (group, collective) identity. Among the implications of the latter are that my own identity is seen as constructed, fragmented, shifting, impermanent, non-unified and conflicted, because the qualities with which I am associated are, themselves, shifting and impermanent; that we all, as individuals, are caught up in the task of “finding ourselves” in the context of the groups to which we belong (whether by choice or not); and that these groups, or at least some of them, being inextricably linked to my own identity, are implicated in the determination of *how we should live* (think, for example, of the prescriptive roles that nationhood, religion, ethnicity and culture are taken to play in the lives of individuals). Given that many of these groups exist in various relations of advantage and disadvantage to one another—rich and poor, white and non-white, men and women (and intersex), able-bodied and disabled, heterosexual and homosexual . . . —the stage is set for discord and conflict, because my very identity as an individual is perceived to be advantaged or disadvantaged in some such sense.

Before critiquing the (mistaken) idea that personal (individual) identity can somehow be derived from qualitative (group) identity, I need to corroborate my claim that this idea predominates in areas beyond analytic philosophy, in particular in the social sciences and elements of non-analytic philosophy—not to mention in popular opinion. Taking advantage of the vagueness inherent in “predominates”, the best I can do is provide a sample of comments in support of this claim. I then need to indicate why such comments are confused or mistaken, and clarify the actual relationship between strict, numerical identity and qualitative identity. In short, any attempt to derive the former from the latter is doomed from the start, for the simple reason that the correct derivation is the other way around: conceptually speaking, it is numerical identity that comes first.

Commentators asserting or assuming that personal (individual) identity can be derived from qualitative (group) identity:

... others see self as multiple, fragmented and unfinished. From this perspective identity is understood as a ‘performative struggle, always destabilised and deferred’. Vassilieva [3] (p. 36);

Philosophical discussions of self, identity and subjectivity, by way of contrast, have insisted on embedding such categories within a broader problematics of the human sciences, specifically, in relation to problems of the production of knowledge, objectivity and truth. Postmodern theory has questioned assumptions about the universal and timeless character of the categories of self, identity and subjectivity and provided compelling arguments for them to be seen as dependent on historically specific communicative acts, hermeneutic processes and power relations ... . Finally, with the advent of the postmodern period the central outlook in social and political thought has shifted to a view of the self as ‘flexible, fractured, fragmented, decentred and brittle’ [3] (p. 3);

*Social identity* is a person’s sense of who they are based on their group membership(s). ... . The individual’s very conception of self [partakes] of the common attributes of an historically-originated, socially determined and culturally and situationally constructed social group. McLeod [4];

... [the self became] the post-modern subject, conceptualized as having no fixed, essential or permanent identity. Identity becomes a ‘moveable feast’: formed and transformed continuously in relation to the ways we are represented or addressed in the cultural systems which surround us ... the subject assumes different identities at different times, identities which are not unified around a coherent ‘self’” (Hall [5] (p. 277);

... a particular conception of “identity” was gaining acceptance in anthropology, sociology, and related fields ... . First, identity is not a fixed, stable, unitary, and internally coherent phenomenon but is multiple, shifting, and in conflict ... Second, identity is not context-free but is crucially related to social, cultural, and political contexts. ... . Individuals derive identity, or understanding of self, “in great part from the social categories to which they belong” (Hogg & Abrams ... ). This self-definition is a dynamic process, “temporally and contextually determined, and ... in continual flux” ... (Varghese, Morgan, Johnston & Johnson [6] (p. 23)

The contemporary use of “identity” to refer to such features of people as their race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, religion, or sexuality first achieved prominence in the social psychology of the 1950s ... This use of the term reflects the conviction that each person’s identity—in the older sense of who he or she truly is—is deeply inflected by such social features. Appiah [7] (p. 65);

Identity is about belonging, about what you have in common with some people and what differentiates you from others. At its most basic it gives you a sense of personal location, the stable core to your individuality. But it is also about your relationships, your complex involvement with others and in the modern world these have become ever more complex and confusing. Each of us live with a variety of potentially contradictory identities, which battle within us for allegiance: as men or women, black or white, straight or gay, able-bodied or disabled, 'British' or 'European'. The list is potentially infinite, and so therefore are our possible belongings. Which of them we focus on, bring to the fore, 'identify' with, depends on a host of factors. At the centre, however, are the values we share or wish to share with others. (Weeks, cited in [1] (p. 1));

Identity politics as a mode of organizing is intimately connected to the idea that some social groups are oppressed; that is, that one's identity as a woman or as a Native American, for example, makes one peculiarly vulnerable to cultural imperialism (including stereotyping, erasure, or appropriation of one's group identity), violence, exploitation, marginalization, or powerlessness . . . ;

. . . the controversial term 'identity' raises a host of philosophical questions. *Logical uses aside*, it is likely familiar to philosophers from the literature in metaphysics on personal identity—one's sense of self and its persistence . . . Indeed, underlying many of the more overtly pragmatic debates about the merits of identity politics are philosophical questions about the nature of subjectivity and the self. [Heyes [8], emphasis added]

Heyes explicitly makes a connection between this sense of identity and:

. . . the literature in metaphysics on personal identity—one's sense of self and its persistence . . . Indeed, underlying many of the more overtly pragmatic debates about the merits of identity politics are philosophical questions about the nature of subjectivity and the self . . . Charles Taylor argues that the modern identity is characterized by an emphasis on its inner voice and capacity for *authenticity*—that is, the ability to find a way of being that is somehow true to oneself . . . What is crucial about the "identity" of identity politics appears to be the experience of the subject, especially his or her experience of oppression and the possibility of a shared and more authentic or self-determined alternative. [Emphasis added]

Self-continuity can be defined as the sense that past, present, and future time-slices of one's identity are meaningfully connected. Philosophers (Taylor, Wiggins), as well as both classic (Erikson, James) and contemporary (Erikson . . . ) psychologists, portray self-continuity as a defining feature of personal identity. Both personal and societal functioning arguably depend on people's forming identities that are seen to persist over time—not just from past to present but also into the future. . . . *During the life-course, however, people experience physical, psychological and social changes, and neither past nor future selves can be directly experienced in the present. Hence, people's sense of being the same person through time is not a given, but must be actively constructed*—and both individuals and cultural groups may prioritize different bases of self-continuity within identity construction . . . Becker, et al. [9], [emphasis added]

'Identity' is a concept that presupposes a dialogical recognition of the other; it is a relational concept. But it is also a concept that presupposes identification in the sense that individuals recognize attributes or properties in each other that are construed as identical or at least similar. These properties, then, are used as an index of individual position and disposition. Identity is therefore a concept not so much of uniqueness or distinction as of resemblance and repetition. Isin and Wood [10] (p. 19)

The most straightforward explanation of how it is that so many writers have equivocated between individual and group identity is that they have simply ignored the distinction between quantitative and

qualitative identity, thereby tacitly assuming that the only resources for defining the former must lie in the latter. Before explaining the errors behind such thinking, I need to consider a tempting response that may be made on behalf of social science itself, namely, that while it is readily conceded that groups of any kind could not exist without individuals to populate them, writers such as those cited above are more interested in the socio-political dimensions of the problems associated with oppression, stereotyping, and discrimination, by highlighting those qualitative features which group individuals together, and which they, their oppressors, or both, regard as salient. It is a common-place that people *identify* with such features and groups as when, for example, I *identify with* fellow Australians or Jews; alternatively, when I *identify as* Australian or Jewish. The identity component involved here is clearly *qualitative*, in that a broad domain of individuals can be “partitioned” (to use the mathematical term) according to such relations of sameness or similarity as “same gender”, “same race/ethnicity”, and “same sexual orientation”. The suggestion which I am describing as tempting, then, is that what is really being identified is *the group (partition) defined by a particular quality*, for example: women, blacks, and lesbians. (. . . it is *qua* women, *qua* blacks, *qua* lesbians that groups demand recognition. The demand is not for inclusion within the fold of “universal humankind” on the basis of shared human attributes; nor is it for respect “in spite of” one’s differences. Rather, what is demanded is respect for oneself *as* different . . . Heyes [8] quoting Kruks.)

My first point in response is that it is not at all clear that those groups, collectives or associations to which many feel a strong sense of attachment (identification) are most accurately characterized in qualitative terms in any non-trivial sense. For example, politicians and others interested in cultivating a sense of patriotism in citizens sometimes make broad claims about what it means to be, say, Australian, in terms of the values of mateship, “a fair go”, etc. Those among us who see such terms as little more than culturally-specific references to universally desirable character traits might prefer a simpler historical or legalistic definition in terms of place of birth, acquired citizenship, etc. Nations and states, like individual objects, have fairly specific origins and histories, and even when the latter are bound up with specific value-laden qualities (as determined by a constitution which emphasises freedom, justice, and democracy, for example), it is no simple matter to define citizenship in terms of such qualities. A more realistic requirement is that citizens—especially immigrants—be prepared to pledge loyalty to the nation when it comes to choosing sides in the event of war (but not international sporting contests!) or agreeing to pay taxes, etc. In so far as I do identify as Australian (identify with Australia and fellow Australians), the basis of such identification is simply the contingent fact that I was born in (or later accepted as a citizen of) a country that was first settled many thousands of years ago and, subsequently, by Europeans in 1788, and became an independent nation in 1901. Citizens of other countries would, presumably, feel the same about their own homelands. It is hard to see how such a contingency can support any non-trivial, strongly value-laden sense of identity of identification.

How about collective entities which may be defined quite vaguely, yet are often viewed as embodying specific values, customs, beliefs and practices? I am thinking particularly of *traditions* and *cultures*. Noting that these concepts have been characterized in multiple ways, (“In 1952, the American anthropologists, Kroeber and Kluckhohn, critically reviewed concepts and definitions of *culture*, and compiled a list of 164 different definitions.” [https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/al/globalpad/openhouse/interculturalskills/global\\_pad\\_-\\_what\\_is\\_culture.pdf](https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/al/globalpad/openhouse/interculturalskills/global_pad_-_what_is_culture.pdf)) we may view a tradition as one or several beliefs or behaviours that are passed from one generation to the next, and culture as a broader concept which embraces specific items (clothing, food), behaviours and, indeed, traditions. When considering questions of identity, the pervasive nature of culture renders it a more likely candidate for something we identify with—indeed, something which defines our very identity. Deferring for the moment the mysterious idea that culture could define one’s *individual* identity, the suggestion is that a given culture, which is shared by multiple individuals past and present, is associated with qualities that can be tracked over time and which are very important to those individuals; indeed, they cannot imagine what it would be like to live outside this cultural framework. Hence the idea of “cultural death” which, on some views, is virtually synonymous with “the death—or, at least, the severe impoverishment—of

individuals who subscribe to that culture". Throughout history and in our own day, certain ethnic, racial, religious, gender-related and other characteristics are taken to be culturally *essential* and, thereby, indispensable to the existence both of the culture and of its adherents.

I see two major difficulties with this view of the place that culture has in our lives. First, it is generally conceded that the features and qualities that characterise cultures over time are not rigid or fixed. Those who maintain that when qualitative change is imposed on a collective (tribe, nation . . . ), the result can be cultural "death", are likely to interpret such change when it arises within the collective itself in much less drastic terms—i.e., using the language of change but not of death or extinction. The lack of precision in such cases confirms that there really are no clear *identity conditions* for cultures; they are, at best, vague and amorphous entities. Secondly, it is not true that even the most drastic cultural change leads inevitably to the death or decline in well-being of actual persons. Accordingly, it can be argued that in so far as such change actually saves the lives of individuals, the cultural "loss" involved is bearable, because the lives and well-being of actual persons are more important, morally speaking, than the continued existence of collective entities such as cultures. This is one example of a principle I call "The Principle of Personal Worth", to which I shall return when considering the issues of morality and moral education.

To return to my main theme, a closer look at the comments of those cited above confirms that it is individual, not collective, identity which is at stake. Appiah, for example, attributes what he calls the contemporary use of "identity", namely, its *qualitative* sense, to the psychologist Erik Erikson, noting that Erikson himself moved between psychological (private, inner) and social understandings of identity. It is precisely this movement which, for Appiah, among others, links qualitative identity to what he refers to as "the older sense [of identity] of who he or she truly is", namely, numerical or quantitative identity [7] (p. 65).

### 3. Individual Identity Cannot Be Defined Qualitatively

I readily concede that in practical terms, we often use one or more qualitative features to *identify* individuals. I point out that the pen you are holding is mine because it has my signature etched into it; the witness identifies a suspect in a line-up as the murderer because she recalls the shape of his ears; you correctly identify me in an old third grade school photo on the basis of some kind of qualitative similarity, and so on. But it would be unwise to rely on the notion of *identification* as a reliable way to define the actual identity of an individual. For one thing, we sometimes use identification of an individual to specify the quality, group or kind in question, as when I point to a painting in the Rijksmuseum and declare: "That is a Vermeer", or when a botanist claims, with understandable excitement, "This is a new species of *Astragalus*". No one imagines that the painting and plant thus identified are the *only* instances of their kind. Indeed, to repeat, it is in the nature of groups and kinds that they have numerous instances. Further, the qualities that a given individual happens to have at a given time are likely to change, with some disappearing to be replaced by others, and so on (it was this feature that prompted Hall, cited above, to insist that individual identity itself is a "moveable feast"). Short of finding an essential property for each individual—i.e., a quality possessed by just that individual and no other—there is only one way to conceive of defining an individual in terms of its qualities, namely, by specifying *all* of them! How far can this idea take those who see individual identity in qualitative terms?

The underlying idea to be entertained here is the converse of Leibniz's Law. Leibniz stated that if individuals *a* and *b* are strictly identical, then they share all of their qualities or properties. This principle is actually undeniable once we accept that there is a concept of strict identity. The converse—"The Identity of Indiscernibles"—on the other hand, is another matter. For one thing it is far from clear how one could determine that individuals *a* and *b* share *all* their qualities. In any case, aside from esoteric discussions in analytic philosophy, this so-called principle has no practical utility and—as far as I can determine—is irrelevant to the relationship between individuals and the groups they belong to.

A more modest approach is to propose that the identities of individuals may be specified by reference to a more manageable selection or cluster of qualities. This is the idea of “multiple” or “plural” identity, which avoids the extremes of attempting to identify objects in terms of all their qualities, on the one hand, and in terms just one specific quality, on the other (it is, after all, in the nature of a quality or property that more than one individual has it). (Amartya Sen proposed such a pluralistic idea in response to what he termed “the Fallacy of Singular Affiliation” [11] (p. 20), or what might also be thought of as an *essentialist* perspective on identity.) Pragmatically speaking, the point of so doing is to counter the potentially divisive idea that for almost any given quality or classification, there will be those who have or satisfy it and those who do not. It is true that many of us are distinguished by religion, ethnicity, and/or sexuality, but we are also likely to be united by other qualities (common nationality is often cited here); i.e., we have “multiple identities”. Accordingly, we may identify with multiple groups and qualities, but this idea falls well short of proclaiming that individuals are actually defined by their qualities, whether taken singly or in clusters.

Fortunately, the case against conceiving numerical identity in terms of qualitative identity is, logically speaking, quite simple: qualitative identity *presupposes* numerical identity. In order to conceive of an object as having specific qualities in the first place, we must already possess the concept of an object as *something* which has various qualities. But the possession of such a concept requires having the concept of the numerical identity of an object because, as previously noted, existence and identity go together. This point can be illustrated by the example just touched on. I show you a photo of my third-grade class taken some (okay, many!) years ago and ask you to find—i.e., identify—*me*. Even though you will inevitably utilize qualitative features to do so, the actual identification in question is not qualitative (To what group do I belong?) but quantitative (*Where am I* in the photo?). The task is not to identify someone who is *similar* to or like me, but to identify someone who *is* (strictly identical to) me. Moreover—and this is the important point—the very idea that there are many qualitative differences between us (both external and internal), makes sense *only on the assumption* of strict identity. After all, it would not be particularly interesting to learn that I am qualitatively like or unlike someone in the photo who is not actually me.

In the absence of numerical or quantitative identity, an entire range of familiar narratives which purport to be about one or more particular individuals would not make sense. Here are two contemporary examples.

- (i) Over the last several decades, more people have been forced from their homes and even their countries than at any time since the aftermath of World War II. Whatever the reasons and wherever the blame, it is difficult for most of us to imagine the upheaval and anguish that refugees and asylum seekers experience. Many perish in transit or are herded into detention camps or countries at least as repressive as those from which they fled in the first place; some manage to establish new lives for themselves and their families, often at great cost, both financially and emotionally. Doubtless everyone who does survive such a transition has a *story* to tell, a story in which they and those close to them are the chief characters. These narratives may speak of enormous *qualitative* change and upheaval, but the stories and the changes make sense *only* because the individuals concerned retain their own *quantitative* identities. They are the very same people who left one environment and now find themselves in another. No amount of qualitative difference can alter this fact.
- (ii) A very different kind of example is that of gender reassignment. Once again, it is difficult to imagine a more drastic qualitative change than that of gender; yet, as before, those who undergo such procedures could, if they so choose, tell their own stories which may well extend back in time to their very earliest years. And those stories will chiefly be about *them*—males who became female or vice versa. In a recent podcast from the USA, a transgender woman reported having to assure her mother that her son—as he originally was—did not die. “It’s still *me*, mom”. Indeed, it is! (Podcast [12].)



It is noteworthy that several of the comments cited earlier, coming from outside the analytic tradition, include reference to philosophers who are located firmly within that tradition. After attributing to David Wiggins the idea that “self-continuity is a defining feature of personal identity . . . both personal and societal functioning arguably depend on people’s forming identities that are seen to persist over time—not just from past to present but also into the future.”, Becker et al. retreat to a more recognizably post-modernist position:

During the life-course, however, people experience physical, psychological and social changes, and neither past nor future selves can be directly experienced in the present. Hence, people’s sense of being the same person through time is not a given, but must be actively constructed . . . .

But the inference here (“Hence, . . .”) just seems wrong: my sense of being the same person through time is precisely what allows me to make sense of the changes referred to as being changes *to me*.

Heyes [8], also cited above, having correctly pointed out that the “term ‘identity’ raises a host of philosophical questions . . . likely familiar to philosophers from the literature in metaphysics on personal identity”, inserts the disclaimer “Logical uses aside . . .”. Yet it is precisely her failure to consider the logic of identity that leads her to move to and fro between conceptions of numerical and qualitative identity without any acknowledgement that these conceptions are quite distinct from one another.

In arguing that numerical identity—that which makes an individual the very thing that it is at all stages of its existence—is not reducible to qualitative identity, I am not suggesting that qualitative factors play no role in how we should understand numerical identity, let alone that each person’s individuality is a sufficient basis for determining what constitutes a moral life. Indeed, I regard moral individualism as being just as pernicious as its opposite collectivist extreme. What, then, is the precise relationship between these two concepts of identity?

#### 4. Back to Logical Basics

In the analytic context, our understanding of the domain of objects, including persons, underwent a radical transformation some 150 years ago. Perhaps it is better to say that our ability to represent its intuitively understood structure in semantic terms sharpened. This was due, in large part, to advances in formal logic and the philosophy of language, in particular, the insight, due to Gottlob Frege, Bertrand Russell, et al., that the semantic acts of *referring to* an object (picking it out, identifying it) and *describing* it (in qualitative terms) are different in kind and need to be represented, formally, in quite different ways. Instead of being distracted, in such statements as “All humans are mortals”, by the question “To what exactly do the terms ‘humans’ and ‘mortals’ refer or stand for here?”, we are to interpret such terms as “humans” and “mortals” *predicatively* rather than *nominatively*, i.e., as *describing*—attributing properties or qualities to—objects which may or may not be, among other things, human and mortal. Over and above the logical devices needed to understand such universal claims (quantification, conditional implication, variables, etc.), their substantive content depends on an even more basic kind of statement, such as “This is a human” and “Socrates is mortal”, whose logical structure involves the combination or juxtaposition of a “subject” term (“this”, “Socrates”) and a predicate term (“-is a human”, “-is mortal”). Ongoing contestability about reference within the philosophy of language notwithstanding, such basic characteristics of the logical form of a range of simple sentences (or propositions) are the stuff of a typical course in “Logic 101”. (The idea that in a statement like “Socrates is mortal”, there is just one referring expression, implies that the predicate “is mortal” does not *refer* to anything at all, including the property or quality of being mortal. Following Frege, we could say that attributing mortality to Socrates is an example of *conceptual* classification—since, intuitively, we possess the concept of mortality—even though it is not clear what concepts actually *are*. Rather than retreat to the shadowy realm of the mental here, I prefer to tie concepts to *language*.)

The semantic complementarity of reference and predication provides a vital clue as to how we should understand numerical identity as a relation in the ordinary world of objects such as tables, oak trees and persons. We typically make claims like “This object (table, oak tree, person) is the same as (identical to) that one” which can be understood as the combination of identification—this object and that object are tables (oak trees, persons)—and identity—these objects, thus identified, are identical. I am assuming here that we cannot understand, let alone evaluate the truth of, an identity statement (“a = b”) unless we have some understanding of *what* a and b *are* or, more precisely, what *kinds* of object a and b are. (We sometimes use “identify” in what is strictly re-identification as in “Can you identify this gun?”, “Yes, it is the same gun as . . . ”. But “this” marks a difference from “identifying as . . . ”) Following (and summarizing) Wiggins here (who traces his own analysis to Aristotle), although the act of identifying—picking out—an object is an act of reference, in which we, so to speak, connect with something in the world, it includes, whether explicitly or implicitly, a predicative or conceptual act. The former is an act of *deixis*—literally, “pointing via language”—while the latter is an act of predication, which is conceptual in nature. In Wiggins’ Aristotelean terminology, every object we identify—and, in turn, re-identify as the very same object—is a “this-such” (or “thing-kind”) [2] (p. 109). (There has been a long-standing debate in the philosophy of language as to the nature and extent of the descriptive component in acts of reference. In the 1970s, Saul Kripke proposed that proper names—i.e., simple referring expressions—are not disguised (qualitative) descriptions but are linked directly to objects via what he called “rigid designation”. Kripke [13].) In a previous example, “*He* (pointing to me) is the same *person* as the one standing *there* (pointing to the child in the photo)”, the terms “*he*” and “*there*”, used in these specific contexts, refer to objects which are classified as persons. Moreover, the relational term “same person as” indicates that these objects can, in principle, be tracked through space and time, as persons—indeed, as one and the same person.

To see why both a deictic and a predicative act are required for such apparently simple tasks as picking something out, tracking it through time, and reidentifying it, consider attempting to do so in the absence of one or the other. First, the act of pointing (with or without an *indexical* expression such as “this”) is, in theory if not always in practice, radically ambiguous (reflecting the semantic truth that such terms as “object” and “thing” are also either ambiguous or hopelessly vague). Even pointing out a specific region of space (at or over a given time) would not suffice, for the simple reason that there are just too many “things” in a particular space at any one time. If this point seems somewhat remote from common practice, it is because the latter inevitably is facilitated by an assumed conceptual context which specifies the *kind* of thing in question, utilizing such concepts as. *painting, flower, human being/person*, etc. Henceforth, I shall take it that such specification provides an answer to the question: “*What is it?*” Conversely—and it is this point which is overlooked by “identity theorists” who fail to distinguish between qualitative and numerical identity—no amount of conceptual or qualitative elaboration will make it possible actually to refer to some-*thing*—to pick some-*thing* out—in the absence of an act of *deixis* or *ostension* (pointing out). In short, to pick something out, you have to pick *it* out, not just describe it (Wiggins [2] (p. 150)). I remarked above that when identifying familiar objects (including persons or human beings) over time, we take for granted that the objects in question can be tracked through space and over time. However, it is worth noting just how much is taken for granted here. In order to make sense—let alone determine the truth—of such identity claims, we assume, not only that the objects being referred to belong to a frame of reference (e.g., space-time continuum), but that we, as third-party observers, also belong—or, at least, have access to—the same frame of reference.

While there is a potentially infinite number of predicative attributions that can be made for any object to which we refer and track through time—including persons—there are very few which apply throughout that object’s existence and which make it possible to: *identify* the object in the first place, track *it* through space and time, and *re-identify* it as the very same object. Predicates with these features are called “sortals” (Wiggins, following Locke). Sortals answer the question “*What is it?*” with respect to those objects to which they apply, because they supply the *criteria* governing judgements of identification and re-identification. On this account, such judgments are implicit in our understanding

of these objects—we would not understand what tables, trees or persons are unless we grasped their associated identity criteria.

It bears reiterating that while sortal attributions or classifications play a fundamental role in acts of reference, identification and re-identification—which are the semantic components relating to identity proper—they must be complemented by a *deictic* component by which we actually pick something out. As with other forms of qualitative identification, including those, like nationality, religion, ethnicity . . . which are sometimes (mistakenly) interpreted in terms of actual identity, sortals fall short of specifying actual or literal identity (that relation an object has to itself and to nothing else) simply because we understand them to apply to more than one object. Sorts and kinds, like groups, collectives and associations do not single out specific individuals.

It is, as I have noted, in the nature of a sortal term that it provides an answer to the question “What is it?” where this question is shorthand for “What *kind* of thing is it?” I detect something out of the corner of my eye, or I see a flash in the sky, and naturally ask: “What is/was it?” I am usually satisfied with an answer like “That was a/cat” or “It was a search-light”, which specifies the kind of object involved but falls short of pinning down *which* object. The same point applies if the object in question turns out to be a person. However, this point is obscured by our natural tendency to ask, not “What is it?”, but “Who is it/that?” when we know, or suspect, that a person is, indeed, being referred to. It is obscured because the latter question is normally interpreted as referring to a *particular* individual, not just a *kind* of individual. Extending this line of thought, “identity” questions such as “Who is she?”, “Who are you?”, and “Who am I?” are not usually answered by a generic specification of a certain kind of object; rather, the kind in question is taken for granted (be it *person*, *human being*, or *human person*), and the question is answered by specifying a *particular* individual of that kind. In practice, the second and third person versions of this question are more commonly used than the first-person version (“Who are you?” “I am Professor Cheng” or “I am your neighbour” . . . ; similarly, with the third-person instance).

“Who am I?”, on the other hand, can be interpreted in several quite different ways. As Schechtman points out [14] (p. 102), it might be asked by an amnesiac who has literally forgotten his own identity—including, presumably, his own name. More pertinently, it might also be asked by a confused adolescent (her example) or, indeed, anyone who is experiencing what Charles Taylor calls “a crisis of identity”. It is worth quoting Taylor at some length here:

People may see their identity as defined partly by some moral or spiritual commitment, say as a Catholic, or an anarchist. Or they define it in part by the nation or tradition they belong to, as an Armenian, say, or a Quebecois. What they are saying by this is not just that they are strongly attached to this spiritual view or background; rather it is that this provides the frame within which they can determine where they stand on questions of what is good, or worthwhile, or admirable, or of value. Put counterfactually, they are saying that were they to lose this commitment or identification, they would be at sea, as it were; they wouldn’t know any more, for an important range of questions, what the significance of things was for them.

And this situation does, of course, arise for some people. It’s what we call an ‘identity crisis’, an acute form of disorientation, which people often express in terms of *not knowing who they are*, but which can also be seen as a radical uncertainty of where they stand. They lack a frame or horizon with which things can take on a stable significance . . . To know who you are is to be oriented in moral space. (Taylor [15] (pp. 27–28, emphasis added)

In linking uncertainty about identity (not knowing who one is) to uncertainty of “where one stands”, Taylor is pointing to the need for a moral compass which provides an orientation in “moral space”. However, the examples he provides—belonging to a particular nation or spiritual tradition—bring us back full circle to the idea that the most plausible answers to the question “Who am I?” are expressed in *qualitative* terms, where the qualities in question are definitive of our identities precisely because

they affirm our moral commitment to our nation or our religion. I have argued that qualitative identity inevitably falls short of answering the question of *my own* identity. Further, we see a worrying gesture toward moral relativism here, once we accept that our moral “frames” are tied to particular collectives such as nations and religious traditions.

The form of collectivism expressed by Taylor has sometimes been called “communitarianism”, seen as a welcome alternative to extreme individualism. Still, it is concerning that several contemporary communitarian philosophers have linked individual persons and their identities to specific collectives and institutions. For example:

Identities make *ethical claims* . . . we make our lives *as men and as women, as gay and as straight people, as Ghanaians and as Americans, as blacks and as whites.*” [7] (p. *xiv*)

. . . the individual is identified and constituted in and through certain of his or her roles, those roles which bind the individual to the communities in and through which alone specifically *human goods* are to be attained; I confront the world as a member of this family, this clan, this tribe, this city, this nation, this kingdom. There is no “I” apart from these. MacIntyre [16] (p. 172), emphasis added.

In contrast, Sandel describes a view of the self as “radically situated.” On this picture, the self does not exist prior to its ends—it *is* its ends, it is composed of them. These community attachments and principles are not merely something that the self *ascribes to*, but are rather *constitutive* of the self. And to the extent that others share our ends, our identities merge with theirs in a larger entity—a family, a class, a nation—that is uniquely able to form and pursue a common good. [17] (Communitarian critics of liberalism—the latter represented most famously in recent times by John Rawls in his 1971 book *A Theory of Justice*—reject the idea of the free-standing individual who exists independently of where and how she is situated, both descriptively and morally. But communitarianism has its own problems as many commentators have pointed out. Fatherhood may seem like a purely descriptive relationship, but from a communitarian perspective it carries normative commitments which become relativized to the rules and conventions of particular cultures.)

The risks associated with taking this approach are clearly seen when the connection between group identification and moral commitment is taken to extremes. Consider:

In some ways, terrorism is an outgrowth of collectivism taken to its extreme. For collectivist-oriented individuals, the group (e.g., family, nation, religion) takes precedence over the individual . . . the terrorist becomes fused with the group he represents, so much so that he is willing to sacrifice his own life to advance the group’s agenda and purposes. Schwartz [18] (p. 304).

The same idea is represented in interpretations of the horrific practice of *honor* killing, where the group or collective is characterized in terms of *culture* or *role*:

. . . in a society which practices “honor killing”, the father who discovers that his daughter has been raped not only “cannot fail to murder her, on pain of compromising his identity. In fact, he cannot even coherently imagine protecting his daughter—were he to try, it would not be *him* protecting her, but some alien intelligence . . . “. Sachs [17].

Underpinning such extreme examples as honor killing is the same confusion over identity—specifically, the idea that one’s identity is given in terms of some or all of its properties, normative or otherwise. Sachs asserts that:

Attempting to identify the self with its ends makes it impossible to explain how these ends can be normative for us; it also prevents us from explaining how the same individual might have ends which change over time. [17]

For me the point can be made more succinctly: “Attempting to identify the self with its ends is based on a logical confusion about the nature of predication”. I should add that this has nothing to do with either cultural or moral relativism. Indeed, once we understand what constitutes individual identity, we are, on both logical and—one hopes—normative grounds free to argue that honor killing is just *wrong*, always and everywhere.)

It is easy to stand back from such situations and condemn terrorists and family leaders who murder their daughters for committing adultery or even worse, for having been raped, particularly when they happen to be *remote* or *other*, in terms of religion, culture, ethnicity, and geography. However, these phenomena—or, at least, our interpretations of them—are the inevitable by-product of a collectivist mindset about identity that has, I have suggested, dominated the social sciences.

### 5. Who, Then, Am I?

It is, as I have noted, part of our general understanding of concepts, sorts and kinds (i.e., those abstractions used to classify objects, and indicated, linguistically, by predicates) that they apply, in principle, to a *plurality* of objects. In other words, if an object is an F, then it is one F among other Fs. In practice, we often use a combination of predicate terms (called a “definite description”) to pin down a single object, as in “the largest oak tree in the forest”, “the third house on the right”, “the fellow wearing a bright yellow jacket”, etc. We also use names or, more precisely, *proper* names for the same purpose, although only for certain types of object: we name people, some animals (notably, pets), rivers, mountains, cities, and countries, but (usually) not plants, animals in the wild or the farm-yard, tables, rocks, etc. Nevertheless, the actual identity of an object is not determined by any combination of qualitative terms, any more than it is determined by some kind of individual *essence* or nature. Over and above specifying the kind or sort of object in question, we identify—and, where appropriate, re-identify—the object by picking *it* out (referring to it) *deictically*, that is, as *this* or *that* F which, in turn, presupposes that the object is within our own frame of reference.

Returning to the question “Who am I?”, to be understood as a request for my actual identity, we may proceed as follows: “I am a person”, “I am one person among other persons”, “I am *this* particular person among other persons, of whom some—family, friends, colleagues, strangers, etc.—fall within my frame of reference”. Moreover, with the previous paragraph in mind, I am this particular person among other objects in the world that also fall within my frame of reference. By thus identifying myself as one particular person among other persons and other objects in the world, I have, thereby, specified my own identity. Granted, there is an air of triviality in the specification of any object’s actual identity—including my own—given, after all, that strict identity is just that relation an object has to itself and to no other object (“ $a = a$ ”). However, the conception I have of myself in relation to other persons and other objects in general, is far from trivial. First, it suggests that my seeing (visually, but also in the broader sense of awareness) myself as a person is linked to my seeing both other persons and objects which are not persons. Secondly, it suggests that the “moral space” (recalling the terminology of Taylor) in which we seek to orient ourselves as persons can be seen as a triangular framework involving (how I see) myself, other persons and other objects (Davidson [19]). Thirdly, it offers a way to interpret the kind of identity crisis that might lead someone to ask “Who am I?”, not in qualitative or essentialist terms which I have rejected, but along the following lines: “Who am I, in terms of my place and role in a moral space that includes me, but also other persons and other objects? I am *this particular person* in that space, but what does this amount to?” These questions lead, inevitably, to others, including those which I earlier called “The Big Questions” (“What do I stand for?”, “What/who really matters to me?”, “Who am I in relation to (certain) others?”, “What kind of society/world do I want to live in?”, “What is my place in the world?”, . . . ). (The term “Big Questions” is sometimes applied to the discipline of philosophy, especially in response to the question “What is philosophy?” I am sympathetic to this connection, although the subject matter of philosophy’s big questions is not restricted to persons.) My proposal is that someone “searching for her identity” or experiencing an “identity crisis” is, whether consciously or not, posing one or more Big Questions.

Further, even without the emotional elements we would normally associate with such a crisis—stress, confusion, depression . . . —my identity as a person—indeed, as *this* particular person—that is, as a creature aware of himself as one among others, commits me to asking (and, in turn, attempting to respond to), the Big Questions.

I shall return to this idea, but for now want to distinguish it from two others, both of which enjoy a certain popularity but which, I believe, are confused, mistaken, or both. The first idea is that both the Big Questions and their answers lead us directly to our qualitative associations with those institutions such as nations, religions, cultures, tribes, etc., with which we (choose to) identify. Rejecting this idea was part of my purpose in distinguishing between qualitative and numerical identity. The second idea is that the resources for posing and responding to the Big Questions are to be found within each of us, by way of some kind of inner contemplation or soul-searching. In this way, we each uncover our own *essential* or *authentic* identities: *who we really are*. The history of philosophy is (figuratively speaking) littered with the corpses of even great philosophers who sought to answer the question “Who am I?”—whether by empirical or purely intellectual means—by looking *inward*. More troubling is the fashionable tendency of some to advocate such an approach in response to the view that society (however defined) has lost its way and has nothing more to offer.

Distinguishing between quantitative and qualitative interpretations of “Who am I?” allows us to make sense of viewpoints that would otherwise be difficult to decipher. In his short but compelling book *On Identity*, Stan Grant, in the words of one commentator cited on the back cover, “argues that it is time to leave identity behind and embrace cosmopolitanism” [20]. Reading the book, we see Grant rallying against theories of identity that “identify” him as Black, indigenous, Aboriginal, a member of the Noonga (or any other) tribe, Christian, . . . . In my terminology, he is rejecting—correctly—that the answer to the question “Who am I?” can be given in *qualitative* terms. He cites numerous examples, both historical and contemporary, in which the unifying power of identity, defined in terms of race, skin color, ethnicity, tribe, religion, and nationality, has led to division and violence. He does not, however, reject the idea that he is strongly connected to others, including his immediate and more distant ancestors, but also to writers such as Keats and Baldwin with whose prose and poetry he shares a strong feeling of empathy. In agreeing with Sen’s rejection of “singular affiliation” (or “solitarist identity” in his terms, p. 79), Grant endorses the concept of “our shared humanity” which can be understood as the overriding quality which unites all of us or, equivalently, seeing ourselves as belonging to multiple identity groups, with the result that any two individuals will be “identical” with respect to some quality or other. Add to this endorsement his focus on relationships based on *love (agape)* and *freedom*—qualities which transcend qualitative identity boundaries—and the idea that Grant is advocating a form of cosmopolitanism looks increasingly appealing.

However, I believe that there is another way to interpret what Grant is trying to articulate in relation to identity—which is just as well because whatever virtues cosmopolitanism has, providing an answer to the identity question “Who am I?” is not one of them. In saying this, I am interpreting cosmopolitanism as the view that our shared humanity or personhood comes from our common membership of one world or “cosmos”—which is a long way from specifying who *I* actually am. However, this kind of extended collectivism is not the only way to understand what is meant by declaring that we are all persons, and does not provide an adequate answer to the question of identity. We need to return to the idea that this answer can be given in *quantitative* terms, summarized as follows: “By thus identifying myself as one particular person—*this* person—among other persons and other objects in the world, I have, thereby, specified my own identity”. I determine my own identity by locating myself as *one among others*, where the notion of determination here is more akin to that of *discovery* than construction. Moreover, while my identity as a person has many significant implications—morally, epistemologically, and so on—this is more about what *being a person* amounts to than about identity *per se*. To reiterate my earlier conclusion, the identity (i.e., identification and re-identification) of *any* object that we experience amounts to our ability to pick *it* out as an object of a particular kind, among both other objects of that kind and objects of different kinds.

My contention is that Grant would willingly accept the distinction between quantitative and qualitative identity, and agree that it is the former, rather than the latter, which comes closest to answering the identity question “Who am I?” After insisting that “Identity [read *qualitative* identity] does not liberate; it binds”, he continues: “Yet the French offer escape. They have another word which is a counterpoint to identity: *altérité*. It describes the self and the other. This what I choose to see when I gaze into the mirror, when I look on the faces of *my* children” [20] (p. 25). Grant cites Edouard Glissant’s notion of the “poetics of relation” whereby persons belong to inter-connected networks of relationships akin to “a creole garden” in horticultural terms. Later he asserts that “I will not be anything that does not include *my* grandmother, *my* wife, *my* ancestors”. We see here an implicit recognition that my own identity is tied up with my relationships to specific others (where the latter begin with those closest to me but can be extended over time and space to include friends, acquaintances, colleagues, and distant others). To reiterate the outcome of my earlier inquiry into the nature of identity, these relationships cannot be reduced in qualitative terms, because they include an essential deictic component, as indicated in the highlighted term “my” in the above comments by Grant. I grant that among those individuals who participate in such relationships, some may constitute families, communities and other groups or collectives. But my identity is bound up with the relationships, not with the groups; indeed, the latter are more or less incidental to the question of who I am.

The shift from qualitative to quantitative identity yields an alternative to prevailing socio-political theories about “identity”, including collectivist, individualist and even cosmopolitan. Seeing myself as *one among others* with whom I am related experientially—rather than qualitatively—allows each person to focus on these relationships, extend them, and reach out to others with genuine compassion, care and empathy. It allows us to resist the tribal tendency to “identify” exclusively with members of this or that group which can so easily lead to excluding others as persons altogether. The problem here is with the exclusivity, not the identifying. I do not reject the notion that some individuals find meaning, comfort and support in identifying with certain groups. If patriotism is about feeling love for, or pride in, one’s country and its citizens (likewise, one’s culture), then it is, to that extent, morally innocuous. However, problems emerge when we take a *moral* stand on such identification, by believing that one’s own nation is superior to others (this can be termed “nationalism”). Earlier, I argued that answering the question “Who am I?” puts each of us in a position to ask and respond to the Big Questions. What I am rejecting here is the idea that identifying with this or that nation, religion, ethnicity, tribe or culture binds us to the moral values or norms of these groups. This is what I meant by suggesting that one’s identification in this sense commits us to answering the Big Questions in pre-determined ways which do not respect individuals’ capacity or freedom to think for themselves.

The *cosmopolitan* idea that we are all connected as “global citizens” of a common world or cosmos may seem to avoid the problems associated with a tribal or collectivist mentality. However, it, too, does not provide a strong foundation for what I am referring to as *personhood*. Persons see themselves and others as bound up in relationships of various kinds (including morally-laden relationships, but also affective and physical ones). These relationships link us both to one another and to the world itself and, to the extent that there are no qualitative barriers preventing us from forming relationships with specific types or groups of other persons, they can be viewed as open-ended. Still, the very concreteness of these relationships—they characterize our experiences over space and time—is a key feature that is hard to capture in a framework in which we are all related, simply by being part of a universal cosmos.

## 6. The Principle of Personal Worth

There is something appealing about Taylor’s idea that the question “Who am I?” challenges those who ask it to articulate, or at least search for, their orientation in “moral space”. Suppose we think of this moral space in broad terms, as the moral framework that we all share, in virtue of our being moral beings, i.e., persons. Building on this thought leads, inevitably, to clarifying what *being a person* amounts

to, and how, as persons, we negotiate those questions and puzzles—including morality—which we deem of importance.

I have argued that the identity conditions for persons, however they are to be specified in detail, cannot be given in purely qualitative terms, where the qualities in question include the various collectives, associations and institutions with which persons commonly identify. In thus loosening the hold that these entities have on our very existence, I propose that we also move to separate issues of morality in relation to persons from whatever moral demands or requirements are bound up with these collective entities. This separation is reflected in what I term “the Principle of Personal Worth” (PPW), which asserts that *persons are more important, valuable and worthy, morally speaking, than non-persons*. My target here is not ordinary objects like tables, mobile phones and even most non-human living creatures; rather it is those constructs which are, in some sense, constituted by, but “larger than” persons. (The plausible idea that the identity criteria for human persons are grounded in a biological concept such as *Homo sapiens*—whereby this term would count as a sortal—does not entail that *person* and *human being* are equivalent concepts. For one thing, if persons are linked to such features as language, rationality and a moral sense, there might be non-human persons—aliens, “AI”, dolphins, chimpanzees, for example—on the other hand, there might be humans who do not count as persons—human embryos and those who live in some kind of permanent vegetative state, for example. Such possibilities depend, in part, on empirical findings and are, morally speaking, somewhat contentious.) Think, again, of nations, religions, ethnicities and races, gender and sexuality groups, tribes, clans, cults, cultures, gangs, and other associations, collectives and institutions. PPW rejects the idea that these collective entities possess a moral status that is superior to that of the persons which constitute them. According to this popular but mistaken idea, nation states are morally superior to individual citizens, and tribes, gangs and even cultures are morally superior to their individual members. Such a “collectivist” mentality is often held up against a strongly “individualist” or “neo-liberal” one whereby each person regards his/her own interests and well-being as morally superior to those of everyone else. Fortunately, these two extremes are not the only possibilities.

PPW offers guidance on several contentious issues. In Australia, same-sex marriage legislation was passed in 2017, but the issue of religious *versus* individual freedom remains a political football, especially in light of the recent federal election result (which saw the conservative party re-elected, against all predictions). PPW exposes such concepts as *religious freedom* when its defenders are more concerned with safe-guarding institutional “rights” over the rights of individuals, especially when those individuals are relatively powerless (e.g., children and members of sexual/gender minorities). The only plausible basis for discrimination on grounds of sexuality would be if *disallowing* discrimination (by compelling faith-based schools to admit gay or transgender students, say) causes *more* harm to actual persons—or harm to *more actual* people—than the discrimination itself. It is difficult to see how this could be. (The issue involving homosexual teachers is more complicated, since it may be seen as a more direct attack on freedom of religion. Still, the proverbial “elephant in the room” here is an issue that our pluralistic and allegedly open-minded society needs to engage with in a spirit of mutual respect and humility, namely, the moral (not just religious) basis on which enlightened and reasonable people can continue to condemn a sexual orientation or practice *other than* by appealing to ancient texts and proclamations.) The same point holds with respect to such socio-historical entities as cultures and traditions in general. The child who asks why he or she must conform to a particular practice or tradition should not be satisfied with being told that “This is what we do; it’s part of our culture”. This factual response does not serve to *justify* why individuals must continue to conform.

PPW offers a response to recent incarnations of the so-called “culture wars” or “clash of civilizations”. The writer Douglas Murray, in his book *The Strange Death of Europe: Immigration, Identity, Islam*, laments what he sees as the loss (“death”) of European culture due to the recent surge of refugees and asylum seekers from the Middle East and North Africa, many of whom happen to be Muslims [21]. A similar example is cited in a paper published in this special issue, in relation to local council elections in Malta: “Reality struck with some Maltese when they realized that in some



towns, there are more non-Maltese voters entitled to vote in the local council elections than Maltese. One candidate expressed this reality as ‘shocking’, pointing out that ‘becoming a minority in your own country is quite shocking. It will mean degradation of our identity, languages, culture and values’” [22].

There is little doubt that large-scale immigration changes the cultural environment of the host society; indeed, the US and Australia (among other countries), with their histories of migration from many parts of the world, are living testaments to such change, as well as to the many mutual benefits it has wrought. It is quite legitimate for a government, on behalf of its citizens, to insist on certain legal requirements for those who wish to live there, but the law, like morality, should be directed primarily at individuals and their behaviour, not at (all members of) specific cultures, religions, races or ethnicities. Responding to Murray’s concerns about the death of European culture, it is morally dubious to suggest that preserving a culture is more important than saving individual lives. In any case, what constitutes *preservation* of a culture, as opposed to merely *changing* it? As we explore such issues, we begin to realize that collectivist concepts such as *culture* are not at all well-defined, and that attempts to characterise ourselves (persons) as essentially *culturally embedded* can lead to an overly fragile and impoverished understanding of *who* we really are.

One further example of a violation of PPW, which has exacerbated much of the current political turmoil in the USA, is the passing, by the Supreme Court in 2010, of the “Citizens United vs. Federal Election Commission” law which states that “Political spending is a form of protected speech under the First Amendment, and the government may not keep corporations or unions from spending money to support or denounce individual candidates in elections.” In short, corporations are persons for the purpose of making contributions to political parties. However, this makes a mockery of the very concept of a person and has given a few wealthy and partisan donors enormous power when it comes to driving the agendas of particular parties.

These examples illustrate a widespread tendency to *inflate* the moral significance of collectives and institutions in relation to those individuals who constitute them. The Principle of Personal Worth serves as a reminder that moral norms and judgments are, first and foremost, about the well-being of actual persons.

PPW is not an endorsement of the kind of individualistic conception of the self that has so often been linked to the Western capitalist model of social and economic life. Indeed, such a conception turns out, somewhat ironically, to be not all that different from the collectivist model in which persons are viewed, in both moral and ontological terms, as members of, or affiliated with, such entities as nations, religions, tribes, etc. In the capitalist model, the individual becomes an *institution* in his (!) own right.

Why should we accept PPW? It is difficult to deny when comparing persons with such objects as rocks and insects (which is why we refer to the latter as “objects” in the first place). But how do we compare the moral value or worth of persons with that of the groups and institutions to which they belong? To understand the special status of persons, we need to identify those characteristics or qualities which are unique to them. One clue here is that we human persons have the ability to ask and deliberate on such moral questions as “Why should I do this?” or even “Are persons more valuable than non-persons?” In short, we possess such qualities as *reflectivity*, *rationality* and *agency*. As Taylor puts it, “... rationality imposes obligations on us. Because we have this status which is incomparably higher than anything else in nature, we have the obligation to live up to it.” [15] (p. 365) and, we might add, the moral rights associated with it. This ability, in turn, is linked to several others which may or may not be distinctively human but are, I contend, distinctive of persons: most notably, our linguistic abilities and our capacity for self-awareness. In short, we bestow a moral value on beings with these characteristics that is above and beyond that attached to those which lack them. (I make this point somewhat warily, bearing in mind the ongoing struggle of those with disabilities—including intellectual and emotional—to be regarded, and treated, with *respect*, that is, as persons. Schechtman has appealed to such examples—specifically, individuals with dementia or living in a permanent vegetative state—to defend a conception of persons in terms of having “a characteristic kind of life” which connects our own lives with the lives of others, not necessarily in symmetric terms. Accordingly,

grandpa, who may no longer function as a rational agent, is still a person because he remains connected to other persons through the love, affection and memories they have of him [14]).

The idea that persons are those beings which possess rationality, self-awareness, agency, language and moral sensibility resonates with both our ordinary beliefs about persons and (most) mainstream philosophical conceptions of personhood. Moreover, these qualities apply, first and foremost, to *individual* persons (each of whom regards herself as one among others) and, only derivatively (if at all), to such artefacts and constructs as nations, religions, corporations and cultures.

## 7. Personhood and Moral Education

I need to emphasise that linking personhood, conceptually speaking, to morality, leaves open those contentious questions which constitute the philosophical domain of *normative ethics*. Accordingly, I am not offering a view on the relative merits of deontological, utilitarian, virtue-based or other ethical theories. It is not just that this domain lies outside the scope of my concerns here, but that it lies outside the scope of moral *education* (as distinct from education in moral philosophy) itself. Somewhat ironically, this is just as well, because if proposing and implementing a practical framework for moral education required settlement of—or even negotiation over—philosophical issues that remain deeply contestable after several thousand years of deliberation, then the prospects of moving forward on moral education would be dismal indeed. I have proposed that being aware of ourselves and others as persons commits us to take seriously what I have called “The Big Questions”. Accordingly, in so far as formal education can be construed as a form of *personal development*, one of its major commitments is to empower young people, in terms of their requisite knowledge, skills and dispositions, to construct and respond to such questions themselves (albeit not necessarily *by* themselves). Granted, such empowerment might include an awareness of those values and commitments with which various cultural, religious or national traditions have been associated but—to repeat a point made repeatedly above—one’s own personhood extends beyond merely adopting (or rejecting) such traditions.

A key concept which warrants careful treatment here is that of *community*. In brief, there are communities and there are *communities*, and the differences matter a great deal. At one extreme, we find so-called communities which function as “identity” groups, binding their members to a predetermined understanding of who they are and what is important to them. I am thinking here of national, religious, ethnic and even cultural communities. It is this limiting sense of *community* that I have rejected as a basis for our conceptions of personhood and morality. At the other extreme, we find relatively innocuous uses of the term “community” which claims to embrace all those who share properties, such as geographical locality, scholarly or cultural interests, etc. Finally, there is the kind of community which emphasizes the value of each member, in the context of their relationships to one another. Indeed, we can say that such a community is *no greater than the sum of its parts or members*. It is this third sense of *community* that forms the basis of a meaningful and genuine framework for education in general and moral education in particular. (All forms of education are normative or value-laden, and the values in question are bound to be *contestable*. By placing a particular conception of *person* at the heart of the educational process, I am deliberately endorsing such values as *thinking for oneself as one among others*, which lies between individualistic autonomy, on the one hand, and collectivism or “group-think”, on the other. Still, both teachers and students should have the opportunity to engage such questions as “What constitutes (good) education?”, in a spirit of communal inquiry.)

Enabling and encouraging young people to regard themselves as *one among others*—where “others” refers both to other persons and to the world more generally—is a key imperative. Two aspects of “otherness” need to be respected here: first, that although we understand *the other* in terms of “other than oneself”, we acknowledge the intrinsic *inter-dependence* in both epistemological and moral terms; secondly, that at least in theoretical terms, *the other* is *anyone* other than oneself, regardless of particular group affiliations and identifications. In practice, schools, classrooms and other teaching and learning environments can be constructed as *communities of thinkers* in which a strong sense of safety and inclusiveness is inbuilt because its members value the inter-connectedness that is represented by being

*one among others*. In contrast to many real-world communities which function along more narrow tribal lines, this kind of community need have no agenda or historical tradition which extends beyond that of its actual members. Accordingly, its borders are transparent and open, with no sense that those on the outside are somehow “excluded”. (The idea that schools and classrooms should function as *communities of thinkers* (or *inquirers*) supports the case for *public* education in which students from many cultural and socio-economic backgrounds are brought together in an environment of communal inquiry which is, ideally, free of any predetermined commitment to a specific institution (religion, state, etc.). Whether individual states—which fund public schooling—are willing to support this idea is another matter.) Also noteworthy here is the realization that being in a *safe* environment actually encourages *risk-taking*, because its members know that they are protected from harm. Obvious examples include shy children who choose to speak up, someone who is prepared to defend her viewpoint against the majority, and those who are willing to back down, rethink or change their minds when given good reasons for doing so.

The idea of being, and being aware of oneself as being, *one among others*, is key to the kind of community which, I am suggesting, constitutes a strong framework for education. However, this idea presupposes that as persons, our own self-awareness is intrinsically linked to our awareness of other persons who are, themselves, self-aware. This “network of mutual awareness” is made possible by what is, arguably, the single most important hallmark of personhood: our capacity to communicate with another through *language*. Moreover, in the context of building and sustaining communities of thinkers, we need to give particular emphasis to those forms of language which, somewhat paradoxically, receive inadequate attention in schools and classrooms. Here, I share one analytic philosopher’s reverence for one particular aspect of the Western philosophical canon:

Writing may portray, but cannot *constitute*, the intersubjective exchanges in which meanings are created and firmed. Socrates was right: reading is not enough. If we want to approach the harder wisdom we must talk and, of course, listen. [23] (p. 432)

Needless to say, there is talking and then there is *talking*. The Socratic tradition to which Davidson has alluded invokes not just the everyday activity of conversation which is rarely held accountable to particular cognitive or intellectual standards. Social media platforms which encourage rapid, superficial, unreflective exchanges—or even one-way flows of information—constitute a new paradigm of exchange, not just for casual conversations among “friends”, but for transmitting high-stakes socio-political material to large numbers of people. However, given the inter-dependence of thinking and conversation, we may reasonably expect that higher-level (what I term “powerful”) thinking—thinking which is: self-aware, generates sound judgments based on well-grounded criteria, imaginative, well-reasoned, considerate . . . —both generates and *is generated by* powerful talking. For too long, schools have treated conversation as the poor cousin among the skills of literacy, partly because it is assumed that children arrive at school already able to speak, and partly because reading and writing are more closely intertwined with a pre-determined curriculum and traditional modes of teaching and assessment.

I use the terms “inquiry” to refer to powerful thinking and “dialogue” to refer to powerful talking, although I am aware that both terms have been used in a variety of ways in different contexts. I am particularly interested in the idea that if a society can find ways to integrate its everyday modes of communication with dialogue, then it stands a much better chance of functioning as a genuine democracy (assuming that familiar democratic structures concerning free elections, etc. are in place) than if it labels dialogue as characterising an elite or privileged minority. This idea is not aimed at destroying or undermining the common-place interactions and narratives that document the course of our ordinary lives; rather, it proposes to elevate them to a higher standard as the need and situation require. Fictional and imaginative narratives for all ages have their place, but when, for example, those in positions of leadership are communicating or engaging with their supporters or followers, the demand for greater truthfulness and consistency regulates the behaviour of both sides: our leaders ought to tell the truth but we, the people, must be prepared to hold them to account.

Formal education can play a crucial part in helping young people *become persons* by cultivating environments which are characterized by certain forms of affective, moral and social engagement, on the one hand, and by the reflective practices of powerful talking and powerful thinking, on the other. (By linking formal education to personal development, I am implying that becoming a “full” person is not an inevitable fact of life, but is, itself, a normative process that may admit of varying degrees of success or completion.) Such environments are termed “communities of thinkers”, “communities of dialogue”, or “communities of inquiry (coi)”. (The term “community of inquiry” has its origins in Pragmatist philosophy and is a central structural component in the Philosophy for Children movement. More generally, the coi constitutes an appropriate environment for teaching and learning in any subject area that can be constructed and presented to students as genuinely puzzling or problematic, not just as content to be “learned”. See Splitter [24,25].) The attributes of a coi are taught and learned both directly—by focusing on explicit strategies for questioning, argumentation and reasoning, for example—and indirectly—by modelling and reflecting on dialogue that both communicates and generates the thinking of the community. Inherent in dialogue is that form of *scaffolding* which allows participants to “stand back” from, and reflect, not just on the subject under consideration, but on the quality of our thinking about that subject (“Are you saying that . . . ?”; “What follows from what she said?”; “Does anyone disagree with/have a counter-example to what he is proposing?” . . . ).

I am proposing that immersing young people into communities of inquiry in which they explore and construct the boundaries of their personhood by way of their reflective relationships with others is, arguably, the most effective way of preparing them for the kind of mastery in and of their own narratives that guarantees genuine agency, in affective, intellectual and moral terms. A key component of mastery in this sense is *good judgement*, including the determination to evaluate the narratives that are presented to and of them by others (bearing in mind that we construct our narratives; they do not construct us). I draw attention to two related aspects of judgement which have particular resonance with the main themes of this paper. First, reiterating Davidson’s admonition, we must not only talk but *listen*, where listening is both skills-based and, more importantly, a certain disposition or determination: to take seriously the voice of the other as someone who is *worth* listening to because he/she is, like me, a *person*. We may protest that those who have been swept up in the current wave of tribalistic populism are not prepared to listen to anyone who challenges their own narrative, but we can, perhaps, do more to bridge the gap by being prepared to listen to *them*. Secondly, acknowledging the futility of talking and listening to those who can never admit that they might be mistaken—or worse, are indifferent with respect to matters of truth or falsehood—we, young and old, need to cultivate a deep sense of *intellectual humility*. As Davidson has pointed out, crucial to our capacity to use language meaningfully is the meta-belief that our beliefs might be wrong, and our concepts wrongly applied [26] (p. 124). Acknowledgement of our fallibility is built into the very idea of powerful thinking, otherwise called “inquiry”. It might seem unrealistic to think that what counts as political or civic discourse in the real world could be accountable to the norms of inquiry, but we need to think ahead here and imagine what such discourse might be like if all those involved had internalized such norms from a young age. Further, as before, we can take ourselves as test cases: are we prepared to accept that on a range of matters over which there is clear discord and lack of consensus, we just might be wrong?

## 8. Concluding Comment: Seeking Something beyond “Our Little Selves”

A common refrain among commentators (including William James and communitarians such as MacIntyre, Taylor and Sandel) who oppose individualism as a moral or spiritual basis on which to view and respond to the Big Questions is that we persons need to believe or, at least, to feel, that there is something “bigger than” our own selves. This need has, since the beginnings of recorded history, fed a range of narratives, both religious and secular, whose primary purpose is to bind together, or unify, distinct individuals in some kind of common pursuit. In responding to this line of thinking, we need to tread cautiously. On the one hand, as I have indicated earlier, individualism, whether viewed as the self-centered pursuit of materialistic goals or the inward-looking contemplation of the self, is extremely

problematic. On the other hand, the alternative has often been seen in terms of some-*thing* larger than ourselves, where the *thing* in question tends to divert our sense of moral responsibility into a largely-unquestioned commitment to a religion, state, culture, etc.

In this paper I have defended a relational conception of personhood based on the idea that each person is, and sees herself as, *one among others*. We are embedded in a linked network of relational networks of persons and other objects in the world, some of which might have names—my country, my religion, my sports club, my choir, my school, etc.—but others will not—my close friends, select family members and (some) ancestors, those objects and places I associate with my own history, etc. These networks provide the connections that constitute my life as a person; accordingly, they shape and reshape my responses to the Big Questions as I relate in various ways—including through dialogue—with others. In other words, they shape my life as a moral being. This being said, we persons are—or should be—free to seek out those relationships with others—thereby expanding and enriching our inter-personal networks—which are particularly meaningful to us. For some, their nationality or religion might constitute such a network; for others, their friendship or family circle might do so. In any case, what matters here is that these networks are not reducible to specific qualities which bind us, in terms of identity and morality, to specific institutions. We enter into these relational networks as persons, even as these same relationships expand and deepen our sense of our own personhood. In this way, we can certainly see ourselves as connected to something “bigger than” ourselves, but not at the cost of “losing” ourselves in the process.

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