

Identity and Difference

Rafael Winkler
Editor

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Contemporary Debates on the Self

palgrave
macmillan

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Johannesburg, South Africa

ISBN 978-3-319-40426-4

ISBN 978-3-319-40427-1 (eBook)

DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-40427-1

Library of Congress Control Number: 2016949041

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Printed on acid-free paper

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by Springer Nature

The registered company is Springer International Publishing AG

The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

Reconsidering Identity and Difference in the Debate on the Self

The intellectual landscape of the humanities has since the 1960s been overshadowed by the question of identity and difference—political and national identity, ethnic and racial identity, gender identity and, in philosophy, the question of the identity of the self and of the knowing, acting and desiring subject. This is partly due to the social, cultural and political upheavals experienced in different parts of the globe at the time, for example, the movement of decolonization in sub-Saharan Africa, the Civil Rights Movement in the USA or second-wave feminism. It is also due to the emergence of a new intellectual orientation in French philosophy in the 1960s. Suspicious, on the one hand, of the claim made by the philosophies of the subject (particularly by existentialism and phenomenology) that the identity of the subject, although not given or natural, is self-constituted, and of the claim made by structuralism in linguistics, anthropology and psychoanalysis that there are invariable structures that govern human life, on the other, a certain unity of perspective or commonality of outlook emerged among various French thinkers such as Deleuze, Derrida and Foucault, to name but a few, which overturned one of the most long-standing beliefs in Western thought. This is that difference (or variation) is not to be derived from or understood on the basis of a prior identity (or structure) but, rather, that identity—whether the identity of a singular or collective subject, of the self or of a people—is a product of differential relations.

This shift of perspective has had significant implications in the discourse on the self, agency and subjectivity in narrative theory, phenomenology, personal identity theory, politics, anthropology, feminism, cultural, race and postcolonial studies. This book explores the contemporary effect of this shift of perspective in the debate on the self in four parts: Narrative Theory and Phenomenology; Politics, Authenticity and Agency; Feminism; and Race and the Postcolonial.

Part I of the book, Narrative Theory and Phenomenology, focuses on the contemporary discourse on the self in narrative theory and phenomenology. A brief glance at the discourse on the self in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries will quickly show that the 'self' is said and thought in many ways. For some, such as logical positivists, behaviourists and, more recently, eliminative materialists, the notion of the 'self' or 'person' (using these terms interchangeably for now) does not pick out a real category in the world and plays no role in the explanation of human nature. For more recent analytic philosophy, by contrast, personhood is recognized as being crucial for our social, moral and cultural life, and the person is regarded as having intrinsic worth. In addition, recent work in cognitive science has adopted the idea of the embodied, extended, embedded and enactive self, whereas phenomenology since Edmund Husserl, Max Scheler and Edith Stein has focused not only on the personal nature of the self but also on its historical and transcendental character. These multiple ways in which the concept of the self is used calls for an account of its historical origin and of the variation of its senses in the history of Western thought. This is the task that Dermot Moran undertakes in [Chapter 1](#), 'The Personal Self in the Phenomenological Tradition'. Moran traces the development of the concept of the self and person from ancient Greek thought to Kant and beyond with a particular focus on the phenomenological tradition and narrative theory.

Narrative theories of personal identity standardly rely on the belief that there are good reasons for drawing comparisons between literary characters and persons. They draw such comparisons to illustrate their thesis that we constitute our personal identity through the narrative by which we understand ourselves. However, there has been a surge of criticisms in the past decade against making such comparisons. In his contribution to this volume, 'Persons, Characters, and the meaning of

“Narrative”, Alfonso Muñoz-Corcuera considers these criticisms and proposes a new defence of narrative theories of personal identity. David Mitchell tackles the problem of self-deception in ‘What Does Self-Deception Tell Us About the Self? A Sartrean perspective’. This is a particularly vexing problem in psychology and phenomenology inasmuch as both disciplines sometimes rely on a common Cartesian heritage concerning the transparency of the mind or self-consciousness. Is it not the case that the self must know that it is deceiving itself about something? Must it not know that the lie it tells itself *is* a lie? How, then, is self-deception possible? Mitchell critically examines the Freudian and deflationary accounts of self-deception and shows them to be wanting. He turns to Sartre to account for the possibility of self-deception and argues that it reveals the self to be stranger than we tend to think.

The question concerning the nature of authenticity and agency in the context of political and ethical action and behaviour is currently a fiercely debated topic in the discourse on the self in both popular and academic literature. This is the theme of Part II. Such phrases as ‘I wasn’t myself’ or the call ‘Be yourself!’ suggest that there is a difference between the ‘I’ and the ‘self’ and that in order to have an authentic relationship to oneself this internal difference must be eliminated. Indeed, is not authenticity in this sense at the heart of the political, moral and social doctrine of individualism? It is also apparent in Cartesian rationalism, particularly in the First Meditation of the *Meditations on First Philosophy* in which the reader is asked to withdraw from the authority of tradition and that of the senses in order to return to its true inner self, which is reason. In ‘Being My-Self? Montaigne on Difference and Identity’, Vincent Caudron turns to Michel de Montaigne and Pierre Charron to examine their account of authentic selfhood. Caudron argues that Montaigne’s *Essays* and Charron’s *On Wisdom* offer a particularly stringent critique of individualism (and of Cartesianism) in that the internal difference between the ‘I’ and the ‘self’ is not an obstacle to but a necessary condition for authenticity.

The question of authenticity is, in the conceptuality of Western thought, closely associated with the question of agency. What conditions must someone satisfy in order to count as an agent? Within the Kantian tradition, self-consciousness is typically understood as a capacity to be reflectively responsive to reasons and to have an objective self-conception, that is,

a self-narrative or practical identity in the world to which we commit ourselves. Working within this Kantian tradition, David Velleman and Christine Korsgaard both maintain that self-consciousness in this sense is a necessary and sufficient condition for agency. They distinguish this model of self-consciousness, which is specifically human, from first-personal awareness, which they believe can be ascribed to some non-human animals too. In 'Specifically Human? The Limited Conception of Self-Consciousness in Theories of Reflective Endorsement', Irene Bucelli questions this distinction between self-consciousness and first-personal awareness. Bucelli argues that first-personal awareness is already specifically human inasmuch as it involves a relation of self-reference (or a sense of ownership) that does not entail the objective notion of a person and that can also not be attributed to animals, and, moreover, that an objective self-conception is not simply added on to this specifically human first-personal awareness but, rather, that it thoroughly modifies it.

Authenticity and agency, which are two particular ways of thinking about the identity of the self—whether as something given or achieved, as something natural or self-posed—are in turn connected with the question of the identity of the human being. Is there an 'essence' to the human being? In other words, does philosophical anthropology have a stable, identifiable, invariably fixed object of study? In 'Making the Case for Political Anthropology: Understanding and Resolving the Backlash Against Liberalism', Rockwell F. Clancy analyses the contemporary backlash against multiculturalism, cosmopolitanism and, more generally, inclusive liberal values—visible, for instance, in forms of political conservatism and religious fundamentalism. This backlash, Clancy argues, can be understood as resulting from the abandonment of a philosophico-political anthropology by liberalism, that is, of a determinate conception of human nature and, correlatively, of the human good or the good life for man. Yet is it possible, indeed, is it even desirable to operate without a conception of human nature and of the human good in political theory? Clancy demonstrates that it is neither possible nor desirable. He proposes a conception of a philosophico-political anthropology that develops an account of the relations between the individual and the community that are characterized not by the exclusive particularism of fundamentalism and conservatism but, rather, by the inclusive particularism characteristic of the

materialist doctrines of Spinoza, Deleuze and Latour among others. A materialist and non-essentialist conception of human nature, in other words, might help resolve the backlash against liberalism and serve as a critical foundation and instrument for progressive political theories.

Part III turns to feminism, the field that without doubt has been the most responsive to the shift of outlook experienced in the late 1960s in the humanities, notably, the prioritization of difference over identity in the discourse on the (gendered) subject. Post-structuralist authors such as Derrida, Deleuze, Foucault, Lyotard and others have each in their own unique way demonstrated the limited, conditioned if not fictitious nature of the modern (Kantian) notion of the subject conceived as a sovereign, self-unifying subject that legislates to itself norms of truth and action. This notion of the subject has proven to be inadequate in the face of the experience of our subjectivity that has come to mark our 'postmodernity'. This is an experience of being decentred rather than unified, of heteronomy rather than of autonomy, an experience of our subjectivity as being in flux. In 'The Decentred Autonomous Subject', Kathy Butterworth considers the effects of this critical appraisal of the modern subject by post-structuralism for feminism. Butterworth contends that it has given rise, on the one hand, to an anti-essentialist thinking in feminist theory, something that ought to be preserved, yet, on the other, this critique has also given rise to a celebration of the fragmented self, which raises serious psychological and political concerns for feminism. In the first place, some post-structuralist authors for whom the fragmented self constitutes a positive and normative model generally tend to underestimate the real psychological costs on people who suffer from psychotic disorders such as schizophrenia, people who suffer from a fragmentation of self. It is also, in the second place, not always clear how such a model can be used to challenge the oppressive structures of patriarchy and capitalism. To this end, Butterworth considers Ricoeur's model of the subject, which, she argues, retains the central insights of the post-structuralist critique of the modern subject whilst being responsive to the psychological costs on people who suffer from a fragmentation of selfhood. She argues that this model can best serve as a critical tool for feminist theory.

Another key concern in feminist theory is the differential power of the erotic, understood as the necessary condition of possibility of the body's

ambiguous nature, its being at once an object for others and a subject for itself. In 'Exploring Rape as an Attack on Erotic Goods', Louise du Toit argues that patriarchy appropriates the healing, constructive, and liberating power of the erotic through perversions and distortions, through mystifications and phantasies such as the idea that it is necessary to 'overcome' one's flesh in order to be an authentic subject. Du Toit considers this in the context of the question of what is sexual about sexual violence, how a sexual attack differs from non-sexual forms of physical attacks. She argues that the patriarchal framing of sexual attacks not only reduces the human erotic to sexuality; it also robs the victims of sexual attacks of the subjectivity of their body.

In the wake of Luce Irigaray's work on sexuate difference and intersubjectivity, a key issue in feminist theory has been whether an ethics of sexual difference in the current global context is possible. Can a universal, and not simply a local or context-dependent, ethics of sexual difference be articulated? In 'Making Mischief: Thinking Through Women's Solidarity and Sexuate Difference with Luce Irigaray and Gayatri Spivak', Laura Roberts considers these questions. She analyses how Spivak has mobilized Irigaray's work on sexuate difference to address women's solidarity and teases out what this might suggest about the possibility of cross-cultural communication between and among women.

Part IV turns to the question of identity and difference in the discourse on the self in the context of race and postcolonial studies. In 'The "Africanness" of white South Africans?', Sharli Paphitis and Lindsay-Ann Kelland explore the way South African philosophers have started to pay attention to whiteness, 'whiteness' and the role of white South Africans in political processes and transformation in South Africa. In particular, they examine the questioning of Africanness on the part of white South Africans, and hence with the way white South Africans have been dealing with the question of belonging to and of being at home in their South African environment. In 'Alterity, Identity, and Racial Difference in Levinas', Louis Blond critically assesses the charges that have been brought against Levinas' philosophy and ethics of alterity by some of the scholarship in postcolonial theory and identity politics. Postcolonial theory claims that Levinas' deployment of alterity

suppresses the materiality and historicity of social and political others and in so doing denies the ethnic and racial makeup—the embodiment—of other identities. Louis examines Levinas' understanding of alterity and identity and considers the claim that Levinas' philosophical position licenses the subdual of racial and ethnic difference.

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Acknowledgements

The idea of this book was first conceived at the annual international conference of the Centre for Phenomenology in South Africa (CPSA) on the topic of identity and difference at the University of Johannesburg, South Africa, on 27–29 March 2015. I would like to thank the co-organizers of the conference, Prof Abraham Olivier and Dr Rianna Oelofsen, the members of the CPSA, including Dr Catherine Botha, and the members of the Department of Philosophy at the University of Johannesburg, including Prof Thad Metz, Prof Hennie Lötter, Prof Veli Mitova, Prof Alex Broadbent, Dr Ben Smart, Ms Zinhle Mncube, Mr Chad Harris and Mr Asheel Singh, for having made it possible for this collection to see the light of day. I would also like to thank the contributors to this volume for bearing with my frequent emails and demands over the course of this last year. I owe a special thanks to Mr David Scholtz, who assisted me with the production and preparation of this volume with his meticulousness and eye for detail.

This book is dedicated to the two centres of gravity in my life, Mira and Salomé, to whom I owe more than I am capable of giving.

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