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Notes toward the definition of 'identity'

The extremity of 'identity' politics in many parts of the globe during the last few decades has given rise to widespread use of the term 'identity' as well as to a glamorous theoretical interest in the concept. However, there has been little clarity or rigor in its theoretical deployment. This brief essay will make a very small effort at correcting that.

My main concern will be how we use 'identity' in the context of identity politics, not how the word surfaces in discussions of metaphysics, about which philosophers have already produced a flourishing and interesting literature. In politics, when we say an individual has a certain identity, we mean that he belongs to a certain type relevant to what we commonly call 'identity politics.'

For some years now, in various essays, I have tried to impose some theoretical order on the concept by distinguishing at the outset between the 'subjective'

and 'objective' aspects of identity.¹ Your subjective identity is what you *conceive* yourself to be, whereas your objective identity is how you might be viewed *independently* of how you see yourself. In other words, your objective identity is who you are in light of certain biological or social *facts* about you.

Of course, subjective identity and objective identity are often closely related. It is neither routine nor plausible, at least in a political sense, to conceive of yourself as something you manifestly are not. Could I, born of Indian parents, think of myself as an African American? I suppose I could. One can imagine all sorts of things that go beyond reality. But since we are interested in the notion of identity in the realm of identity politics, we would be sensible to put aside self-conceptions that amount to fantasies.²

1 I spell out the distinction in detail in Akeel Bilgrami, "Identity," in *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*, ed. Neil J. Smelser and Paul B. Baltes (New York: Elsevier, 2001). Before that I had written about the distinction in a slightly different vocabulary, as the 'first person' point of view and the 'third person,' or detached, point of view, in Akeel Bilgrami, "What Is a Muslim?" *Critical Inquiry* 18 (4) (Summer 1992).

2 I don't want to push this too far, however. People do imagine themselves to have various

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But while the two aspects of identity are closely linked, there can be asymmetry between them. Subjective identity – when it is not mere fantasy – presupposes some proximate objective version of that identity, but not vice versa. For instance, one might be a Jew or an Indian objectively – born to a Jewish mother or to Indian parents – but not identify subjectively as a Jew or an Indian.

It is worth spending time discussing both subjective and objective identities, since they raise very different philosophical issues and ought to be analyzed in very different ways. But before doing so let me quickly register another distinction.

On the question of political identity, one can take either a *normative* angle or a *descriptive* one. A normative perspective asks if it is *good* to have identity or to engage in a politics based on one's cultural, national, racial, or other forms of identity. Much writing about identity politics takes this perspective, with a view to arguing either that identities should not be left out of politics or that infecting poli-

identities, and mobilize themselves politically on that basis. Thus, some group may thoroughly exaggerate its victimhood in the present in order to mobilize an identity in politics. But even here it is presupposed that at some stage they were victims, so it is not entirely made-up and fantastical. I suppose it is also possible that some group completely fabricates an identity in order to make some political capital out of it. I am not saying that one cannot have an identity politics that has only a subjective element with no objective basis whatsoever. I only really want to say that if this happened, we could dismiss the subjective identity *much* more easily than if it were based on something objective. At the very least I want to say that fantasies are not an interesting basis for identity – or perhaps they are *too* interesting to be of relevance to identity politics. Still, I grant that such a politics *could* arise. It cannot be ruled out by mere a priori analysis.

tics with identitarian issues is dangerous and wrong.

By contrast, a descriptive treatment of the subject merely tries to analyze what it means to have an identity in the context of identity politics. Of course, a descriptive angle on identity can observe that those who have a certain subjective identity *themselves* often think that it is a good thing. However, the *theorist* of identity, in taking a descriptive approach to the subject, does not take a position either way. This distinction between the normative and the descriptive is important. Too often, an author's normative stance drives his description of identity, skewing the analysis in one direction or the other. Rather than taking a normative approach to identity politics, this brief essay merely tries to examine 'identity' descriptively.

Identity, in the subjective sense, can be important to politics. It can influence one's allegiances and the manner in which one pursues them or allows oneself to be mobilized. But not all subjective identities are relevant to politics. For instance, I am a cricket lover – and that I am one is part of my self-conception – but, for me, my love for cricket does not play any role in my politics. So politically central self-conceptions will be our focus. However, not even all of one's political self-conceptions are germane to what I mean by 'identity' for the purposes of this essay. You may conceive of yourself as a Democrat in the United States, for example, but still not have a subjective identity in the relevant sense. After all, not all politics is identity politics.³

3 Because all of us conceive of ourselves in various ways that do not make a difference to identity politics, the idea that we have 'multiple' identities (or the slightly different, seemingly more organic idea that we are 'hybrid')

These examples imply that the way one sees oneself – as this or that social, cultural, or political type – is only a *necessary* condition of a political identity, not a sufficient one.⁴ What other conditions might one add to sufficiently characterize the kind of subjective identity important to identity politics?

One such condition might be: *intensely held* self-conceptions, for instance, strongly held commitments to being a Muslim, a Quebecois, etc.

But while intensity is usually typical of the subjective element of identity politics, it is not enough to describe identity in terms of intensity alone. A cocaine addict may have a very intense desire for cocaine but not want to have those cravings. That is, he may be *alienated* from, rather than *identified* with, his desire for cocaine. If this is so, he does not conceive of himself as a cocaine addict, even if he is one. He may have the objective identity of a cocaine addict but not the subjective one.

This example reveals the ambiguity of the expression ‘conceives of oneself.’ In one sense, it can mean ‘being aware that

is too obvious to deny. But, equally, to assert that we have ‘multiple’ identities does not put the conceptual and political difficulties of identities in the public arena to rest. Even those who take a normatively favorable stance toward identity politics, and think that there should be more identity politics, do not deny that all people possess multiple identities. Thus, those who would like to criticize identity politics have to do much more than simply assert that there are multiple identities. I discuss these issues more extensively in the papers mentioned in notes 1 and 10.

4 A note of caution: it may be too ambitious to think that we could give the sufficient conditions of ‘identity,’ or of most social and political concepts. Still, in our efforts to define subjective identity, we could aspire to greater sufficiency than simply saying that it requires one to conceive of oneself in a certain way.

one is a Muslim or Indian or ...’; on the other, it can mean ‘valuing the fact of being a Muslim or Indian or ...’ The latter sense is the relevant one to our discussion of subjective identity. We are looking to see not only if a person is aware of having Islamic tendencies but also if he *values* having them. So subjective identity requires identification with one’s own tendencies.

This implies a distinction between first-order and second-order states of mind. To be alienated from one’s desires is to have desires (such as in our example, the desire for cocaine) at the first-order level that one disapproves of at the second order. In contrast, to be identified with one’s desires means one approves of those desires.⁵ To put it differently, we need to have some kind of *reflective endorsement* of first-order states of mind before we can say we identify with them. It is not enough to like the idea of being a Muslim; one has to, in some sense, approve of liking the idea. If one disapproved of one’s Islamic tendencies, then one would be alienated from one’s mental, moral, and political tendencies and would lack identity in the *subjective* sense.⁶

Politically relevant and intensely held desires that their possessors reflectively endorse – this looks like a good, initial working definition of ‘identity.’⁷ Ac-

5 More fully: Not being alienated from one’s desires need not require one to approve of one’s desires; it may only require that one not disapprove of them. But to actually identify with one’s desires requires approving of them.

6 It is possible to think of those tendencies, in such cases, as constituting one’s objective rather than subjective identity, but I won’t pursue that any further.

7 There is a complication here. Sometimes one’s second-order desires may be quite neurotic and irrational, too. When they are, they

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According to this definition, we might say a Palestinian today, or an Indian in the 1940s, who has strong nationalist first-order political tendencies and reflectively endorses them at the second order, has a Palestinian, or an Indian, identity.

However, those examples, though roughly right, may give the impression that identities in politics are only instrumental, needed only in order to mobilize yourself and others similar to you toward certain ends – national independence, racial equality, gender justice, and so on. And this, in turn, may give the impression that the agents in question think of these identities as intended to last only until they achieve the goals these identities serve.

But not all identities have this merely instrumental role in an agent's psychological economy. Their role in a psycho-

cannot be invoked as revealing what one identifies with or what one is alienated from. Thus, for instance, I may disapprove at the second order of my first-order desire for political activism, but this may be because of a bad experience I once had when I tried my hand at political activity. Let's say the experience scarred me and made me pathologically wary of politics even though all my first-order instincts, tendencies, and values may orient me toward involvement in politics. It is possible that, even from within my value economy, I can see that this second-order disapproval of my first-order politics is irrational. It is interesting to ask, when this happens, whether or not there is a third-order disapproval of the second-order disapproval of the first-order desire for political activity. If one says there is, we are in danger of generating an infinite regress. It may be better to account for the irrationality of a second-order desire by showing it to be irrational not by the lights of a yet higher-order desire but by a failure of coherence between the second-order desire and other desires and values, whether at the second or even the *first* order. To say this, however, is to commit oneself to a coherentism about values and desires that requires very careful explanation.

logical economy may be much more subtle than that. They may, for instance, be a source of dignity and self-respect when one is feeling especially vulnerable; they may be a source of solidarity and belonging when one is feeling alienated from one's social environment; and so on. When they serve much more subtle functions of this kind, it is too crude to describe them by saying that the agents hold these identities instrumentally or temporarily. They may seem to *the agents* to have an *intrinsic* and not instrumental value. *Others* may analyze them by saying, "These identities, even if not explicitly instrumental, as in the case of the Palestinian today or the Indian in the 1940s, are nevertheless serving the function of providing a source of dignity and comfort in a situation of vulnerability and humiliation . . ." But from their *own subjective points of view*, the agents will simply think of these identities in intrinsic terms rather than as serving such functions, and so they will not see them as temporary, lasting only while those functions need to be served. If others are right in their analysis, these identities may well be overturned and revised by the agents in question when these functions cease to be served. But that makes no difference to the fact that, from the agents' own points of view, the identities are quite intrinsic; therefore, in their own minds the identities are conceived as something they ought to hold permanently and without being vulnerable to revision.⁸

How should one capture this element in our analysis of subjective identity?

8 I discuss this phenomenon in the context of present-day Muslim identity in Bilgrami, "What Is a Muslim?" See also my "Occidentalism, The Very Idea: An Essay on Enlightenment and Enchantment," *Critical Inquiry* 32 (Spring 2006).

One can do so by pointing out that some forms of reflective endorsement are different from others in a very specific and interesting way. Some reflective endorsements take the following form, which we may call the ‘Ulysses and the Sirens’ model.⁹

It is best to approach the idea with an example. Someone with Islamic commitments might think (and some Muslims, in fact, do): “Sooner or later, the spread of pernicious forms of modernity will affect us, too; and it may weaken us from our Islamic commitments, so we must protect ourselves from the possibility of such weakening and entrench in our society certain Islamic ways of life that we will live by even if our commitments to Islam were to weaken.” Such endorsement of one’s Islamic commitments at the first order is distinctive. It doesn’t just approve of those commitments; it entrenches them and guards them against a time when there might well be a weakening or a loss of the commitments.

This is distinctive because not all second-order approval of one’s desires and commitments anticipates and resists change in this way. Much of the time, when we support some tendency of ours, it is only to the extent that we expect to have it. If we thought that this propensity were to pass, we would not necessarily protect ourselves against that event. The person with first-order nationalist tendencies under colonial subjugation, for example, may endorse her nationalism at the second order – but she may also know full well that it would not survive the success of her people’s anti-imperialist struggles. In other words, once independence is won,

9 I am criticized for this way of thinking about identity in Jon Elster, *Ulysses Unbound* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

she may have no particular second-order rationale to preserve her first-order nationalist commitments. And she may actually desire a future in which she lives in a state of independence *without* a particularly strong Palestinian (or Indian) identity.

This is even true of many noninstrumental desires. I may intrinsically value the pursuit of philosophy now but not in a way that makes me want to ensure I will be doing it at a time when I don’t value it as much. But the Muslim in the example is quite different. In his case, he does not limit his second-order approval of his first-order Islamic tendencies to the time when he feels a strong commitment to Islam, but reaches out to when he thinks he might not. Such a person now values and desires an Islamic future for himself, even if he now thinks that when the future comes he may not have the desire to be in an Islamic society.

It is tempting to think that this kind of reflective endorsement is irrational. But before we dismiss this form of subjective identity, we should pause because, to a large extent, it characterizes liberal identity as well.

Let’s ask: why do we entrench some of our commitments and values in the Constitution by calling them ‘fundamental rights’? Take free speech. We gave it special status as the First Amendment of the Constitution because we didn’t want to allow ourselves to put it aside too easily, in the event that our commitment to it weakened. Imagine a repugnant neo-Nazi movement spreading its views among an especially susceptible population in our society. Perhaps we would be so alarmed by their speech we would want to censor it. It is partly in order to *prevent us* from taking that step that we elevated free speech to a fundamental right. In other words, we protect ourselves from acting on what we *now*

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perceive as our future 'weakened' state of mind because we currently find desirable a future in which our society embraces free speech.

This parallels how the Muslim in the example above thinks of an Islamic future. Of course, given the nature of Islamic political doctrine and practice in many Muslim societies, such as Iran, he may not think of entrenching it via the same sort of mechanisms as the Liberal does, i.e., a liberal-democratic constitution. But even so, he will want to ingrain Islamic values so deeply now that were Muslims, including himself, ever to falter in their Islamic commitments, the social, political, and legal institutions would make it difficult for them to shed their Islamic ways of life.

So, both cases, Muslim and Liberal, broadly follow the 'Ulysses and the Sirens' model. On this score, neither the Muslim nor the Liberal are any more or less irrational than the other.

I am not saying, however, that the commitments, values, or desires upon which identities are based are immutable or primordial. Not at all. The commitments may well change. But from the point of view of the subject who has these commitments, she *would like them to be permanent*, even if (as she fears) the commitments are not permanent.¹⁰

¹⁰ To put it crudely, the point here is not that such commitments *can* freeze history out, but that they are the kind of commitments that would *like* to do so. It is precisely a conception of the moral or political subject as historically situated and responding to the internal conflicts that history throws up, and the deliberative possibilities prompted by such conflicts, that provides this gap between what the commitments would like to do and what they can do. For more on this nondeterministic Hegelian conception of the dynamics of identity politics, see Akeel Bilgrami, "Secular Liberalism and Relativism," *boundary 2* 31 (2004).

That shows just how deep those commitments are *for her*. And that is why they are so suitable a basis for defining her subjective identity.

This idea is quite intuitive if we recall such frequently heard identity-asserting claims as "I will lose my sense of self, if I betray my people," or in E. M. Forster's schoolboy morality, "I will lose my sense of self, if I betray my friends." Remarks such as these use the none too precise rhetoric of 'sense of self,' but what they are perhaps trying to express (not very well) is how ideals of friendship, nationality, religion, race, gender, etc., can sometimes 'bind' us, Ulysses-style, thereby creating subjective identities.

One plausible analysis of subjective identity, then, is that it is imparted on an agent by her intensely held, politically relevant commitments that mobilize her and others like her who hold such commitments, and that she reflectively endorses at the second-order level in a way that approximates the model of Ulysses and the Sirens.

When we turn to the objective aspects of identity, conceiving of oneself as what one is, reflectively endorsing what one is, is not a necessary condition. For instance, racial identities, when they are thought to be given in biological conditions, are objective in this sense. Gender identity that invokes chromosomes is similarly objective. But biological criteria are not the only criteria invoked in objective identity. Intersubjective and social criteria are also much favored. For example, Marxists often claim that one's identity is given by one's role in a particular economic formation in a given period of history – that is, one's class identity, as 'class' is defined by Marx.

Many oppose the purely biological ways of thinking of various kinds of identity, such as racial and gender iden-

tities, claiming that these identities are 'socially constructed' by the perceptions and attitudes of one's fellows, by the zeitgeist of a particular period, by the conceptual categories and social institutions at a given time. Foucault and those influenced by him have made much of this, and Foucault himself gave detailed historical and social accounts of particular concepts and institutions in Europe as determining identities. In fact, it is interesting that Foucault claims that it is not only the biological and other scientific criteria that are caught up in social factors of this kind, but also the subjective ones we discussed in the last section as well. These, too, are shaped by conceptual and institutional formations far removed and hidden from the exercise of our reflective self-understanding, thereby showing the ideals of individual autonomy, which we assume to be in play in subjective identity, to be illusory.

I will not take up these issues raised by Foucault's influence here.¹¹ I will look instead briefly at the motivations for seeking objective factors of identity at all, over and above the subjective ones.

Many agents may identify with some objective property they have that is not what is most salient about them to others, and it is sometimes thought that it is these latter rather than the former that may often define their identity, no matter what subjects may conceive themselves to be. A good example of this can be seen in Stalin's¹² well-known defini-

tion of a 'nation,' which stresses the importance of historical and economic criteria for national identity, with a view to providing a corrective to what he saw as somewhat premature and ungrounded subjective identifications with one's 'nationality' found in many secessionist demands in different parts of the Soviet Union. Here, whether he was right or wrong about his formulation of the objective nature of national identity, the motivation for his theoretical position may have been (at least implicitly) political.

But underlying these objectivist views is a more interesting *theoretical* rationale that points to important issues of a more philosophical nature. The claim that agents may have a certain identity even if they do not take themselves to do so implies that what one takes oneself to be can be mistaken – a kind of self-deception (or, at least, a self-myopia, which does not involve the motivated element often associated with self-deception, but involves at least the idea that one may sometimes simply be too deep to fully know oneself – where 'deep' is not intended as a bit of eulogy).

It would be philosophically clarifying to make a distinction between two different sorts of appeal to objectivist identities that are said to be (possibly) hidden from a subject's own self-conception. One claim, the weaker one, is that a subject's behavior often betrays his identity, certain identity-imparting features of his psychology – his character and personality, even if he does not endorse and identify with those features. The other, stronger, claim is that identity does not even require that something in the subject's behavior reveal the identity. Nothing in his behavior need reveal the psychological features that give him his particular identity. To demand that it do so is to have too behavioral a criterion

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11 See Michel Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972). For a fine general discussion of the social construction of identity, see Ian Hacking, *The Social Construction of What?* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999).

12 See Joseph Stalin, *Marxism and The National Question* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1953).

of identity; rather, the features and the identity are given by some social, political, economic, or biological theory about him and others like him.

The weaker claim, not surprisingly, is less controversial since it requires that the features of a subject that are going to define his identity are something that he at least reveals in his behavior. The subject may not endorse them, or even acknowledge them, but if the only good explanation of his behavior is that he has those features, and if those features are salient compared to others, then some claim can be made regarding how they constitute his identity. Within this view, the more extreme cases will be where the subject does not even acknowledge the features as being revealed in the behavior. Many of the identities that surface in Freudian and psychoanalytic theories make much of this sort of case (Oedipal or narcissistic identities). The less extreme cases will be those where there is acknowledgement of the features, but no endorsement of them on the part of the subject. These are likely to be more common. What may be called 'silent' identities, as in 'silent majorities,' often consist of subjects who are not self-identified with a certain pattern of behavior, but will not be in any particular state of denial (as they are in the more extreme cases) about whether their behavior reveals the features they are seen to have. It is very likely, for example, that many ordinary Muslims (those who are sometimes called 'moderate' Muslims) in Iran and other Islamic countries, who do not identify with absolutist or fundamentalist Islam, may all the same admit that much in their behavior mutedly plays along with the Islamist elements in their societies.¹³

13 In Bilgrami, "What Is a Muslim?" I analyze why this happens among ordinary Muslims.

The stronger claim very often appeals to biological criteria, but it is most interesting when it does not. Since the biological criteria are in any case usually caught up with social factors (see the point made about them above during the brief mention of the 'social construction' of identity), they will be ignored here. Perhaps the most well known, well worked out, and widely discussed of the stronger objectivist versions of identity, which is not biologically based, is due to Marx¹⁴ and those influenced by him. On this view what makes for having a class identity, say, a proletarian identity, need not amount to any kind of self-identification with the working class. It need not even require any behavior that suggests certain unacknowledged or unendorsed allegiances to that class. All that is required is simply the objective fact of having a certain place and function in the relations of production during the modern capitalist period of economic history.

What is remarkable and controversial about this strong view, more so than anything found in the weaker claim, is that something regarding the self and its identity is being attributed without any basis or manifestation required in the conscious or unconscious behavior of the selves or agents concerned. A working-class person who exhibits no proletarian consciousness nor any of the solidarity and forms of behavior appropriate to the class, and none of whose behavior reflects an unconscious expression of such solidarity or consciousness, is nevertheless said to have proletarian class identity, albeit with a 'false con-

14 This can be found in any number of Marx's writings in which he formulates the doctrine of historical materialism, including Karl Marx, "The Communist Manifesto," in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. R. Tucker (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978).

sciousness.' It is only because he has this identity that there can be cause to call such a subject's consciousness 'false.' It is false precisely because he fails to conceive himself aright, fails to see his deep self, which is determined by objective historical and material relations.

There has been a familiar and fascinating controversy about the very idea of objective identity, even though in the standard formulations of the controversy, the notion of identity is often not mentioned at all. For instance, Isaiah Berlin's anxieties about the notion of 'positive liberty' are, at bottom, about the notion of objective identity as I have analyzed it, where self and self-conception can come so radically apart.¹⁵ What such a separation encourages is the idea that the achievement of *self-realization* of individual citizens, that is, the achievement of their own autonomy and liberty (in the 'positive' sense), is now left to states or to the 'vanguards' of political parties, which lay claim to greater understanding of what a subject's self *really* and *objectively* is. On such a view, according to those alarmed by it, there is no paradox in the familiar expression 'forcing someone to be free.' (Lenin's 'vanguardism' was frank about denying any such paradox.¹⁶)

Underlying political anxieties of this kind is a more philosophical issue, which is much discussed in contemporary moral psychology: the issue of 'external' as opposed to 'internal' reasons. An internal reason is a reason for one to do or believe or value something, which appeals to some other evaluative ele-

15 See Isaiah Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," in *Four Essays on Liberty* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969).

16 See V. I. Lenin, "What is to be Done?" in *The Leninist Anthology*, ed. R. Tucker (New York: Norton, 1975).

ment in one's moral-psychological economy. An external reason makes no such appeal to an internal element; it requires only some objective fact that need not even be recognized by the subject for whom it provides a reason.

Thus, in the orthodox Marxist tradition, a proletarian, given his historically determined identity about which he may have no understanding at all, has (an 'external') reason to be a revolutionary, even if there is no element in his own scheme of values (no 'internal' reason) that recommends it to him. Berlin's anxieties about statist tyranny carried out in the name of self-realization, autonomy, and positive liberty were thus implicitly and more deeply about the very idea of external reasons, even though he never quite articulated them as having that underlying target. However, it becomes explicit in a denial of the cogency of the very idea of external reasons in a brilliant essay by Bernard Williams (a philosopher much influenced by Berlin), though the point is marred in that essay by a somewhat confused equation of internal reasons with a Humean notion of value and motivation.¹⁷

This last set of points provides a good resting point for my notes toward the definition of 'identity,' in which I have distinguished fundamentally between the subjective and objective aspects of the concept. To a considerable extent, which of these two aspects we emphasize in our study of the concept will be a matter of theoretical decision, a decision that, in turn, depends on nonarbitrary philosophical considerations having to do with, as we have just seen, themes at some distance from identity, such as autonomy and moral reasons.

17 See Bernard Williams, "Internal and External Reasons," in *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

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This is why Self, Freedom, and Reason have been closely connected themes in philosophy ever since Kant, both in the analytical and the European traditions of the discipline. Though much more needs to be said in detail to make the links between these themes perspicuous and explicit, it is safe to say that the more inclined we are to be uneasy about the idea of 'external reasons,' the more likely we are to stress the subjective rather than the objective aspects of identity.