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Reason before Identity

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Reason before Identity

RECENTLY, when I was returning from a short trip abroad, the Immigration Officer at Heathrow, who examined my Indian passport, posed a philosophical question of some intricacy. Referring to my address, viz. Master's Lodge, Trinity College, Cambridge, he asked me whether the Master was a close friend of mine. This gave me pause since it compelled me, of course, to examine whether the binary relation of 'being a friend of' can be taken to be reflexive, so that I could legitimately claim to be a friend of myself. On reflection, I came to the conclusion that I was a friend—indeed, a close friend (a view corroborated further by the fact that when I say silly things I can immediately see that, with friends like me, I don't need any enemies). Since all this took some time to resolve, the Immigration Officer wanted to know why exactly I hesitated: was there some impropriety involved in my being in Britain?

Well, that practical issue was eventually resolved, but the conversation was a reminder, if one were needed, that identity can be a complicated matter. There is, of course, no great problem in convincing oneself that an object is identical with itself; Wittgenstein has even offered the view that 'there is no finer example of a useless proposition.'[1] And yet it is not trivial to ask what relations obtain between an

[1] ' "A thing is identical with itself."—There is no finer example of a useless proposition, which yet is connected with a certain play of the imagination': Anthony Kenny, ed., *The Wittgenstein Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), p. 102.

object and itself, other than being identical, and also, how two identical objects relate to each other.

When we shift our attention from the notion of *being identical* to that of *sharing an identity*, and to the idea of *identifying* oneself with others of a particular group, which is central to some of the common uses of the idea of identity, the complexity increases further. It is this difficult problem—of social identity and its role and implications—with which this talk is concerned.

Self-Interest, Identity, and Economic Analysis

Let me begin with a very elementary question that relates to the formulation of human behaviour in the social sciences: does a person identify with anyone else in deciding on what objectives to pursue and what choices to make? Is the idea of social identity vacuous when it comes to explaining behavioural regularities, since no identification is involved other than with oneself? A good deal of economic theory has tended to proceed as if that is indeed the case, so that the assumption of the self-interested individual has tended to be quite central in contemporary mainstream economics. Indeed, this assumption has often been seen as adequate both in explaining human behaviour and in explaining the efficient operation of market-based economies.

Sometimes this forceful assumption is traced to the father of modern economics, Adam Smith, himself. For example, even as fine an economist as George Stigler has praised Smith for making us understand the truth as well as the excellent consequences of the

fact that 'self-interest dominates the majority of men'.[2] As it happens, this thesis is very far from Smith's own view of human motivation; he discussed extensively the prevalence and the important social role of such values as sympathy, generosity, public-spiritedness, and other affiliative concerns. The common misunderstanding of Smith (to which Stigler gives voice) stems from attempts to deduce Smith's general theory of human motivation from his special claim that we need not invoke any concern other than self-interest to explain why people seek fruitful exchange. Indeed, as Smith had argued in a much-quoted passage, we do not need to invoke 'benevolence' to explain why the butcher, the brewer, or the baker *wants* to sell their products, and why the consumers *want* to buy them.[3]

But exchange is not the only activity in a society, or even in an economy: distribution is important, and so is production, including the need for work motivation and discipline, which deeply influence productivity. Furthermore, the efficient working even of exchange systems demands more than the basic motivation that drives the desire to buy and sell: there is need for responsibility, trustworthiness, and social norms that allow a successful market economy to prosper. Indeed, as a partial sceptic of the reach of the market economy, I find it amazing that so many of the advocates of the glory of capitalism refuse to see the moral quality of

[2] George J. Stigler, 'Smith's Travel on the Ship of the State', in A. S. Skinner and T. Wilson, eds., *Essays on Adam Smith* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), p. 237.

[3] Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1776; republished, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), pp. 26–7.

good business behaviour that has been so important in contributing to the success of capitalism: it is no less a moral success than a triumph of unconstrained greed. Stigler's praise of Adam Smith for the alleged wisdom of establishing the prevalence and sufficiency of pure self-interest is, thus, mistaken on two distinct grounds: it is not Smith's belief, and it is not wisdom.

The rejection of purely self-interested behaviour need not, however, entail that behaviour must be influenced by identification with others. The influence of social identity on behaviour can be one route to departures from narrowly defined self-interest, but there can be other influences too, for example adherence to norms of acceptable behaviour (such as financial honesty or avoidance of fraud). To what extent these norms themselves can be traced ultimately to concern for others and to ideas of identity remains to be further examined. This broad question also relates to another: to wit, the role of evolutionary selection of behavioural norms in which perceptions of social identity can also play an instrumentally important part. Indeed, both in reflective choice and in evolutionary selection of behavioural modes, ideas of identity can be important, and obviously any mixture of the two will also have this characteristic.

I don't want to go further into these questions here, if only because I have tried to discuss them elsewhere.[4]

[4] 'Behaviour and the Concept of Preference', *Economica*, 45 (1973); reprinted in John Elster, ed., *Rational Choice* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986); *Choice, Welfare and Measurement* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1982, and Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997); *On Ethics and Economics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987); 'Maximization and the Act of Choice', *Econometrica*, 65 (1997).

Indeed, I cannot fail to recollect that one of those occasions was precisely here in Oxford in 1976, when I came here from the London School of Economics to give a Herbert Spencer Lecture under the title 'Rational Fools'.[5] This was on an invitation from Isaiah Berlin, who chaired the event, and the lecture was to a great extent written for him. This is my first talk at Oxford since Berlin's death, and I take this opportunity of mentioning how much his friends and admirers valued the guidance, challenge, and inspiration that he provided.

Community, Norms, and Reasoning

Whether or not all departures from self-interest can be traced to social identity in one form or another remains an open question, but it is hard to resist the understanding that social identity is a significant influence on human behaviour. The idea that a sense of community and fellowship is important for us all is also difficult to ignore, and it relates closely to our conceptions of social identity. Indeed, behavioural influence is only one of the ways in which community and social identity are important in understanding human life. There are strong influences of the community, and of the people with whom we identify and associate, in shaping our knowledge and comprehension as well as our ethics and norms. In this sense, social identity cannot but be central to human life.

[5] 'Rational Fools: A Critique of the Behavioral Foundations of Economic Theory', *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 6 (1977).

Once this basic point has been accepted, there are, however, further questions that arise about the domain and authority of social identity. While economists have typically been over-sceptical of the role of social identity, it is possible to see evidence of 'under-scepticism' (if I may coin such a phrase) in some social analysis, concerning the precise reach of social identity and its allegedly overpowering influence. There is, in particular, a fundamental question about how our identities emerge—whether by choice or by passive recognition—and how much reasoning can enter into the development of identity. This question is important in many contexts, including the assessment of communitarian conceptions of rationality (and the corresponding critique of communicable reasoning) and of ethics (including universalizable theories of justice).

Indeed, communitarianism in various forms—strong as well as mild—has been in the ascendancy over the last few decades in contemporary social, political, and moral theorizing, and the dominant and compelling role of social identity in governing behaviour as well as knowledge has been forcefully championed. In fact, the advocacy of communitarian perspectives has grown with a relentlessness that bears comparison with the progress of global warming and the depletion of the ozone layer. In many up-to-date theories, social identity figures prominently as the principal determinant of people's understanding of the world, their modes of reasoning and conceptions of rationality, their behavioural norms and practices, and their personal moralities and political commitments. And when these theories of people's perceptions and behaviour are combined, as they are in some theories, with the view

that the nature of rationality, knowledge, and morality must be entirely parasitic on the subjects' perceptions, the determining role of social identities is, then, given a commanding role in the disciplines of epistemology and ethics.

In the more demanding versions, these theories are amazingly assertive. We are told that we cannot invoke any criterion of rational behaviour other than those that obtain in the community to which the people involved belong. Any reference to rationality yields the retort, '*which* rationality?' or '*whose* rationality?' It is also argued not only that the explanation of a person's moral judgements must be based on the values and norms of the community of which the person is a part, but also that these judgements can be ethically assessed *only within* those values and norms (a denial of the claims of competing norms on the attention of the person). Various versions of these far-reaching claims have been forcefully aired and powerfully advocated in theories that give social identity a masterful role.

In the political context, this approach has had the effect of rejecting intercultural normative judgements about behaviour and institutions, and sometimes even of undermining the possibility of cross-cultural exchange and understanding. The political aspects can be explicit and transparent; or they may be implicit and indirect but nevertheless influential, for example in the defence of particular customs and traditions, on such matters as women's unequal social position, or the use of particular modes of traditional punishment. There is a tendency here to split up the large world into little islands that are not within normative reach of each other.

Justice and Communitarian Critiques

In contrast with these strong and morally debilitating claims, identity-based theorizing can also be used in less demanding and more subtle ways. Rather than demanding a world of separated moral islands, it can be used merely to reject theories of justice or rationality that are judged to be inadequately attentive to the claims of community and of affiliative concerns. Critiques of this kind have indeed been presented very extensively in recent years and have been quite influential.

I would like to examine here communitarian critiques of the so-called 'liberal theories of justice'. The term 'liberal', though commonly used, is a bit deceptive for this class of theories which pre-eminently includes John Rawls's theory of 'justice as fairness' (with its strongly egalitarian implications)[6] and other theories influenced in different ways by Rawls's reasoning, including the theories respectively presented by Ronald Dworkin, Thomas Scanlon, Joseph Raz, John Roemer, and others.[7] I shall be concerned in particular with the communitarian critique of Rawls's own theory, though many of the arguments apply to the formulations involved in the other theories as well.

[6] John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), and *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

[7] Rawls's influence is also strong on ethical writings that have stopped short of presenting a fully fledged theory of justice, such as the normative theories presented by Thomas Nagel, Derek Parfit, Richard Arneson, G. A. Cohen, Cass Sunstein, and others.

In the Rawlsian framework of 'justice as fairness', fairness for a group of people involves arriving at rules and guiding principles of social organization that pay similar attention to everyone's interests, concerns, and liberties. In working out how this may be understood, the Rawlsian device of the 'original position' has proved illuminating and useful. In the hypothetical original position, which is an imagined state of primordial equality, individuals are seen as arriving at rules and guiding principles in a cooperative exercise, in which they do not yet know who exactly they are going to be (so that they are not influenced, in selecting social rules, by their own vested interests related to their actual situations, such as their respective incomes and wealths).

Rawlsian analysis proceeds from the original position to the identification of particular principles of justice. These principles include the priority of liberty (the 'first principle') giving precedence to maximal liberty for each person subject to similar liberty for all. The 'second principle' deals with other matters, including equity and efficiency in the distribution of opportunities, and includes the Difference Principle involving an allocational criterion that gives priority to the worst-off people, respectively, in each group.

Questions can be raised about the plausibility of the specific principles of justice that Rawls derives from his general principles of fairness, and in particular it can be asked whether the device of the original position must point inescapably to these principles of justice; I have presented my own doubts on this elsewhere.[8]

[8] For these critiques and some suggested alternative principles, see my *Collective Choice and Social Welfare* (San Francisco: Holden-Day,

With those specific debates I am not concerned in this lecture. My focus, rather, is with the general approach of deriving justice from fairness, through reasoning involving the original position and similar devices. Communitarian critiques are addressed to this very foundation, and it is on this that I concentrate here.

Some communitarian theories have presented alternative moral visions, rivalling the ethical claims of liberal justice, by focusing on norms and mores other than a concern for justice, for example the associative values of caring for other members of the same community. That these values can be extremely important is a lesson that we learn not only from the typically somewhat *ad hoc* theories of communitarian ideals, but also from the more structured ethical analyses of Stuart Hampshire, Bernard Williams, and others.[9]

However, the importance of these values need not be denied in the Rawlsian system, in so far as individual conduct is concerned. A person may have reason to do much more for others, because of, say, affection and love, than is required by rules of justice. But this cannot disestablish the need for rules of justice, since the individuals involved in social interaction include,

1970; republished, Amsterdam: North-Holland, 1979); 'Equality of What?' in S. McMurrin, ed., *Tanner Lectures on Human Values*, i (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980); 'Justice: Means versus Freedoms', *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 19 (1990); *Inequality Reexamined* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, and Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992).

[9] Bernard Williams, 'A Critique of Utilitarianism', in J. J. C. Smart and B. Williams, *Utilitarianism: For and Against* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973); Stuart Hampshire, 'Morality and Convention', in Amartya Sen and Bernard Williams, eds., *Utilitarianism and Beyond* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

among others, those who are not firmly tied to each other by affection and spontaneous warmth. Human society may need more than justice, but it does need justice.

The more effective line of criticism of the Rawlsian approach has come from a different angle of vision. It has been argued, particularly powerfully by Michael Sandel, that the demands of the Rawlsian rules of justice, exacting as they are, may not be fulfilled in practice in the absence of pre-existing communal solidarity and social identity.[10] As Charles Taylor puts it,

> Sandel's point pushes us toward the issue of whether the kind of egalitarian distribution Rawls recommends can be sustained in a society which is not bound together in solidarity through a strong sense of community; and whether, in turn, a community of this kind can be forged around a common understanding which makes justice the principal virtue of social life, or whether some other good does not have to figure as well in the definition of community life.[11]

[10] See Michael Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, 2nd edn. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). See also Rawls's response to criticisms by Sandel and others in his 'Justice as Fairness: Political not Metaphysical', *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 14 (1985), and *Political Liberalism*. Sandel's reply to Rawls's response can be found in 'A Response to Rawls' Political Liberalism', pp. 184–218 of the 1998 edition of his book.

[11] Charles Taylor, 'Cross-Purposes: The Liberal–Communitarian Debate', in Nancy L. Rosenblum, ed., *Liberalism and the Moral Life* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 162 Taylor also clarifies in this paper the distinction between different types of claim made in communitarian theory. On this see also Will Kymlicka, *Contemporary Political Philosophy: An Introduction* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), ch. 6; and Michael Walzer, 'The Communitarian Critique of Liberalism', *Political Theory*, 18 (1990).

Taylor is undoubtedly right in demanding that 'the definition of community life' must go much beyond justice—a sustainable claim on which I have already commented. But the Rawlsian theory of justice is not really aimed at defining community life. Rather, it is concerned with arriving at principles of justice that fairness demands, even if affection and loyalty do not fulfil them automatically.

There are three distinct but interrelated points to make about Sandel's thesis regarding the relation between principles of justice and the demands of affection and affiliation. First, if it were to turn out (as Sandel alleges) that these principles of justice could not be fulfilled except through a sense of communal solidarity, then that requirement of solidarity would be a *part* of the demands of justice—not a rival principle that undermines the need for Rawlsian justice. Second, very little empirical evidence is provided by Sandel—or by anyone else—to indicate that Rawlsian rules cannot 'be sustained in a society which is not bound together in solidarity through a strong sense of community'. This is merely a pessimistic assertion against the general possibility of socially agreed behaviour—by no means a demonstration of its infeasibility. Third, while a sense of community would always be a major ally of justice within the community, justice cannot entirely rely only on that, since social interaction would inescapably involve people who are not closely tied by bonds of affection or partnership. This is why the principles of justice derived by Rawls (and those in theories inspired by Rawls) have to go into the need for public policy and for social rules and behavioural norms.

Justice must deal with relations between people who are not bound by communal solidarity. The interactions, for example, between Bill Clinton and Kenneth Starr are matters of justice; even though each may claim a strongly American identity, love is not going to do much work here. The same applies between different economic and social groups which compete and contest; and yet they have to co-exist and co-survive. Justice *is* important, and has to go much beyond the domain of communal affection.

Delineating Roles and Choice over Identities

I would now like to turn to a different but related issue, concerning the need for choice and reasoning in social identity. In examining this need, it is useful to consider two rather different ways in which social identity can be important: its *delineating* role and its *perceptual* function. The latter—the perceptual function—is concerned with the way a member of a community may perceive the world, understand reality, accept norms, and argue about what is to be done. This is a big issue, and I shall take it up after I have considered the other role of social identity, that of delineation.

The delineating role of social identity can be an important part of an adequate formulation of any idea of the social good, and even in defining the reach and limits of social concern and appropriate conduct. Any formulation of the notion of the social good cannot but raise the question: good of *which* group of individuals? This is a demarcational requirement concerning the

domain of social choice. In any diagnosis of the social good, there is the question as to who is to be included in that aggregative exercise, and this task cannot be divorced from the exercise of social identification. The converse may also hold, and, as Charles Taylor has observed in an illuminating discussion of the role of political identity, 'the identification of the citizen with the republic as a common enterprise is essentially the recognition of a common good'.[12]

It is not hard to see that delineation leaves room for choice and reasoning. To insist on a particular canonical group identity, without reasoned support, would beg the question: why focus on this group only rather than another, of which the person may also be a member? For any particular map of group partitioning, two distinct questions can be raised. First, a person may ask whether the lines may be redrawn on the same map. Should a person see herself as European and not just Italian or just German? Or as Irish, and not just Irish Catholic or Irish Protestant? There are substantial issues to discuss here.

Second, there are different maps and different procedures of partitioning people. A person can simultaneously have the identity of being, say, an Italian, a woman, a feminist, a vegetarian, a novelist, a fiscal conservative, a jazz fan, and a Londoner. The possibility of such multiple identities is obvious enough, and their varying context-dependent relevance is no less evident. If this person gets involved in the promotion of classical jazz throughout the world, her identity as a jazz-lover may be more relevant than her identity as a

[12] Charles Taylor, *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), pp. 191–2.

Londoner, which however may be more crucial when she makes a telling criticism of the way London transport is organized. The context dependence of relevant identity is elegantly illustrated in a scene in Tom Stoppard's play *Jumpers*, when Inspector Bones, investigating a murder, asks the professor of philosophy, extremely suspiciously, who the assembled people are, to which the philosopher replies: 'Logical positivists, mainly'.[13]

Given plural delineations, alternative identities can compete for relevance, even in a given context. For example, in considering a problem of London transport, a person's loyalties as a Londoner keen in improving the transport of her city may conflict with her convictions as a fiscal conservative keen on keeping public expenses severely under control. Sometimes the conflicts of identities involving attitudes to rather grander issues may take a more extensive form. For example, being born in a particular country, or within a particular culture, need not eliminate the possibility of adapting a perspective or a loyalty that is very different from that of the bulk of the people in that country or in that culture.

Discovery or Choice?

Communitarian approaches often tend to acquire persuasive power by making a definitive communal identity a matter of self-realization, not of choice. As Michael Sandel presents this claim with admirable

[13] Tom Stoppard, *Jumpers* (London: Faber & Faber, 1972), p. 41.

clarity, 'community describes just what they *have* as fellow citizens but also what they *are*, not a relationship they choose (as in a voluntary association) but an attachment they discover, not merely an attribute but a constituent of their identity.'[14] In this reading—what Sandel calls the 'constitutive' conception of community—identity comes before reasoning for choice: 'the self came by its ends,' as he puts it, 'not by choice but by reflection, as knowing (or inquiring) subject to object of (self-)understanding.'[15] On this view, a person's identity is something he or she detects, rather than determines. Social organization can then be seen, as Crowley puts it, as attempts to 'create opportunities for men to give voice to what they have *discovered* about themselves and the world and to persuade others of its worth'.[16]

It is, however, difficult to imagine that we can really have no substantial choice between alternative identifications, and must just 'discover' our identity. It is hard to rule out the possibility that we are constantly making these choices. Often such choices are quite explicit, like when Mohandas Gandhi deliberately decides to give priority to his identification with Indians seeking independence from British rule over his identity as a trained barrister pursuing English legal justice, or when E. M. Forster famously concludes, 'if I had to choose between betraying my country and betraying my friend, I hope I should have the guts to betray my

[14] Sandel, *Liberalism*, p. 150. This is Sandel's statement of a radical communitarian position. He offers less radical versions as well.

[15] Ibid. p. 152; the parentheses are Sandel's own.

[16] B. Crowley, *The Self, the Individual and the Community* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), p. 295.

country'.[17] Quite often, however, the choice is implicit and obscure, and less grandly defended, but it may be no less real for that reason.

At this point, I should make a few clarificatory explanations to prevent misunderstandings of what is being claimed. First, the importance of choice does not entail that any choice we make must be once-for-all and permanent. Indeed, our loyalties and self-definitions often oscillate, in ways that are well illustrated by Albert Hirschman's analysis of 'shifting involvements'.[18] As Emma Rothschild notes, such oscillation may be 'a continuous and prized quality of civil society'.[19] Choosing can be, to quite an extent, a repeated process.

Second, it is not my purpose to claim that the choices we have are quite unrestricted. There are limits to what we can choose to identify with, and perhaps stronger limits still in persuading others to take us as something other than what they take us to be. A Jewish person in Nazi Germany could have longed to be taken as a gentile to escape persecution or extermination, and an African American facing a lynch mob could have sought a different characterization. But these redefinitions may not be within the person's feasible options. In fact, the persons involved may not even be able to see themselves as gentile or white, even if they were inclined to choose to try to do this. The real options we have about our identity are always limited by our

[17] E. M. Forster, *Two Cheers for Democracy*.

[18] Albert Hirschman, *Shifting Involvements* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982).

[19] Emma Rothschild, 'The Quest for World Order', *Daedalus*, 124 (Summer 1995), p. 81.

looks, our circumstances, and our background and history.

It is, however, not news that choices are always within certain constraints, and any choice theorist knows that characterizing the constraints faced by the chooser is the first step in understanding any choice that is being made. The point at issue is whether choices exist at all, and to what extent they are substantial. The claim that I am presenting here is that they can be quite substantial.

There is a third issue to be addressed here. We can, of course, 'discover' our identity in the sense that we may find out that we have a connection or a descent of which we were previously unaware. A person may discover that he is Jewish. In Rabindranath Tagore's novel *Gora*, the problematic hero, also called Gora, who champions Hindu customs and traditions and is a staunch religious conservative is placed in some confusion when his supposed mother tells him that he was adopted as an infant by the Indian family after his Irish parents had been killed by the mutineers. We do discover many things about ourselves, even when they may not be as foundational as the one that the Hindu nationalist Gora had to face.

To recognize this is not the same as making identity just a matter of discovery, even when the person discovers something very important about herself. There are still issues of choice to be faced. The person who discovers that she is Jewish would still have to decide what importance to give to that identity compared with other competing identities—of nationality, class, political belief, and so on. Gora had to ask whether he should continue his championing of Hindu conser-

vatism or see himself as something else, and the choice that emerges in his case (to wit, seeing himself as just Indian without a caste or a sect) is, to a great extent, a matter of reflected decision. Choices have to be made even when discoveries occur.

Responsibility and Herd Behaviour

Indeed, I would argue that the belief that we have no choice on these matters is not only mistaken, but may have very pernicious implications that extend far beyond communitarian critiques, or for that matter the soundness of liberal theories of justice. If choices do exist and yet it is assumed that they are not there, the use of reasoning may well be replaced by uncritical acceptance of conformist behaviour, no matter how rejectable they may be. Typically, such conformism may have conservative implications, protecting old customs and practices from intelligent scrutiny. Indeed, traditional inequalities, such as unequal treatment of women in sexist societies, often survive by making the respective identities, which may include subservient roles of the traditional underdog, matters for unquestioning acceptance, rather than reflective examination. But the unquestioned presumptions are merely unquestioned—not unquestionable.

Many past practices and assumed identities have crumbled in response to questioning and scrutiny. Traditions can shift even within a particular country and culture. It is perhaps worth recollecting that John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women*, published in 1874, was taken by many of his British readers to be

the ultimate proof of his eccentricity; as a matter of fact, interest on the subject was so little that this is the only book of Mill's on which his publisher lost money.[20]

However, the unquestioning acceptance of a social identity may not always have conservative implications. It can also involve a radical *shift* in identity—accepted as a piece of alleged 'discovery' rather than as reasoned choice. Some of my own disturbing memories as I was entering my teenage years in India in the mid-1940s relate to the massive identity shift that followed divisive politics. People's identities as Indians, as Asians, or as members of the human race seemed to give way—quite suddenly—to sectarian identification with Hindu, Muslim, or Sikh communities. The broadly Indian of January was rapidly and unquestioningly transformed into the narrowly Hindu or finely Muslim of March. The carnage that followed had much to do with unreasoned herd behaviour by which people, as it were, 'discovered' their new divisive and belligerent identities, and failed to subject the process to critical examination. The same people were suddenly different.

If some of us today continue to be suspicious of the communitarian approach, despite its attractive features, including the focus on within-group solidarity and on benign affection for others in the group, there is some historical reason for it. Indeed, within-group solidarity can go hand-in-hand with between-group

[20] See Alan Ryan, *J. S. Mill* (London: Routledge, 1974), p. 125. Mill noted that his views of women's suffrage were seen as 'whims of my own': John Stuart Mill, *Autobiography* (1874; reprinted, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 169.

discord. I believe that similarly unreasoned identity shifts have occurred and are continuing to occur in different parts of the world—in the former Yugoslavia, in Rwanda, in Congo, in Indonesia—in varying forms, with devastating effects. There is something deeply debilitating about denying choice when choice exists, for it is an abdication of responsibility to consider and assess how one should think and what one should identify with. It is a way of falling prey to unreasoned shifts in alleged self-knowledge based on a false belief that one's identity is to be discovered and accepted rather than examined and scrutinized.

This issue is important also in preventing what Anthony Appiah has called 'new tyrannies', in the form of newly asserted identities, which may have important political roles but can also tyrannize by eliminating the claims of other identities that we may also have reason to accept and respect. Appiah considers this particularly in the context of the identity of being black—an African-American—which has certainly been an important political ingredient in seeking racial justice, but which can also be oppressive if it is taken to be the only identity a black person has, with no room being given to other claims. Appiah puts the issue thus:

> In policing this imperialism of identity—an imperialism as visible in racial identities as anywhere else—it is crucial to remember always that we are not simply black or white or yellow or brown, gay or straight or bisexual, Jewish, Christian, Moslem, Buddhist, or Confucian but we are also brothers and sisters; parents and children; liberals, conservatives, and leftists; teachers and lawyers and auto-makers and gardeners; fans of the Padres and the Bruins; amateurs

of grunge rock and lovers of Wagner; movie buffs; MTV-holics, mystery-readers; surfers and singers; poets and pet-lovers; students and teachers; friends and lovers. Racial identity can be the basis of resistance to racism—and though we have made great progress, we have further still to go—let us not let our racial identities subject us to new tyrannies.[21]

To deny plurality, choice and reasoning in identity can be source of repression, new *and* old, as well as a source of violence and brutality. The need for delineation, important as it is, is perfectly compatible with the recognition of plurality, of conflicting loyalties, of demands of justice and mercy, as well as of affection and solidarity. Choice is possible and important in individual conduct and social decisions, even if we remain oblivious of it.

Perceptions and Culture

I turn now to the perceptual function of social identity. There can be little doubt that the communities or cultures to which a person belong can have a major influence on the way he or she sees a situation or views a decision. In any explanatory exercise, note has to be taken of local knowledge, rational norms, and particular perceptions and values that are common in a specific community. The empirical case for this recognition is obvious enough.

[21] K. Anthony Appiah, 'Race, Culture, Identity: Misunderstood Connections', in K. Anthony Appiah and Amy Gutman, *Color Consciousness: The Political Morality of Race* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), pp. 103–4.

Does this recognition undermine the role of choice and reasoning? Can this be an argument in the direction of the 'discovery' view of identity? How can we reason, the argument may run, about our identity, since *the way we reason* must be independent on what identity we have? We cannot really reason before an identity is established.

I believe this argument is mistaken, but it is important to examine it with some care. It is perfectly obvious that one cannot reason from nowhere. But this does not imply that, no matter what the antecedent associations of a person is, they must remain unrejectable and permanent. The alternative to the 'discovery' view is not choice from positions 'unencumbered' with any identity (as communitarian expositions often seem to imply), but choices that continue to exist in any encumbered position one happens to occupy. Choice does not require jumping out of nowhere into somewhere.

It is certainly true that the way we reason can well be influenced by our knowledge, by our presumptions, and by our attitudinal inclinations regarding what constitutes a good or a bad argument. This is not in dispute. But it does not follow from this that we can reason only within a particular cultural tradition, with a specific identity.

First, even though certain basic cultural attitudes and beliefs may *influence* the nature of our reasoning, they are unlikely to *determine* it fully. There are various influences on our reasoning, and we need not lose our ability to consider other ways of reasoning, just because we identify with, and have been influenced by membership of, a particular group. Influence is not the

same thing as complete determination, and choices do remain despite the existence—and importance—of cultural influences.

Second, the so-called 'cultures' need not involve any *uniquely* defined set of attitudes and beliefs that can shape our reasoning. Indeed, many of these 'cultures' contain very considerable internal variations, and different attitudes and beliefs may be entertained within the same broadly defined culture. For example, Indian traditions are often taken to be intimately associated with religion, and indeed in many ways they are, and yet Sanskrit and Pali have larger literatures on systematic atheism and agnosticism than perhaps in any other classical language—Greek, Roman, Hebrew, or Arabic.

An adult and competent person has the ability to question what has been taught to her—even day in and day out. While circumstances may not encourage a person to do such questioning, the ability to doubt and to question is within each person's capacity. Indeed, it is not absurd to claim that being able to doubt is one of the things that make us human beings, rather than unquestioning animals. I remember with some warmth and amusement a Bengali poem of early nineteenth century, by Raja Ram Mohan Ray, which I encountered as a child: 'Just imagine how terrible the day of your death will be; others will go on speaking, and you will not be able to contradict.' There is perhaps some plausibility in that characterization of the central feature of death. I may not go so far as to argue for the slogan: 'Dubito ergo sum', but that thought is not very distant either.

These points are so elementary that they would be embarrassing to assert had the opposite not been fre-

quently presumed, either explicitly or by implication. In the context of cultural debates applied to the West itself, it is in fact most uncommon to dispute any of these rather obvious claims. It is hardly ever presumed that, just because a person is born English, or comes from an Anglican background or from a Conservative family, or has been educated in a religious school, she must inescapably think and reason *within* the general attitudes and beliefs of the respective groups. When, however, other cultures are considered, say in Africa or Asia, the constraints imposed by the respective cultures are taken to be much more binding and restrictive. Since the assumption of tradition-given constraints is very often presented by advocates of cultural pluralism and by exponents of the importance of a multi-cultural world (an ideal that has, for very good reasons, a widespread appeal and plausibility), the assumed constraints are frequently seen not as something that would limit and restrict the freedom of the individual to choose how she would want to live, but as a positive assertion of the importance of cultural authenticity and genuineness. The constrained individuals are then seen as heroic resisters of Westernization and defenders of native tradition.

This kind of reading leads to at least two different questions. First, if the presumption of the lack of choice about identity were entirely correct, how could it be appropriate to see in the traditionalism of the people involved a deliberate defence of local culture? If people have a real choice and choose not to depart from their local tradition, then in their traditionalism—*thus chosen*—we may be able to read a deliberate defence and even perhaps a heroic resistance. But how

can that conclusion be sustained if, as is standardly assumed, the people had no choice anyway? The status of reasoned choice cannot be thrust upon conformity without reasoning. The linkage with choice and reasoning is important not only for reformers, but also for traditionalists resisting reform.

Second, what evidence is there that people born in a non-Western tradition lack the ability to develop any other form of identity? The opportunity to consider any alternative may not, of course, arise, and then ignorance and unfamiliarity may prevent any actual act of choice. An Afghan girl today, kept out of school and away from knowledge of the outside world, may indeed not be able to reason freely. But that does not establish an *inability* to reason, only a lack of opportunity to do so.

I would argue that, important as the perceptual role of community and identity may be, it cannot be presumed that the possibility of reasoned choice is ruled out by these influences. This is not to deny that the influences that operate on a person may well be, in practice, very restrictive. They certainly can restrain and limit. But to see in them a heroic defence of traditionalism, rather than a bondage of unreason, would be a mistake.

Indeed, even in very harsh circumstances, things do change. Maimonides, the great Jewish scholar in the twelfth century, had good reason to take a dim view of the possibility of reform in an intolerant and dogmatically sectarian Europe, and had reason enough to run away from his European homeland and its religious persecutions to the security of urbane and tolerant Cairo and the patronage of Sultan Saladin. Things

have moved on from inquisition-ridden Europe (though the history of the middle of the twentieth century gave us pause), but we should not now make the converse presumption that, while reasoned choice may be easy enough in Europe, non-Western cultures—Cairo and beyond—are inescapably imprisoned in the tyranny of unreasoned fundamentalism. Choices do exist; the possibility of reasoning does too; and nothing imprisons the mind as much as a false belief in an unalterable lack of choice and the impossibility of reasoning.

Identity and Justice beyond Borders

I turn, finally, to the case for a greater recognition of the need for reasoned choice of identity and community, not merely in communitarian critiques of liberal theories of justice, but in the liberal theories themselves—in the Rawlsian theory in particular. This concerns the coverage of the 'original position' and its implications for the understanding of fairness as well as its manifest practical consequences. There is substantial room for ambivalence as to who the parties are who are assumed to be having this contract? Are they all the people in the world—is it a global social contract? Or is it a contract that is worked out for each nation or each polity on its own?

As it is generally understood, the domain of the exercise of Rawlsian fairness has been taken to involve each nation separately, to which the device of the original position is correspondingly applied. In his Amnesty Lecture given at Oxford, entitled 'The Law

of the Peoples', and the subsequent manuscript for a new book, Rawls has supplemented this outlook by the need for another original position, this time involving representatives of different peoples.[22] At the risk of some oversimplification, the two original positions can be seen as being, respectively, *intranational* (between individuals in a nation) and *international* (between representatives of different nations). As may be expected, Rawls analyses the demands of justice in each case with great insight, rigour, and humaneness.

The importance of nationality and citizenship cannot be denied in the contemporary world. But we also have to ask: how should we take note of the relations between different people across borders whose identities include, *inter alia*, solidarities based on classifications *other than* partitioning according to nations and political units, such as class, gender, or political and social beliefs? How do we account for professional identities (such as being a doctor or an educator) and the imperatives they generate, without frontiers? These concerns, responsibilities, and obligations may not only *not* be parasitic on national identities and international relations, they may occasionally run in contrary directions to international relations. Even the identity of being a 'human being'—perhaps our most basic identity—may have the effect, when properly seized, of broadening our viewpoint; and the imperatives that we may associate with our shared humanity may not be mediated by our membership of collectivities such as 'nations' or 'peoples'. As I reflected on the

[22] John Rawls, 'The Law of Peoples', in Stephen Shute and Susan Hurley, eds., *On Human Rights* (New York: Basic Books, 1993); and 'The Law of Peoples', manuscript of a monograph (1998).

possible content of this lecture while sitting in Calcutta in June, with the subcontinent still shaking with the aftershocks of nuclear explosions, the perspective of direct *interpersonal* sympathies and solidarities across the borders seemed to have a cogency that can substantially transcend the national particularism of the estranged polities.

In fact, our practical interactions across the borders often involve norms or rules that are not derived through the relation between nations. This applies powerfully to the markets and exchanges in a rapidly globalizing world economy, with its own discipline and own mores. Obviously, when the need for legal enforcement is involved, national laws are still very important in guiding it; and yet so much of global commerce involves direct interactions between parties—with its own ethics, rules, and norms—which can be supported or scrutinized or criticized in terms of inter-group relations that are not confined to relations between nations.

There are other identities also. A doctor could well ask what kind of commitments she may have in a collectivity of doctors and patients, when the parties involved need not necessarily belong to the same nation. (It is well to remember that the Hippocratic oath was not mediated—explicitly or by implication—by any national contract.) Similarly, a feminist activist could well consider what her commitments should be to address the special deprivation of women in general—not necessarily only those in her own country. When an Italian feminist is involved in a movement for more gender justice in Sudan, she is acting not primarily as an Italian, but as a feminist.

The obligations that are recognized cannot, of course, each be dominant over all competing concerns, since, as was discussed earlier, there may well be conflicting demands arising from different identities and affiliations. This calls for reasoning—not for a mechanical formula—on the varying priorities of the respective identities. The alternative of subjugating all affiliations to one overarching identity—that of membership of a national polity or 'people'—misses the force and far-reaching relevance of the diverse relations that operate between persons. The political conception of a person as a citizen of a nation, important as it is, cannot override all other conceptions and the behavioural consequences of other forms of group association.

This is not the occasion to try to develop fully an alternative formulation of justice in the world in which we live. The way to proceed, I would argue, would involve overlapping original positions involving different associations and groups, rather than a neat two-stage structure with the stages dovetailed into each other. This would quite possibly lead to some conflicting demands of justice involving different loyalties. However, if the theory of justice is to be seen not as an algorithmic blueprint for practical planning, but as a way of political thinking that helps to clarify the ethical demands faced by individuals and associations (including, *inter alia*, governments), then this looser formulation can be seen to be more cogent and more fair to our plural concerns and identities.

Time to conclude. First, social identities can be important. We have reasons to reject the view of individuals merely as self-concerned islands. Second, there

is a significant role of reasoning in the choice of identity, and there are good grounds for rejecting the communitarian presumption that social identity is a matter of 'discovery' rather than involving a process that incorporates choice. Third, we have reasons to be suspicious of separatism in epistemology and ethics proposed by strong forms of communitarianism and the related tendency to treat different cultures as cognitive or moral islands. Fourth, I have argued that the Rawlsian approach to justice is robust enough to withstand communitarian criticism.

Finally, I have also argued that not only communitarian critiques but the Rawlsian approach itself must provide more room for choice and reasoning in dealing with our diverse affiliations and identities, including those that are not mediated through our nationalities or citizenships. This extension would not be, in any sense, 'anti-Rawlsian' in spirit. No one has taught us more than Rawls on how to reason about justice and why we must acknowledge the choices that exist. We can go further along the way that Rawls, more than anyone else, has helped to build.

AMARTYA SEN

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