

The story you have to write. An inquiry into identity.

The identity problem: a static construction or a work in progress?

What is identity? Or in other words, what makes you and I, you and I, over a certain period of time? This question is central to the philosophy of mind, because it's deeply linked to the mind / body problem. Can I be I, without my body? Should we accept the idea of the I, and in so doing identity, as a non-physical entity that can detach from the body, and keep on living?

The first modern philosopher who questioned the ancient idea of identity as an immutable substance was Locke. He followed the mind / body dualism stating that the man, as the material living body, was what characterized the human being, rather than his reason. Locke stated in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*:

“If we should see a creature of our own shape and physical constitution, though it had no more reason all its life than a cat or a parrot, we would still call him a man; and anyone who heard a cat or a parrot talk, reason, and philosophize would still think it to be a cat or a parrot and would describe it as such.”

So the idea of the man as a “rational animal” is no longer true. Then what makes an individual, or using Locke's words, a *person*?

A typical movie cliché is the mind / body swap. In many movies we see the main characters swapping their bodies, following a certain event. This unusual situation usually generates some funny sketches, where the characters try to interact with other people. They are perceived as the other person, but their self-perception remains unchanged.

According to Locke's theory, they are still the same people as before the swapping. Their personal memories are still intact and so is their identity.

But if I am me, in relation to the memory that I have of myself, we should think that amnesia is probably the worst enemy that we can face. And should all the memories be intact in order to produce an identity, or do we have “main” memories and “secondary” memories?

This theory was immediately criticized by Hume, because:

“Who can tell me, for instance, what were his thoughts and actions on the first of January 1715, the 11th of March 1719, and the 3d of August 1733?” (Hume, 1738).

Moreover, Hume claims that everytime we think about our personal identity, we found ourselves wrapped in a series of perceptions that belong to us, but we can't just isolate one of them, which should be the distincted perception of our Self. According to Hume, the I is nothing more than the name that we use to call that collection of ideas and perceptions that we have. But those are unstable and change over time. So the idea of a permanent I is nothing more than an illusion.

This fact, combined with the notion of identity as a collection of private memories led Hume to assert that our identity could not just be what we remember, but what we want to remember. when we experience a “gap” in our story, we try to fill it with our imagination, on the basis of the principles of similarity and causality.

This theory is very convincing because it regards the human faculty to imagine as something essential to what, or who, we are. This powerful connection between imagination and memories not only defines our identity, but also helps us in the process of making one.

If the way we process our perception will be study more by Dennet, Vittorio Guidano pushed

Hume's theory even further. Guidano, founder of the post-rationalist cognitivism, postulates the existence of a true "narrative mind". He asserts that the way we build up our identity is strictly connected with the evolution of the consciousness and the organization of cognitive processes. The main point to understand the factors that help to form the Self need to be searched in the notion of "self-organization", the way human beings organize themselves, and how they make sense to the reality, in order to preserve their personal identity and integrity. Our private story, our ability to shape our memories, is not detachable from our experience of the "not-me", of the other. The way we choose to interact with the alterity forms the way we gain knowledge from the world, from our social environment.

"Not only would I say that the Self always implies a sense of the other and, in general, of others, but of everything that does not correspond with the Self in the world." [...] "The meaning is produced only thanks to the conversational interaction that the individual has with others. The meaning is produced in the narrative plot of conversations of which human life is made up (...). The meaning is the way in which the Self organizes its own experience, it constitutes a way of creating coherence and consistency in the context in which it belongs." (Guidano, 1992). (Tran. me) [1]

The evolution of the way we acquire individual knowledge over time must be considered as a process of self-organization of the identity. The need to maintain a continuity in our persona's story, avoiding any idiosyncrasy that may originate from any internal or external pressure, creates the need to re-arrange our identity during our life.

But this does not mean that our identity is nothing more than something at the mercy of the waves of existence. It is, on the contrary, a willingness to adapt. The continue assimilation of new experiences over time increases the internal complexity of the identity gradually, taking the individual to much more polished levels of the Self and the world.

Notes:

[1] *"Non solo direi che il Sé implica sempre un senso dell'altro e, in generale, degli altri, ma di tutto quello che non coincide con il Sé, del mondo." [...] "Il significato si produce soltanto grazie all'interazione conversazionale che l'individuo ha con gli altri. Il significato si produce nella trama narrativa delle conversazioni di cui è composta la vita umana (...). Il significato è il modo con il quale il Sé organizza la propria esperienza, costituisce un modo di darsi coerenza e consistenza nel contesto al quale appartiene."*

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