

THE INDIVIDUAL'S IDENTITY IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

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Abstract

The aim of submitted paper is to analyze the problem of identity in contemporary society and to show how dynamic, multi-layered and divergent can identity of an individual be. I will focus on the question what identity means in contemporary society and how an individual creates it continuously. In addition to philosophical, sociological and anthropological reflections on identity, the basis of my reflections will be the exploration of identity according to Susan Faludi, a contemporary journalist and documentary writer. The latter examines in detail the identity of her own father, who changed his gender from male to female at the age of 76, although he does not seem to have achieved the true fulfillment of his own search for identity. In the following text, we will discuss selected perspectives on the problem of identity in philosophy (Descartes, Locke, Damasio) and later we will move on to the investigation of identity in the context of gender in connection with cultural conditioning.

Keywords: self-identification, identity, gender, society, Susan Faludi, Descartes, binarity

1. INTRODUCTION

An interesting contemporary reflection on the question of identity is the study of the American journalist with Hungarian and Jewish roots, Susan Faludi. When award-winning author Faludi learns that her seventy-six-year-old father has undergone gender reassignment surgery, she embarks on an unusual journey to find a sense of identity in the modern world. The author's effort to face her father's metamorphosis takes her beyond the borders: historical, political, religious, sexual, until she finds herself face to face with the question of today's time: Is identity something you choose or is it rather something you can't escape? (Faludi 2018) Etymologically, the concept of identity is related to the concept of medieval Christianity, to the Latin *identitās*, which can be translated as identity. The Latin *identitās* is formed from the word *idem*, which we translate as the same. The Greek language used the term *tāutotēs* to denote identity, sameness, derived from the Greek *tāutos*, which we translate as the same, identical (Greek to *auto* – the same) (Králík 2015). We can find this concept, for example, in Parmenides' fragments, from which it is clear that there is only one entity (Eon) and the entire plurality and variability of entities is only an appearance (*doxa*). In the following text, we will discuss selected perspectives on the problem of identity in philosophy (Descartes, Locke, Damasio) and later we will move on to the investigation of identity in the context of gender in connection with cultural conditioning.

2. THE PHILOSOPHICAL CONSIDERATIONS OF AN IDENTITY

In philosophy, R. Descartes' concept of identity became a breakthrough, who, with methodological skepticism, was directed towards the perspective of the self from the first person. Descartes' skepticism begins with a reflexive self-consciousness that questions everything, resulting in the questioning of absolutely everything except the fact that we think (doubt). Despite a skeptical attitude towards the external world and knowledge of reality, one absolutely certain guidance remains for us, according to Descartes: "... even if I wanted to think that everything is deceptive, it is absolutely necessary that I, who think so, should exist." (Descartes 1992, p. 22)

Descartes also offers a perspective with an imaginary demon by which man would be guided and who would question any possibility of guidance. But one thing cannot be doubted: the fact that I doubt. Nor can it be doubted that I think. Doubting is the act of thinking, and however conceivable it may be that my thoughts are wrong because of the demon, yet the very fact that I think remains with me, and that is

indisputable. And if I am deceived by a demon, then that still means that I am, otherwise I could not be deceived by him. "... And let him lie to me as much as he can, yet he will never make me nothing if I think I am something. So, having considered everything enough and more than enough, it is necessary to establish that the statement: I am, I exist, is necessarily true" (Descartes 2003, p. 28) Or, more famously Descartes formulation: Cogito ergo sum. I mean, I am. Cogito, or self, includes all the contents of the human mind, including sensory perception, not in the form of cognition of objects of the external world, but as modes of thought through which a person thinks only of states of mind without relation to objects. John Locke also made a significant contribution to the solution of identity issues. In the work *Discourse on Human Reason*, he defines the criterion of personal identity. According to John Locke, the criterion of human identity is memory. This criterion privileges the first-person perspective, similar to Descartes' cogito. Here, however, we find a departure from Descartes' concept, which equates the self with an immaterial substance. Locke assumes that the perceiver also has a conscious experience of perceiving: "...when we see, hear, feel, taste, have feelings, think our wishes, we know that we do so." (Locke 1983, p. 71)

The self in Locke's conception separates the experiences it has had from those it has not through memory. The limits of personal memory also mean the limits of self-identity. According to Locke, a person's identity consists in participating in the same continuing life, based on the continuity of flowing material particles and the functional organization of the body, although the matter of which a person is composed is constantly changing. A person's identity is determined by the continuity of memory, not by the duration of a material or immaterial substance. Locke's idea of identity as memory has greatly influenced the approach of several psychologists, psychiatrists and neuropsychologists, who also situate the essence of the self in his memory. It is worth mentioning, for example, the cases of memory damage described by neuropsychologist Oliver Sacks. In the story *The Question of Identity* (Sacks 2013), Sacks describes the case of the patient William Thompson, who could not remember anything for more than a few seconds, was constantly disoriented, in the abyss of amnesia, which he tried to cover up and bridge with fabrications. Sacks believes that: "... for him it was not fiction, but the real world as he saw it and perceived it. He himself was constantly changing and disintegrating, his identity did not last even for a moment, and because he could not live like that, Mr. Thompson created a kind of feverish, unreal world, a kind of substitute coherence of phenomena, things, situations and people." (Sacks 2013, p. 122) From the first-person point of view, the very self-perception of Mr. Thompson, it was not about creating situations, characters and stories, but about the normal, real world. Korsakov's syndrome, which he was diagnosed with, forced him to create a world and himself to replace what was lost through constant forgetting. Sacks speaks of the amazing power of creativity and imagination that his patient must have possessed because "...he literally has to create himself (and his world) at every single moment." (Sacks 2013, p. 123)

He thus creates (unsuspectingly) a self-portrait that lacks continuity, that is, what the vast majority of philosophers, psychologists, psychiatrists and neuropsychologists consider to be a key feature of identity. Each of us lives our own story, the self-portrait that is this story is our identity. In order to preserve the identity, a person needs a continuous internal conversation. Mr. Thompson was deprived of a continuous, coherent internal narrative, which led him to a kind of narrative madness. People describe him as a buffoon, a spontaneous, ridiculous madman who never stops. It constantly bridges, patches the disruption of memory, sense, personality, identity. But the question remains, how does Mr. Thompson feel? According to Sacks: "...he does not feel that he has lost feeling (because he has lost feeling), he does not feel that he has lost depth, that elusive, mysterious, multi-leveled depth that somehow defines identity or reality." (Sacks 2013, p. 123) And here we encounter perhaps the most serious methodological problem. How do we know he doesn't feel a loss of identity? After all, only Mr. Thompson himself experiences first-person perception, our entire induction is based on a reductive second- and third-person analogy. As Oliver Sacks mentioned: "If we want to learn something about a person, we ask about his fate, his story, because each of us is a biography, a story. Each of us is an individual story that we constantly, unconsciously create through ourselves and in ourselves - through perception, feelings, thoughts and, last but not least, through discourse, talk. Biologically, physically, we are not very different from each other; historically, as a narrative, each of us is unique." (Sacks 2013, p. 37).

Let's return to the reflections of philosophers on the topic of identity, self, consciousness. I will introduce Damasio's evolutionary perspective (Damasio 1999) and the distinction between basic consciousness and expanded consciousness. Basic consciousness can be understood as a biological state that is characterized by one organizational level, does not have memory, attention, or language. It does not belong only to man. Part of expanded consciousness, which is graded, is the ability to anticipate the future. Damage to basic consciousness means damage to extended consciousness, the reverse is not true. Damasio further connects the emergence and development of consciousness with the emergence and development of the self, speaking of the proto-self, the basic self, and the autobiographical self. Therefore, the self (neuronal self) can be understood as the biological predecessor of the self, it does not yet have consciousness, we are not aware of it, it lacks contact with the object.

For the proto-self, the representation of the object represents a change and the emergence of the core self. We are aware of the basic self, it is characterized by continuity in time, and the autobiographical self follows it evolutionarily. This is a summation of individual experience from the lived past to anticipating the future.

3. GENDER AS A KEY PART OF AN INDIVIDUAL'S IDENTITY

To understand the problem that we want to pay attention to next, it is necessary to first explain the difference between the meanings of the terms gender and sex. These are terms often confused and although they are related, the difference between them is significant. Sex is biologically determined primarily by the presence of sex chromosomes and is not subject to change. We also perceive and behave according to our gender. Etymologically, this term is related to the term head, (number of heads) which originates in the Russian *poglovje* and later began to be used in the context of male/female gender, or as a set of signs distinguishing men and women; Latin *sex*, *sexus* appears in the 14th century in the meaning "state of a woman" or "state of a man".

Congruence between experiencing biological sex and gender role is called *cisgender*. Natal sex can be assigned to an individual based on the appearance of anatomical features that are present at birth, but it can also be a sex determined prenatally, based on an ultrasonographic examination or genetic tests. To put it simply, gender (sex) is a physical determinant with which we are born. Gender, on the other hand, refers to the role that society assigns to us. Etymologically, the term gender is related to the Proto-Slavic *roditi*, which was derived from the Indo-European *uredht*, which can be translated as grow, rise, rise; we also translate the ancient Indian *várdhati* in a similar meaning as multiply, increase, Greek *orthos* means upright, straight (Králik 2015).

The Latin *genus* is related to the Old French *gender*, which appeared around the 13th century and meant a kind, a genre. *Genus* also means class, species, character, order, in the sense of classification. From the aforementioned etymological analysis, it is clear that the concept of gender refers to something dynamic. In the context of contemporary legal philosophy (but also other scientific fields, e.g. sociology, psychology, ethnology, anthropology, etc.), we do not understand gender as a biological, but rather as a social, psychological, historical and cultural determinant. It is simply expressed by Laura Palazzani in the Introduction to the book *Gender in Philosophy and Law*, where she writes that "gender marks who we are, so it is a physical condition; gender indicates who we become, so it is an acquired status." (Palazzani 2012, p. v) According to Laura Palazzani, "gender denotes both the conceptual category referring to things or persons that have essential properties in common and that differ in inessential properties (analogously to kind, species, class, type, from the Latin *genus*), and the grammatical category distinguishing between masculine and feminine (in some languages from neuter too)." (Palazzani 2012, p. v)

Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, the so-called The Istanbul Convention defines gender in Article 3 as: "the socially established role, behavior, actions and characteristics that the relevant society considers appropriate for women and men" <[https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/SK/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:22023A0602\(01\)>](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/SK/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:22023A0602(01)>). As, in our opinion, Zuzana Fellegi rightly notes, the convention points out that the difference between men and women is not only biological in the sense of innate sex, but that there is also a difference in the social

and societal status of women and men and what is expected of them within expects this position. The recognition of the category of gender does not cancel the category of gender, gender only indicates a certain social superstructure of gender, which is not innate, it is always created by the current society and changes historically. (Fellegi 2020) "And although there is only one female biological sex, different societies create different roles and models according to which they should behave, and their social status is often unequal"(Fellegi 2020), Fellegi further asserts.

Relating to the role that we attribute to an individual on the basis of gender is so uncomfortable for some people that they cannot identify with it. There are people who have to struggle every day with the feeling that they do not belong in their body, that they cannot identify with the role assigned to them after birth. We are talking about trans people. They do not identify with the sex and (or) gender assigned to them at birth (or prenatally on the basis of an ultrasonographic examination). As with every person, the multidimensional complex of aspects that make up that person must be taken into account, the same is the case with transgender people). Some trans people only wish to change their registered gender to match what they see as their own and with which they identify. Some of them wish to undergo various forms of treatment and interventions so that the appearance of their body corresponds to the ideas of the given gender (as Faludi's father in her own story). There are those who do not wish to be assigned a gender in the state registers with which they do not identify, but their concept of their own gender is not defined into two approved categories, therefore they do not wish to be identified as either of the categories "man" or "woman".

Despite the diversity of needs and requirements of trans people, they differ from the so-called cis people, i.e. persons who do not perceive the discrepancy between the gender assigned at birth and the perceived gender identity. Experience of problematic self-identification, or even non-identification is unique for each individual (just as self-identification with one's own physicality is unique for cisgender people). An individual may be aware of a certain sexual and gender discomfort from early childhood, or he may evaluate the problem with self-identification later in adolescence, puberty or adulthood. In addition to transgender people, there are people who cannot be clearly classified as male or female according to medical standards. Gender dysphoria (incongruence) is characterized by a significant and permanent discrepancy between an individual's experienced gender and the gender assigned to it (without the possibility of free choice), which often leads to a desire for transition, so that the individual can live, be accepted and perceived by himself and his surroundings as a person of the experienced gender.

In the past, transgenderism was considered a mental illness, but the World Health Organization has taken a step forward in terms of the perception of transgender people. On May 25, 2019, it removed gender nonconformity from the list of mental illnesses and moved it to the category of sexual health, so "the current diagnostic version of transsexualism is named as gender incongruence in the 11th revision of the International Classification of Diseases and defined as a marked and persistent discrepancy between the experienced gender of an individual and the gender assigned to it. Let's look at one well-known case, from Germany. It was about Vanja, who was born in 1989 in Germany and was registered as a girl in the birth book. However, he did not identify with either the female or the male gender. With a non-standard chromosome composition (45, X0) and with the Dritte Option campaign, he therefore decided in 2014 to demand through the courts that his intersexuality be recognized and the record regarding his gender changed to "inter/divers" or "divers". In Germany at that time, there was a possibility of erasing the gender data from the register from 2013, but Vanja refused. The Federal Constitutional Court found him to be right in 2017. If the law forces persons who cannot permanently identify with the female or male gender to officially record their gender, but does not allow a positive registration other than female or male, it violates their rights. Subsequently, in 2018, the German parliament passed a law that allows intersex people to choose female or male gender; do not indicate your gender and also indicate your gender as "divers". In Germany, the binary model of sexes and genders was thus questioned and the approach of the Western understanding of intersexuality began to be gradually reversed.

Let's also add that in addition to transgender and non-binary people, there are also sexually fluid people. People from this group form a subgroup of non-binary persons, by "fluidity" they signal that there is a dynamic fluctuation between gender identities in their identity. The so-called a-gender, non-gender, gender-free, gender-neutral: these persons completely reject binary or non-binary orientation and define

themselves as people who have no specific gender identity (Rauchfleisch 2022). Transgender or otherwise gender non-conforming people experience gender-based violence because of their appearance, disgust from their surroundings, fear, as can be visible also in Faludi's story or in many researches (Bauer et al. 2009, Ozamis et al. 2020)

4. CULTURAL CONDITIONING OF APPROACHES TO GENDER IDENTITY

We mentioned above in connection with the etymological definition of the term gender that it refers to a certain dynamic that is related to the socialization of an individual. In the next subsection, we will point out the diversity of approaches to gender from the point of view of different cultures. According to several current researches, the perception of gender and gender identity formation is culturally conditioned (Rauchfleisch 2022). While Western culture is largely based on a static gender binary, there are cultures with "less rigid images of the sexes." (Rauchfleisch 2020, p. 13) An interesting example is the Native Americans in North America, also referred to as the "two-spirit-people." The term "two-spirit-people" was replaced in the 1990s by the judgmental and pejorative term "berdache" used to describe Native Americans who defy traditional Western expectations of gender identity, physicality, experience and manifesting.

The term berdache was first used in Italian in the 15th century, later recorded in French and Spanish. The term berdache comes from the Arabic word bardaj, which can be translated as a slave or kept boy, the Spanish bardaje was used to mean a person who engages in sodomy, and the French bardache meant a boy who is kept by a man for sexual services. The arrival of Europeans in America and the introduction of Christianity had a significant impact on the traditions and prejudicial attitude towards berdach. Europeans considered gender variation outside of the male-female binary and any sexual behavior other than culturally accepted male-female relationships as deviant. For them, the term berdache was a "label" used to condemn individuals who deviated from the binary system. The term berdache was also applied to individuals who were anatomically different such that they did not fit the European definition of male or female and were judged as freaks, monsters and deviants. (Roscoe 2000)

In American Indian tradition, a person's character is seen as a reflection of their spirit, and transgender people are considered doubly blessed, having both a male and a female spirit (Williams 1992). "Two-spirit people have a recognized social position among the Indians and are sometimes highly revered. The Indians explain the two spirit being as a call from a higher power and therefore attribute supernatural powers to these people." (Roscoe 2000) Similar religious traditions existed among the indigenous people of Siberia and many parts of Central and Southeast Asia. Rather than the physical body, Native Americans emphasized the "spirit," a person's character, as most important. Rather than seeing two-spirit persons as transsexuals trying to make themselves the "opposite sex," it is more accurate to see them as individuals who have a gender status different from both male and female. This alternate gender status offers a range of possibilities, from slightly effeminate men or masculine women to androgynous or transgender people to those who completely cross-dress and pass as a different gender. Native American emphasis on variants of gender identity formation allows for diversity in gender and sexual identities.

Another notable example is the Fakaleiti in Tonga, who dress and manifest as women, or the Indian hijras, referred to as the third sex. We can also briefly attend the so-called the phenomenon of "virgin" or "tobelija", which are labels for a woman who socially changes her gender and takes a vow of virginity or lifelong celibacy. (Young 2000) She cuts her hair, dresses in men's clothes, uses the male version of her name, can carry a gun. She assumes the rights and responsibilities of a man in a patriarchal society, participates in men's meetings and can join the military service. The practice is based on collective, not individual responsibility and needs, and the "virgin" is recognized by the community. A vital role of the social institution of the virgin or tobelija in the Western Balkans is to ensure the survival of the clan. (Young 2000) The practice evolved from the need to transfer the inheritance to a male heir in the absence of a male in the household. It is not about gender dysphoria, but about a targeted, pragmatic acceptance of the social change of gender, which is advantageous in the given community and perceived as natural, as it has become a common part of the culture.

5. CONCLUSIONS

In the previous text, I tried to indicate the complexity and complexity of the phenomenon of personal identity. Similarly, in the biographical documentary novel *In the Dark Chamber*, Faludi shows the multi-layered and dynamic nature of identity. In her father's case, this is formed not only by gender and gender (although on the first level this may seem to be the foundation of his identity) but also by nationality, historical and cultural circumstances, the relationship with parents, family and later with his own children, leaving his native country and searching for possibilities as live in a foreign, new country. All this shaped Faludi's father's identity and it shapes ours as well. Perhaps the complexity of identity was best expressed in the phenomenal dialogue between Alice and the caterpillar: "‘Who are you?’ said the Caterpillar. This was not an encouraging opening for a conversation. Alice replied, rather shyly, ‘I-I hardly know, sir, just at present- at least I know who I was when I got up this morning, but I think I must have been changed several times since then.’ ‘What do you mean by that?’ said the Caterpillar sternly. ‘Explain yourself!’ ‘I can’t explain myself, I’m afraid, sir’ said Alice, ‘because I’m not myself, you see.’ ‘I don’t see,’ said the Caterpillar. ‘I’m afraid I can’t put it more clearly,’ Alice replied very politely, ‘for I can’t understand it myself to begin with; and being so many different sizes in a day is very confusing.’ ‘It isn’t,’ said the Caterpillar. ‘Well, perhaps you haven’t found it so yet,’ said Alice; ‘but when you have to turn into a chrysalis--you will someday, you know--and then after that into a butterfly, I should think you’ll feel it a little queer, won’t you?’ ‘Not a bit,’ said the Caterpillar. ‘Well, perhaps your feelings may be different,’ said Alice; ‘all I know is, it would feel very queer to me.’ ‘You!’ said the Caterpillar contemptuously. ‘Who are you?’” (Lewis 2016).

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