

# Preface

*It's a familiar scene: a crowd of annoyed passengers wielding boarding passes for a flight that has just been cancelled. As time wears on and nothing seems to be happening, tempers begin to fray; suddenly, one irate customer pushes himself to the front of the crowd and yells at the harried assistant behind the counter. "This is ridiculous! Do you know who I am?" whereupon the assistant calmly picks up a microphone and says, in as sweet a voice as she can manage: "Ladies and gentlemen, there is a man here who does not know who he is. If anyone can provide some assistance, please step forward."*

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*At the end of the exam, the teacher instructed all students to stop writing immediately. One student continued to write, ignoring several warnings to put down her pen. The student finally approached the front desk to submit her test booklet, only to be informed by the teacher that this would be a pointless exercise as she would be disqualified anyway. The student then asked the teacher "Do you know who I am?" to which the reply was "I have no idea, but your name is on the test", whereupon our clever student shoved her own booklet into the middle of the large pile already submitted. She then quickly left the classroom.*

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*Asked by the bank manager to confirm his identity, the elderly gentleman took out a small mirror, looked at it for a moment, and replied: "Yep, that's me all right!"*

Some years ago, I taught an honors class of undergraduates at a well-known university in the USA. My chosen topic for the course was "Identity", and I hoped that the students (who were reputedly bright and enthusiastic) would be willing to engage with just about anything I presented to them. Having pursued for many years the topic of identity in its mathematical, logical and broader conceptual manifestations, I had relatively recently become aware that identity was a major focus of attention in the social sciences. One reason for this shift, which occurred around the 1950s–1970s, was the emergence of a range of civil rights movements (particularly in the United States), in response to years of persecution and discrimination perpetrated against the members of groups that threatened the dominant *status quo* characterized as heterosexual, white, male, Christian and able-bodied. The second, more theoretical factor, whose origins predated the first by at least 100 years, was

the reaction against Modernism and the idea of a fixed self who both controlled, yet remained outside, a fully determinate natural world. Selves – or persons – in the emerging “post-everything” age of population growth and decline, growing acceptance of gender and sexual diversity, ethnic and religious conflict, the tragic and unpredictable movement of refugees, economic and cultural colonization, climate change and so on – were (and are) increasingly thought to take on multiple or shifting identities. Behind this recent shift of focus – to what is known, in the social sciences, as *Identity Politics* – lies an assumption which is rarely exposed, let alone challenged, namely: that the determinants of our own identities are those same groupings, collectives and associations to which I referred, whose admittedly uncertain and shifting identities infect and infuse those of their members. Nation-state affiliations (citizenship), gender traits and roles, formerly distinctive and separate cultural markers, etc., are becoming fuzzier and more fluid; accordingly – so the assumption implies – our own identities are following suit. If we add another largely unexamined assumption – that identity (and only identity) answers the question “Who am I?”, then we appear to arrive at the disturbing conclusion (for me, at least) that not only do many people not know who they are, but that there is nothing there for them either to know or not know. Neither you nor I *have* any identity! I do not think we have to accept this conclusion.

Returning to the Honors class, when planning the course, I knew that I wanted to discuss both the logic of identity and identity politics (as characterized above), but I made no real attempt to connect the two (mainly because I not yet worked out the connection). So, for the first several weeks, I presented the formal properties of identity and some of its associated logical and conceptual puzzles, including Heraclitus’ thesis that you cannot step into the same river twice, the paradox of *Theseus’ ship* which involves two separate but contemporaneous ships claiming identity with one earlier ship, numerical versus qualitative identity (Leibniz’s Law and “Identity of Indiscernibles”), and the challenge of identifying and re-identifying familiar objects through space and time (see Chaps. 2, 3, and 4). How, I had long wondered, could anyone *not* be fascinated by this fundamental concept which, on the one hand, is part of every student’s mathematics toolbox as soon as they learn that when you put two apples on the table, and add three apples, the result is (always) five apples but, on the other hand, appears to resist all attempts at definition? Identity is that relation which a thing bears to itself and to no other thing, to be sure. But how can we understand what “other” means here unless we already know what makes something “the same”?

As I proceeded merrily to think out loud about the logical structure of the identity relation, my students who, as it happened, constituted a fair representation of the fluidity, fuzziness and diversity already noted (they included several gays and lesbians, one transsexual, two individuals of indeterminate gender, one disabled student, several non-white students, one Buddhist and so on), progressed through the stages of patient indifference, bewilderment and, eventually, outright hostility. Why, they demanded, was I wasting time discussing rivers, ships and obscure logical principles when what they wanted – what they had taken the course for – was the opportunity to affirm their own (marginalized) identities and, thereby, clarify *who they*

were? Sadly, by the time we reached that part of the syllabus where the latter issues were to take center stage, I had already alienated a good many of them. My student evaluations for the course were disastrous.

This book represents my best attempt to make it up to those students, at least in my own mind. I now feel that I understand the connection between the logical and conceptual dimensions of identity, on the one hand, and the range of issues that fall under the heading of “Identity Politics”, on the other. But the connection is, I fear, not very encouraging. When we understand the meaning and function of the identity relation in what I call its literal (numerical) context, we find that the concerns of *identity politics*, so-called, have *nothing* to do with this conception of identity at all. Why this is true, and why it matters, are among my chief concerns in what follows.

We humans have been asking apparently serious questions about our own identities since our hominoid (hominid?) ancestors first stood up on two legs and realized that their grunts could be understood by others just like them. That we did – and still do – ask questions at all reflects certain emergent features of our evolutionary development, most notably: a capacity for speech, an awareness of the world around us, a desire to know what is going on in that world (“What is it?”, “What is it doing and why?”...) and, presumably, an expectation or hope that someday, someone will come up with the answers. Many, albeit not all, such questions also reflect the realization that we – i.e. those asking the questions – are *part of* that same world, in the sense that we can affect, and be affected by, things that are in it – including, as a special case, others like us. This notion that we are *causally related* to the world and its objects, as familiar as it is, nevertheless reveals a profound truth about the *kind of thing* that we are, as I shall explain. Whatever that kind is in specific terms, it binds us to the objective world of our ordinary experience: we humans exist in space and time, and our *identities* – which underscore that existence – are a product of that world.

What, then, do we say about the question of our *personal* identities which, presumably, are the target of the silly jokes with which I began? Under what circumstances can we seriously ask “Who am I?” and what would constitute a serious answer? I shall spend some time dealing with these questions, although I fear that my responses will be somewhat “underwhelming”. Briefly put, my thesis about our own literal identities – like those of any other natural objects – is that they are accounted for, conceptually at least, in virtue of the kind of (physical) thing that we are (*living organism*, perhaps). It follows that such questions as “Who am I?” in so far as these are questions of identity, are to be answered either by referring to our physical identities or by reinterpreting them as questions about something else entirely. I am many things – an Australian citizen, a resident of Hong Kong, Caucasian, a not-very-observant Jew, an ardent fan of Bach’s choral music, an academic, left-handed, gay, chubby, the eldest son of my parents, the author of these words and on and on. But with one possible exception (I will leave the reader to find it!), *not one* of these categories, groups or associations constitutes any part of my

literal *identity*, even though it may be quite appropriate to say that I strongly *identify* with several of them.

“Identity or identification?” – “Who cares!” one might ask, with utter disdain for semantic pedantry. However, such indifference is not good enough. It is true that *identity* and *identification* are closely related in some contexts – as in “What is the identity of that object?” and “Can you identify that object?”, where the appropriate answers will involve an understanding of the *kind* of object that it is. But there are other contexts in which the apparent connection is quite misleading – as in “I’ve lived in so many countries and cultures, I don’t know who I am anymore” (read: “I don’t know my own *identity*”), versus “I’ve moved around a lot but I still *identify* with Australia/Australians” (alternatively: “I still identify as Australian”). Here, I submit, there are important differences. The former claim is either false or nonsensical (barring such rare phenomena as total amnesia, advanced Alzheimer’s, or schizophrenia), while the latter suggests a certain attitude or feeling (roughly, feeling good about certain connections and affiliations). Such affective associations, though powerful, are usually morally innocuous, but not always. The notion of identifying as Australian might be short-hand for identifying with (feeling good about) certain character or racial traits rather than others. Trouble comes when affect is transformed into crude morality. It is, for example, difficult to interpret some social policies and practices as anything other than reflections of xenophobia or racism in the broader community, whereby the sins of a few are visited upon the many (i.e. all members of the most salient minority group that includes those few extremists). Ethnic and religious genocide are still present in the world, as are acts of terrorism whose perpetrators value some causes, ideals or other abstractions more than they value persons (themselves included). All such examples reveal extreme degrees of hatred whose origins lie in an apparent need to find or affirm one’s own *identity* by *identifying* with one group and – thereby – distancing oneself from others. Exposing not just the likely dangers of such an “us and them” mentality (which are well known), but the mistaken thinking that underlies it, is another of my prescribed goals here. So is offering a way forward, one which adheres to the old proverb “Prevention is better than cure”, as I shall explain.

Those intent on avoiding the sort of crude collectivist mentality portrayed in the previous paragraph – whereby we see ourselves in terms of the various groups, associations and affiliations that are most important to us – might be tempted to retreat to some form of moral and/or existential individualism, when it comes to characterizing our own personhood. Conversely, critics of individualism have often embraced just such a mentality in order to highlight each person’s essential involvement in, or dependence on, the various groups, associations and affiliations that take her beyond the limits of her own self. However, when I reflect back on my own life, I realize that I have always been fearful of both extremes (as I now see them). On one hand, I see my life and well-being as essentially bound up with the lives and well-being of others; not, I should clarify, *others* in some abstract sense of “anyone other than myself”, but *specific* others with whom my life is, in some sense, interwoven. I am, from time to time, reminded of the importance of these individuals when, for whatever reason, they are no longer present (death is one reason, but when

it comes to friends and romantic attachments, other factors often come into play, needless to say). It is as if a part of me has also ceased to be. On the other hand, I do not feel a strong sense of attachment to groups, associations and collectives, particularly those I regard as having agendas of their own that may or may not be in harmony with my own sense of who I am and where I want to go. Of course, I belong to many such *supra-persons* as I call them: I am a citizen of Australia, a member of the Jewish people, a homosexual, left-handed, an academic, Caucasian, fan of J.S. Bach and on and on (not all of these associations are *supra-persons* in the pejorative sense I will later attach to this term: some do not really constitute groups at all, just properties or qualities that people share; others, like my choir, are groups that have no moral pretensions to being more than merely the sums of their actual members). However, I see neither my identity as an individual person nor my moral sense in terms of, or relative to, such groupings.<sup>1</sup>

The twin fears I described above were nowhere more clearly realized than when I was a school student. Like many, my fondest memories (beyond my own school friends) are of a small number of outstanding teachers – particularly, in my case, those who nurtured and encouraged my sense of curiosity about the “big questions”. But my main recollection is of having a vague feeling that we were all playing a kind of game, one which managed somehow to combine intense individualism (in the guise of “competition”) with the sense of fulfilling a pre-ordained role in a system which did not really exist for our benefit. Later, as a university student, my passion for philosophy and pure mathematics overshadowed these concerns (helped, no doubt, by the happy fact of being a very good student). But when, some years later, I shifted my primary focus from philosophy to education by way of my “discovery” of philosophy for children, what attracted me as much as the prospect of bringing philosophy and children together was the collaborative and dialogical approach of the classroom *community of inquiry*. Here was an environment, both affectively and cognitively nourishing, which allowed, indeed enabled, children to *become persons*, wherein each individual became aware of her/himself as *one among others*, and in which the sense of community was not that of a *supra-person* with its own agenda, but a network of relationships whose sole rationale was the well-being of its members. This distinction between groups that are, and groups that are not, larger (in both a moral and an ontological sense) than the sums of their own parts (members) seems to me to be of the utmost importance.

This book represents my current thinking about the relationship between personhood and identity. In short (and at the risk of sounding overly dramatic), there is none! Once we see this, we can take a more critical look at those *supra-persons* which lay claim to capturing something essential about who I am and how I ought to relate to others. In the course of this examination, I find good reasons for shifting

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<sup>1</sup> The philosopher Hannah Arendt reportedly told a close friend who accused her of abandoning the Jewish people (because she had implied that those who died at the hands of the Nazis were not entirely blameless for their own fate) that she felt a great affection for, and connection to, many individuals in her life, but had no feeling for collectives such as *peoples, religions, nations*, and so on. I “identify” with Arendt here.

the focus away from the various ways in which persons seek to unite – and, therefore, divide – along such *supra-personal* lines as citizenship, religion, culture and so on; and towards those crucial characteristics which truly unite us as persons – in particular, language, morality and a triangulated sense of awareness (awareness of myself, of others and of a common world). With this realignment firmly in place, I turn back, finally, to education, and confirm the central place of collaborative inquiry through dialogue as *the* pivotal dynamic in teaching and learning.

For a variety of reasons, both personal and professional, it is quite some time since I was a member of a community of like-minded philosophers. Accordingly, I cannot here thank anyone for “reading an early draft of the entire manuscript” (except, of course, for the very helpful folk at Springer), but I can thank a select few for offering insightful comments, criticisms and suggestions, not to mention for reassuring me that the struggle to complete the book would be worthwhile in the end. They include friends and colleagues alike: Adrian Beavis, Jen Glaser, Kerry Kennedy, Lam Chi-Ming, Leung Chung-Hang, Leung Yan-Wing, Megan Laverty, Mark Mason, Margarita Pavlova, Danny Schiff, William Sin, Elliott Sober, Michael Smith. And, although it is many years since I last had any real contact with them, I cannot ignore my former teachers, advisors and mentors, particularly those who helped me shape my own views on identity and related matters: Michael Ayers, Donald Davidson, Gareth Evans, David Hull, A.C. “Camo” Jackson, Peter Strawson, David Wiggins.

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