

You don't need an identity | Raymond Geuss

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11–14 minutes

A strong, rigid identity is commonly understood as a strength. However, the very idea of a fixed identity is premised on a philosophical myth: having a complete, all-encompassing account of The Truth, a worldview. Once we realise that we can recognise the imperative for having one, consistent identity as a relic of an ancient, eccentric ethical ideal, argues Raymond Geuss.

One of the earliest, and still, in many ways, one of the most vivid, literary representations of what has now come to be called 'identity politics' is Robert Musil's novel, first published in 1930, *Man without qualities*. The novel is set in Vienna during the period immediately before the outbreak of the First World War, and the central character, Ulrich, to his dismay, finds himself surrounded by people with strong fixed 'qualities' (we would say 'identities'): feudal Catholics, socialists, people with strong commitments to Science, to The Law, to Commerce, or to Art, radical nationalists, self-consciously 'simple soldiers', but he cannot see any of these forms of engagement as anything more than possible ways of living, chosen from among an almost unsurveyable group of others to which one could equally well

devote oneself. One of the other characters in the novel says that someone completely without qualities is not really a human being at all, and many nowadays would endorse that claim. The novel focuses both on the realm of the individual and on that of the group: the political entity, too, of which Vienna was the capital, was a state that in one sense, as Musil says, died because of the lack of a simple linguistic term to refer to itself — was it Austria-Hungary, the Dual Monarchy, the Habsburg Empire? The linguistic defect was, however, merely a rather superficial expression of an underlying lack of a clear social and political identity. It is somehow appropriate that the second volume of Musil's novel, which was to deal with Ulrich's actual attainment of a kind of realised 'identity' — through an incestuous relation with his sister — was never completed. The intellectual world of the novel is presided over by the brooding presence of Nietzsche. Ulrich's hysterical friend Clarisse even proposes declaring a 'Nietzsche-Year' to celebrate the impending sixty years of peace since Kaiser Franz-Josef became Emperor — that anniversary would have fallen in December 1918.

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Identity and worldview

It wasn't, Nietzsche thought, that the Stoics had started it, but they were the ones mainly responsible for institutionalising in the West the idea that the ideal human life was that of a person with a firm and fixed identity. According to the Stoics, that identity was best instantiated in the philosopher. The philosopher leads the best kind of life for two related reasons. First, he (and let's stay with the masculine pronoun for the moment) knew and

understood the final Truth about the universe as a whole and his place in it; this was essentially a truth about the necessary order of nature. Second, he identified with and had assimilated that Truth in such a way that the order and regularity of Nature informed all his beliefs, habits, sentiments, attitudes, and actions in such a way as to give him a fixed and stable character. The consistency and invariability of his character thus mirrored the necessary large-scale order of the world. The Stoic 'Sage' knew who he was: he was '*kosmopolites*', a law-abiding citizen of the orderly city of gods and men which encompasses the whole cosmos. He was the ideal man because he had the proper worldview containing a Truth that was sufficiently substantial to serve as a guide for human life, and because he had trained himself to react, in feeling, sentiment and conduct in a way that was appropriate that worldview and which gave him his particular identity.

This general structure was taken over by Christianity. Those who were 'saved' knew the Truth about the world and their place in it. Knowing this Truth gave them a sense of their own identity (as 'the faithful' or 'the Orthodox'): it was something which, when appropriately assimilated, gave them all the guidance they needed in life. The demands made by this Truth were to have priority over all more pragmatic considerations.

Eventually, after the demise of Christianity the structure was re-secularised in various ways. Thus, the basic Truth in question can come to be construed as the claim that Reason (or in an even more modern variant 'Science') should have universal, unquestioned authority in human life. Historically the most recent full-blown worldview based identity was provided by communism. As Marx put it, communism was 'the solution to the riddle of history which also knew itself to be the solution'.

Stoicism, Christianity, communism are all what have sometimes been called 'total worldviews' or 'total ideologies', in that they purport to contain a comprehensive theory of everything: the natural world, human society, thought, emotion, values. Until the beginning of the 20th century providing such a total worldview was supposed to be the most important task of philosophy.

However, other conceptual structures have also been developed that have some strong similarities with full-blown ideologies, but are slightly narrower in their range. Thus, in the UK we have recently had a very virulent outbreak of 'nationalism'. Brexit shows the characteristic structure noted above in that the need for a palpable, unmistakable break with a prominent, clearly marked symbolic dimension was to take priority over pragmatic and utilitarian considerations such as national prosperity, and preserving our international political standing. None of these had any importance compared to the imperative to redress the *moral* affront of being forced to treat Europeans as our equals, by asserting an identity that was distinct from theirs. Still even this kind of extreme nationalism was not really a total ideology because it concerns only politics, society, and culture, and has nothing really to say about nature, logic or the human mind.

Since a traditional worldview has two aspects — the Truth it presents and the mode of assimilation of that Truth into human life so as to constitute an identity — there are correspondingly two aspects to existential human failure. First, some person or group could simply fail to discover the Truth, or, even worse one could take some falsehood to be the Truth. Thus, for Christians there are pagans who have never heard the 'Good News' and there are Muslims and post-Christian secular rationalists who may have heard it but ignore or reject it and pursue illusions.

The second kind of failure refers to a deficiency in assimilating the truth in such a way as to introduce stability and fixity into one's character and action.

What happens, however, if the idea of a single, clearly accessible Truth which can substantially structure human life is abandoned? Maybe no single true worldview exists, or perhaps it is inaccessible to us (which would amount to much the same thing in practice) or perhaps the last truth we can discover is a mere set of relatively empty platitudes, which are insufficient to give us the guidance we want about how to lead our lives.

The philosopher Kant made an interesting suggestion here. There is no metaphysical truth about the world, but we can learn a final truth about our own cognitive apparatus which is that it is structured around the principle of non-contradiction. Kant retains the Stoic ideal of fixity of character grounded in some objective truth if we adopt beliefs and habits of action which, all taken together, constitute a logically consistent set, and if we cultivate a fixed and invariable character which inclines us always to follow consistent rules.

Beyond fixed identity

If Montaigne is right to suggest that acting humanely is a function of the willingness occasionally to be inconsistent, the Stoic ideal loses much of its attractiveness. Suppose a young woman at age 6 has acquired the habit of rising early in the morning, speaking Italian in everyday life, eating meat two or three times a week, going to church every Sunday. She may change her mode of living several times during the course of a long life and, at 80 she may sleep late, habitually speak Portuguese and have become a vegan and an atheist.

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just another mask, in a series that continues, in principle, for as long as you wish to pursue it.

Still inconsistency over time is not difficult to admit. The young woman ate meat regularly, and then decided to become a vegan, so she changed; anyone who found this hard to understand had no understanding whatever of human life. It is also, if one wishes to put it that way, a logical necessity that if at any given moment she is eating meat, then at that moment she is not not-eating meat, but this is irrelevant because what is at issue in identity are habits of acting or dispositions to behave, which have a minimal temporal extension. It is also impossible that she be 'wholeheartedly' (as they say) a vegan and a meat-eater *at the same time*. The problem with this is precisely the ideal of wholeheartedness. Why exactly is there a demand that I identify myself *totally* with anything? There is nothing wrong with imposing this Romantic demand on oneself or others, provided one recognises that this is a free-standing ethical decision that is in no way mandated by the structure of the world or by human nature. As Nietzsche puts it, I can treat Christianity, Marxism, vegetarianism, rationalism, national affiliation, or the belief in science as 'masks' rather than projects that require my complete allegiance, full commitment and remainderless identification.

The philosopher, he says, *loves* the play of masks. Nietzsche's attitudes and beliefs are part of a mask which he can and does change frequently, and from which he keeps his distance.

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There are two questions here. First, is it possible *never* to identify fully with any worldview, but to treat each as one shifting perspective on the world, and to have, in that sense no fixed

character? Second, even if possible, would this be desirable? Wouldn't a world of people without traditional fixed characters and identities be simply a world of chancers like Boris Johnson or at best of infinitely pliable consumers?

I would submit, however, that the problem with Johnson is not that he is too flexible, but that he acts reprehensibly. In any case, to reject fixed identities is not to maintain that *all* ways of acting 'flexibly' are equally good. Obviously there are all sorts of moral differences between the case of an individual who espouses vegetarianism, but sometimes backslides, the case of a population whose members act sometimes as animists, sometimes as Buddhists, sometimes, perhaps, even as Muslims or Christians, and the case of a politician who is an inveterate public liar on important issues. As with most other things, it is the context which allows the discrimination. What does seem clear is that thinking one *must* have an identity rooted in a worldview is an ungrounded speculative imposition.