

Personal Identity between Philosophy and Psychology

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A Perpetual Metamorphosis?

By

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**Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing**



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This book first published 2021

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-5275-6352-9

ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-6352-0

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PRESENTATION

What is personal identity? What forms its nature? Is there a difference between identity and personality? What makes a “person” an individual, and what exactly is the person? What role is played by character, nature, environment, society, values and destiny in defining and substantiating a personal identity? How do persistence and change in identity coexist within a person? What is the nature of such a “change”? Is it just a natural process? And, are we sure it is a “process”? Which mechanism or force or dynamism determines it? And what is the function of culture, tradition and knowledge in representatively defining who we are and the way in which we understand ourselves, our relationship with others and, in general, the human being?

We are currently facing an additional reflective challenge due to the fragmentation of our understanding and knowledge around the human being because of the progressive differentiation and specialization of knowledges. Paul Ricoeur revealed this sort of paradox (a lack of comprehensive understanding due to an improvement in exact knowledge):

We have at our disposal a symbolic logic, an exegetical science, an anthropology, and a psychoanalysis and, perhaps for the first time, we are able to encompass in a single question the problem of the unification of human discourse. The very progress of the aforementioned disparate disciplines has both revealed and intensified the dismemberment of that discourse. Today the unity of human language poses a problem. (Ricoeur 1970, 3–4)

From a certain perspective, by following this diagnosis it seems that the search for a unified synthetic and comprehensive understanding is far less reasonable and achievable than to (re-)consider the problem from the tensional perspective of an interdisciplinary work. The dialectics of different disciplinary approaches and knowledges, as well as different theoretical-speculative perspectives and traditions, can be more productive in deepening and readdressing problems concerning human identity. It is by following this line of reasoning that we have decided to analyse and discuss the above questions (and all connected problems and dilemmas) from the dialectical perspective of psychoanalysis and philosophy. As is known, these are among two of the most important disciplines to offer significant and productive advancements in the current study of human identity.

Between them, they offer a massive vocabulary and a vast and flexible theoretical system. At the same time, they manage to “absorb”, consider and summarise important content and knowledge stemming from other disciplines such as neuroscience, psychology and psychiatry.

It is useful to immediately specify the use and interpretation of the key concepts—such as “identity”, “individual” and “person”—and the overview of the problematic. A historical-theoretical approach helps to (briefly) summarise the main critical aspects and major models of identity which are still animating contemporary debate and research. Both directly and indirectly, this book will constantly define its positions, theorisations and critical analyses, keeping track of those models and their concrete, scientific contents. Together with their contributions, all scholars and scientists mentioned below will be implicitly considered as an unavoidable reference or a critical term of dialectical comparison.

1. Identity as a process

Georg W. F. Hegel was the first to conceive of human identity as a process. Beyond its specific character as a spiritualistic/idealistic philosophy, Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807) may be interpreted as the paradigmatic example of an approach to human identity in which the accomplishment of personal identity comes via a process. In fact, it is expressive of a teleological view that lends itself to exploring the development of personal identity through a constant (logical-ontological) three-sided dialectics of affirmation, negation/differentiation and unification (or thesis, antithesis and synthesis). The moment of reunification represents a new starting point of a new dialectical moment of affirmation, negation/differentiation and unification, until the end of a final and higher level of realization or accomplishment.

Hegel’s perspective supports the idea of a process of personal development in a psychological, existential (or experiential) and moral sense. The negative is the true dynamic element, and it can be experienced in many ways: an inner limitation, a suffering, an external obstacle, a difficult situation, a critical relationship or an interrelational experience.

It can be said, on the one hand, that some philosophers and scholars (Alexandre Kojève, Jean Hyppolite, Paul Ricoeur and others) explicitly refer to Hegel by offering their own anthropological interpretation; on the other hand, other perspectives can indirectly be put in parallel and in connection with Hegel’s view because of the great similarities they reveal. This is the case with William James’s philosophical point of view, for example. Not only does his pragmatic perspective counterpoise René

Descartes's substantialist and rationalist approach to the *Cogito* and (thus) personal identity, but also—in accordance with evolutionism—his vision intertwines the idea of identity as a flux with the idea of a perpetual, essential, progressive processuality. This is an idea largely shared among pragmatists and neopragmatists who mirror Darwinism and interpret personal identity as “emerging” from biological or organic life. Among contemporary neo-pragmatists, it is John Searle who proposes, maybe better than others, a productive theoretical mix of evolutionist and phenomenological approaches to the human being. The result is a naturalistic model which can be classified as reductionist, but at the same time acts as a kind of dialectical-processual model. In a further sense, the concept of processuality can be found in certain interdisciplinary research projects based on a kind of phenomenological approach that is directly or indirectly linked to Edmund Husserl's phenomenology (as Searle's was). Francisco J. Varela, Evan Thompson and Eleanor Rosch's neurophenomenology represents one of the most articulated and ambitious projects of this nature (see Varela, Thompson, Rosch 1991). It revitalises, extends and redefines the potentiality of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception, mixing it with cognitive science (and subsequently with additional philosophical traditions and different scientific disciplines). Somehow, Alva Noë's enactivism (Noë 2009) or Vittorio Gallese's studies and reflections on mirror neurons (see, for example, Gallese 2006) follow a similar interdisciplinary, phenomenological approach.

2. Identity as a dynamism

A very different theoretical model of identity is provided by Sigmund Freud's dynamic model. Beyond the variety of ideas and understanding of human identity and psychic life that he developed over decades, Freud retained a conception of a psychic life that is dependent on neurobiological function and, at the same time, characterised by a “middle-way” dynamism of energetism and experience (that is, of mechanism and will, instinct, desire etc.). More specifically, in Freud we find two major moments of theoretical-anthropological elaboration. There is a passage from Freud's early perspective on psychic life, focused on the theory of drives, that is, of the conflicting dialectic between the instances of the ego and the libidinal drives (still maintained in his metapsychological period); and a second perspective focused on a deeper dynamism between *life drives* and *death drives*. Together, these writings confirm the persistence and centrality of the element of dynamics in Freud's vision. In one way or another, all theories,

practices and methodological-therapeutic approaches in dynamic psychology have Freud's "lesson" as their main reference.

Certainly, dynamic psychology faced tremendous transformation and even the history of psychoanalysis is a history of different, alternative, even mixed and conflicting models of psychic life. However, these models still persist as predominantly "dynamic", as is the case in theoretical-speculative studies when Freud's psychoanalysis is (re)interpreted in connection to other models, such as Hegel's. This can be seen, for example, in the works of Hyppolite and Paul Ricoeur, for example. It is interesting to put Hegel and Freud in connection. There is a certain justification for this, because, as in Hegel's vision, Freud conceives of the conflicting and antithetical context (between conscious and unconscious life) as a fundamental "mechanism" in the definition and maturation of personal identity. At the same time, behind Freud's connected idea that "The ego is not master in its own house" (Freud 1968, 143) lies his productive contribution in arguing against the substantialist approach to the human being which was traditionally conceived of as accomplished *ab origine*. Somehow, we find something similar in Hegel's approach. However, Freud's scepticism is stronger and deeply antithetical to a substantialist approach, more so than with Hegel. In fact, where Freud relieves tensions between regressive drives and progressive drives, and therapy is used to overcome a psychic experience blocked and trapped because of the past, Hegel describes a teleological-progressive movement of the spirit across various challenges and vicissitudes to become fully accomplished. Freud's individual is a frustrated, contradictory, unfree and inauthentic being. Conversely, Hegel's individual is a spiritual entity, always involved in dramatic dialectics in order to become free, accomplished and realised.

Freud's theorisation has been strongly reconsidered and transformed, even within psychoanalysis itself, stretching it to its extreme and even overturning it. This is the case with Jacques Lacan's structuralist approach, in which personal identity disappears behind the constitutive structure of psychic life (i.e., there is no full, concrete and autonomous self). Even certain uses of psychoanalysis in philosophy do not mirror its essential aspect as a dynamic model. Gilles Deleuze, for example, largely refers to Freud, but at the same time conceives of identity as a practical-social artefact and a perpetual non-substantial phenomenon, something more similar to a stable simulacrum or a "play of contrasts" in which there is neither dynamism nor dialectics. In his view, all modern philosophical and scientific research around the human being (Freud's included) follows an anti-Hegelian line of reasoning. He does not want to re-establish dialectics as a paradigm or as a way to positively recompose all contradiction and

tensions in human personal development; conversely, he considers contradiction and unaccomplishment as something “stable”. However, under his deconstructive perspective he aims to reintroduce a kind of dynamism: the dynamism of a perpetual process of demolition (which is the process of life itself).

The misunderstanding that could easily arise from transferring Freud’s *divided subject* from the psychopathological and clinical domain, which is its true context, to the philosophical domain (as a universal paradigm) should not be overlooked. In fact, even if neurotically split, the subjectivity of a philosopher who reflects on his own fractures remains in all respects a “strong” subject that has nothing to do with borderline non-integration or with the schizophrenic void and, perhaps, not even with the deficiency of the narcissistic self.

However, it is true that it is not easy to separate scientific-theoretic research from philosophical-speculative work both in science and philosophy. This is particularly true if we reconsider the process of determining a new paradigmatic model: that of identity as social construction.

3. Identity as a social construction

Various philosophical and psychological studies have come to converge on the idea that the social dimension is the core of human identity, in the sense that the full development of personal identity largely depends on social factors and aspects. We are social beings.

The work of George H. Mead, as a behavioural and social psychologist, as well as a pragmatist philosopher, emerges as a true reference point. His 1934 oeuvre, *Mind, Self and Society*, constitutes the synthesis of an articulated psychological, sociological and philosophical perspective in which human beings are substantially seen as members of a society: they cannot experience a mind or a self outside of the social human process. At the same time, human society cannot exist without an individual’s mind and self. As Mead clearly affirms:

Human society as we know it could not exist without minds and selves, since all its most characteristic features presuppose the possession of minds and selves by its individual members; but its individual members would not possess minds and selves if these had not arisen within or emerged out of the human social process in its lower stages of development those stages at which it was merely a resultant of, and wholly dependent upon, the physiological differentiations and demands of the individual organisms implicated in it. (Mead 1972, 227)

This movement of reciprocal influence and determination is not intended to be understood as a circular movement of interdependent co-determination. In Mead's interpretation, social process comes first, then the mind. In fact,

There must have been [...] lower stages of the human social process, not only for physiological reasons, but also (if our social theory of the origin and nature of minds and selves is correct) because minds and selves, consciousness and intelligence, could not otherwise have emerged; because, that is, some sort of an ongoing social process in which human beings were implicated must have been there in advance of the existence of minds and selves in human beings, in order to make possible the development, by human beings, of minds and selves within or in terms of that process. (Ibid.)

A variety of theorisations can be put in parallel with Mead's model, starting with a contemporary of his: Lev Vygotsky. By developing research around the mind-language relationship, Vygotsky came to theorise the centrality of the linguistic and relational-communicative dimension in the formation of the self. In addition, and quite similarly to Mead (in that he considers the interiorization of cultural and symbolic social practices), Vygotsky underlines the dependence of the development of higher psychic functions on the internalisation of social codes, functions and rules.

Several scholars have recognised the validity of this view and implemented it. Among them, Jürgen Habermas subsumes it within his communicative critical-sociological research (see Habermas 1981); David J. Chalmers and Gregory Bateson within their information and computation theories (see Chalmers 1966, Bateson 1972); and Paul Watzlawick, Janet Helmick Beavin and Don D. Jackson within a pragmatic, cybernetical psychotherapeutic key (Watzlawick, Beavin, Jackson 1967).

4. Identity as intersubjectivity

The model of identity as intersubjectivity is strictly related to the previous model. Even if it was largely elaborated within the hermeneutical-philosophical tradition during the twentieth century—thus, within a different theoretical and speculative context in comparison with Hegel's phenomenology and Mead's pragmatism—this model has several aspects similar or relating to the behavioural and even to the dialectic approach. Obviously, the degree of similarity and connection depends on the scholar's particular interpretation and articulation; however, it can be in general collocated between Hegel's and Mead's models. The key concepts and categories to

frame the main axes of this conception must be understood in their philosophical, psychological and sociological sense, and they are the following: *language, social interaction, alterity, reciprocity and mutual recognition*.

In scientific terms, both psychological and sociological research have equal relevance. This is because, on the one side, the development of social competences such as mutual respect and the recognition of another person as a person similar to me in sentiment, humanity and dignity is in parallel with one's psychological (and moral) development. On the other side, psychological (and moral) development can be achieved only by a progressive, parallel process of interiorization of cultural, traditional, moral and normative practices and rules which exist only within the social sphere. Here again, Mead's work can help in considering both the balance between the psychological and sociological dimensions, and the role of language as a mediator between experience, social reality, the formation of the self and the true nature of intersubjective relation. As is known, he speaks of "symbolic interactionism", and "transfers" into it all the essential aspects of psychological and sociological human interaction, underlining that, essentially, human interaction is a kind of symbolic-cultural practice in which all emotional, motivational and value-related elements find a symbolic means of expression and an immediate non-rational mutual understanding and recognition. For Mead, in fact, it is in language that experience and the social world find a sign and symbolic decoding capable of mutual understanding and sharing. This is a process that goes hand-in-hand with the development of the ability to "recognise" the other and to assume—mainly emotionally—the other's point of view (*generalised other*).

It is true that Mead tends to focus on the discourse of symbolic interaction, although he recognises the centrality of emotions and values. In contrast, other authors focus on the discourse of the interrelational dialectic or the dialectic of recognition between persons—that is, by considering the individual as a whole, made of language, reason, sentiments, values etc. Among these, we mention Axel Honneth's social-critical approach and Paul Ricoeur's phenomenological-hermeneutic approach (see, respectively, Honneth 1992 and Ricoeur 2004): two different models of intersubjectivity based on hybrid theoretical-speculative research around recognition in which both Hegel's dialectic and Mead's pragmatic approaches are brought to play in different ways. Significantly different, but at the same time under an identical paradigm, is Habermas's theorisation, within which language and communication are key to the complete understanding of human interaction and the intersubjective practice within the public sphere (see Habermas 1981). For Habermas, personal emancipation and recognition are

fundamentally questions of active participation, belonging and social critical action, that is, the communicative dialectics among social actors. The quality of communicative relationships mirrors the degree of emancipation and of individual and social maturation.

In this model, psychoanalysis plays an important role, above all via these theoretical-practical studies centred on issues concerning interpersonal or intersubjective aspects or considering those aspects in redefining their theorisation and practices. This is the case, for example, with Heinz Kohut's self psychology. The theoretical and clinical advantages deriving from this discipline's assignation of a central role to the idea of self, rather than to the ego, are not to be underestimated. Once the idea of the "other" has achieved a similar relevance, the consequence is to focus on the individual him/herself in a more comprehensive way that is equal to overcoming the abstract distinction among psychic instances. However, one wonders if precisely the contemporary psychoanalytic conceptualisations around the self end up running the risk of putting the original unaccomplishment and non-mastery in brackets. Such a conceptualisation in fact represents a weakening of the idea of a fracture or decentralisation, especially in that it presupposes, *a priori*, the idea of the self as a psychological structure through which the experience of oneself acquires cohesion and continuity (see Stolorow and Atwood 1994). However, we must consider additional theoretical developments through which we can grasp the essential nature of the intersubjective dynamic, starting from the analytical (therapeutic) relationship. Of particular interest are Donald W. Winnicott and Wilfred R. Bion's studies (Winnicott 1958; Bion 1962) defining the idea of the analyst as a container—an approach which, contrary to the metaphor of the "analyst as a mirror", implies the entry into play of a strongly relational dimension. Even a more traditional psychoanalytical perspective may help to deepen questions concerning intersubjectivity: we are referring here to the line that places value on the counter-transference movement, understood in a generalised sense and therefore, actually, as a co-transference. One feature that arises from considering (inter)subjectivity through countertransference is the importance of the analyst's awareness of his/her own conflicts, of his/her own internal lacerations with which he/she inevitably descends into internal analytical exchange. Furthermore, it brings to the fore the idea that the analyst's subjectivity as a person comes into play in the interactionist and interpersonalist model, in which it is manifested through paying particular attention to concrete relationships. These considerations bring the analyst into play as a person that is "entire": on the one hand, he/she is fully involved in an emotional and physical sense (i.e. the most basic and immediate level of reality), on the other hand, he/she is involved as a

specific individual with his/her own role, social position and decision-making capacity (see, for example, Hoffman 1998).

5. Identity as a structure

A new model of identity has been defined by the linguistic turn. This is the model of identity as a structure. It finds its paradigmatic expression both in Claude Lévi-Strauss's anthropological work and in Jacques Lacan's anthropological-psychoanalytical theory. While the first declares the *dissolution of the human being*, the second theorises the disappearance of "personal identity" as "personal" under the idea that *the unconscious is structured like a language*. Lacan prospects a double renversement of personal identity. On the one side, there is the renversement in terms of dominance and control between conscious and unconscious life, as psychoanalysis conceives of it (and Lacan reverses Descartes's *cogito, ergo sum* principle, by saying "I am where I don't think"). On the other side, the idea of a linguistically structured unconscious enables a specific idea of the unconscious not only as a reality basically characterised from signifying processes, but also as a culturally and socially dependent reality in which personal particularity and uniqueness are of marginal relevance. Following Lacan's view, we can say that the structural model does not consider possible the idea of personal identity as an autonomous and consistent reality.

6. Identity as symbolic life

In contrast with structuralism, the hermeneutical tradition has developed a second model (after the intersubjective one). This is the model of identity as symbolic life, which is the result of an intertwined theoretical synthesis between traditional exegetical-hermeneutical studies, existentialism, philosophical hermeneutics and psychoanalysis. We can consider Carl Gustav Jung, Gabriel Marcel and Paul Ricoeur as the major theorists of this viewpoint. Jung's perspective (as defined in his 1928 paper "Über die Energetik der Seele") is well known. As he states:

Psychic development cannot be accomplished by intention and will alone; it needs the attraction of the symbol, whose value quantum exceeds that of the cause. But the formation of a symbol cannot take place until the mind has dwelt long enough on the elementary facts, that is to say until the inner or outer necessities of the life-process have brought about a transformation of energy. If man lived altogether instinctively and automatically, the transformation could

come about in accordance with purely biological laws. We can still see something of the sort in the psychic life of primitives, which is entirely concretistic and entirely symbolical at once. (Jung 1928, 42)

As known, early Freudian psychoanalysis, initially linked to a certain reductionism (in Ernest Jones as well as in Freud), was antithetical to Jung's perspective. However, it subsequently recognised the importance of a distinction between the ego and the objective world in a way able to allow access to the symbol. Above all it is thanks to Klein's group, and particularly thanks to Hanna Segal, that the belonging of the symbolic function to the ego was underlined (see Segal 1957). Actually, only when the egoic instance is constituted, is it possible to recognise reality as something "other than me" and therefore to distinguish the symbol as an ego's expression from the symbolised thing.

Within a different theoretical contest (different but still linked to hermeneutics), Alfred Lorenzer suggests the opportunity to distinguish the "centre of the formation of the symbol", which should be found in the ego, from its "source of stimulus" including the id (see Lorenzer 1971). Such a tension can be better understood in the light of Bion's contributions: if there is a state of non-thought, from which thought is also generated, and if this state is characterised by a dimension of infinity which, however, can only be expressed when it is reduced to finitude that is, it becomes thinkable then we can understand the symbolic function as a bridge-function. It can be considered as the regulator of the flow of permanent communication that allows ideas to be producers of further meaning, as well as bearers of a defined sense. The symbol is therefore not an attribute of indistinction, but the function that allows one to proceed from indistinction (which remains the original event) and return to it. In other words, this is the function that allows one to retake from the magma of the origins without getting lost (see Martini 1998, 2005). Therefore, symbol has a paradoxical constitution in that it implies the coexistence of a rapprochement and distancing operation, which could be understood as the magmatic pole and the signal pole of the symbolic function.

With a constant reference to the symbolic process or to the symbolic function, we can understand it as the connection between non-representational unconscious, the unconscious representation and the conscious thought which is limited by the restrictions of the logical order. The symbolic process would thus configure the complex path of thought (which inevitably crosses those three areas) that connects the symbol (or rather, the symbolic image) to the symbolised object. In order to reach an integrated conception of the symbol, beyond the extremes of reductionism and excess, it is necessary to recognise, with Mario Trevi, that

the insignificability of the symbol does not abolish the irrepressible attempt to assign significance to this signifier suspended on the void or projected onto an indistinct future. But this operation of attribution of significance should be so shrewd as to postpone, every time it is concluded, to another similar operation, which is similarly limited and opening up to a further nature of a new significance. The symbol *has no* meaning but endures (and transcends) innumerable processes of meaning. (Trevi 1990, 22; author's trans.)

Assuming these premises, it is possible to conceive of identity in a concrete, effective way as something that is under *symbolic* construction, transformation and evolution.

7. Identity as narration

There is a third, more recent, theoretical-practical model of identity that, together with the intersubjective and the symbolic model, has a significant connection with philosophical hermeneutics. This is the model of identity as narration. In a way quite similar to the previous one, this model intertwines some advancements in philosophical hermeneutics with certain developments in psychoanalysis. Where hermeneutical advancements depend upon a philosophical rethinking of central themes studied in narrative hermeneutics, psychoanalytical developments are concerned with those theoretical studies focused on the role of language, communication and narration played in auto-interpretative processes, as well as in therapeutic and clinical interactional processes.

In philosophy, the major role in defining this model has been played by Paul Ricoeur (see Ricoeur 1983–1985, 1990). Conversely, in the scientific field it is Jerome Bruner's research that has had a central function of reference (see Bruner 1986). Among psychoanalysts, we must recall Roy Schafer and Donald Spence (see Spence 1982): they emphasise the hermeneutic role of interpretation, representation and narration but, unfortunately, did so in a unilateral way, articulating a weak discourse unable to recognise and analyse the "referential drive" (Ricoeur) of the discourse. This position has received two criticisms: on the part of the North Americans, the criticism of creationism; on the part of the French, the criticism of ignoring the chaotic nature of the unconscious and rather aiming at consistency and exhaustiveness. On the contrary, in Ricoeur's philosophy of narration, we find a distancing from both creationism (being a philosopher attentive to the referential drives) and coherentism (being a philosopher who considers the category of *inachèvement* as central).

8. Identity as a neuro-functional mechanism

Finally, under the paradigm of identity as a neuro-functional mechanism, we propose to summarise almost all members of that variegated set of emergentistic, reductionist monistic, dualistic-interactionist models which define and reconduct personal identity to the functioning of the brain. Even this model has tremendous importance in deepening the question of personal identity under different perspectives and it does so in a comprehensive way (that is, in a way that considers all aspects, including our neurobiological constitution, functioning and mechanism). Karl Popper, John C. Eccles and Wilder Penfield are among the most important and moderate scholars who regard the brain as the central function and reference for the study of personal identity. Conversely, Jean-Pierre Changeux, Daniel Dennett, Gerald Edelman and Owen Flanagan are among the most “polarised” scholars who embrace a physicalist reductionist view. Paul and Patricia Churchland and Stephen Stich are even more “polarised” in their embrace of the so-called eliminativist perspective.

It is through these models that the research presented in this volume will analyse all critical and theoretical aspects, in search of a more balanced and comprehensive vision which is able to avoid all extreme or unilateral theorizations. As previously mentioned, this study frames the problem of personal identity as a problem of a scientific and speculative nature—more precisely as a psychoanalytic and philosophical-hermeneutical question. However, its comprehensive “vocation” forces it to cross different disciplinary, theoretical and methodological fields. In an effort to thematise and make different models and points of view interact, we have evaluated the only way to mirror the complexity and real multi-faceting of personal identity as fact. On the one hand, the clarification and philosophical deepening of different conceptual and theoretical dimensions and perspectives represents a productive approach to redefining and engaging in critical reflection around any applicative use of a specific model in psychoanalysis. On the other hand, the process of theoretical-practical analysis and reflective reconsideration in psychoanalysis forms a decisive tool of control, correction, orientation and rethinking for an investigation oriented by philosophical-speculative purposes. Regressive and progressive thrusts, continuity and discontinuity, advance and arrest, experience and possibility, affirmation and disavowal, affectivity and initiative, character and project, action and responsibility, autonomy and relationship: all these form the “magmatic substance” of the reality of personal identity and the fact of being and becoming a person. We are born as individuals, but to become a person is a complex, tortuous process.

We do not believe we are offering a new scientific theory or philosophy; rather, we want to offer a new point of departure for theoretical-scientific and speculative advancement. We will be reconsidering the fundamental characteristics of a dynamic and hermeneutic vision of identity, tracing a middle-way perspective and, at the same time, absorbing Bion's idea of transformation and Ricoeur's philosophy of translation.

CHAPTER 1

PERSONAL IDENTITY: A PERSISTENT DILEMMA

1. A brief historical-theoretical synthesis

The concepts of “subject” and “foundation” have a long history of theoretical (re-)determination and transformation. Compared to the former, the notion of foundation has been more semantically stable, maintaining, in one way or another, its dual Greek and Latin, matrix: “foundation” as the ontological *cause* (λόγος or αἰτία) of something and as the logical *raison d’être* (*ratio*). With the pre-Socratic philosophers, foundation as λόγος gained a polysemic variety, but it is Aristotle’s use of λόγος as causality *and* (one’s own) necessity that significantly affected the speculative discourse on personal identity (and beyond) throughout the centuries. This double meaning mirrors the intertwining, in Aristotle, between the process of knowing something and the process of demonstrating or producing such knowledge (see *Anal. Post.*, I.2 71b9). In his view, the foundation is the logical and ontological necessity of something, that is, its effectiveness both as a real object and as an object of knowledge. In the modern era, a similar reaffirmation occurs with Hegel, but within a highly differentiated philosophical context. Consider, for example, the way in which Leibniz redefines the concept, overcoming the idea of necessity, through his principle of sufficient reason. It is thanks to modern philosophers that in the contemporary era we have inherited all major uses of “foundation” from antiquity: foundation as a legitimate constitution, foundation as a necessary constitution and foundation as a possibility.

As for the concept of the “subject”, the oldest use of it goes back to Plato and Aristotle, in reference to specific determinations or qualities of a thing. The corresponding Greek word is ὑποχείμενον, a term with a vast range of uses, from metaphysics to gnoseology and from logic to grammar. Conversely, its second major meaning—of “subject” as individual, spirit, human being and so on—is of a modern derivation. Yet, in modern philosophy, we find a clear intertwining between the two uses, especially

putting in parallel with Aristotle's metaphysical discourse around the "subject" and the substantialist approach to the human being, as seen in modern philosophers such as Descartes. Aristotle conceives of the subject as a "substrate"; and "the substrate is that of which the rest are predicated, while it is not itself predicated of anything else" (*Metaphysics*, VII.3 1028b). It is the matter, the form and the union of matter and form of which a thing is composed. It is the objective reality to which predicates and determinations are referred and attributed. It is true that only in Medieval philosophy would the concepts of subject and substance be unified as one (because for Aristotle the subject remains just one modality of the substance); however, the key concepts and determinations have an Aristotelian derivation. René Descartes would be the first among modern philosophers to define the subject (or *Cogito*) as a thinking thing, a mental substance. In the second meditation of his *Meditations on First Philosophy*, he states: "What am I? A thing that thinks. What is that? A thing that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, wants, refuses, and also imagines and senses" (*Meditations*, II).

Conceiving the subject or soul as a *substratum*, John Locke develops a perspective in parallel with that of Descartes, even though he is the author of a well-known critique of the notion of substance (see *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, II, 23, 2). In fact, Locke opens the way for all antishubstantialist perspectives against conceptions of personal identity as a permanent, stable and concrete thing. David Hume's criticism against personal identity has a narrow connection with Locke's empiricist critique. Hume sees the ego simply as "a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement" (*Treatise of Human Nature* [1738], I, 6). For him,

Identity depends on the relations of ideas; and these relations produce identity, by means of that easy transition they occasion. But as the relations, and the easiness of the transition may diminish by insensible degrees, we have no just standard, by which we can decide any dispute concerning the time, when they acquire or lose a title to the name of identity. (Ibid.)

The speculative and scientific problem concerning the consistency and reality of human subjectivity entered the field of modern and contemporary philosophical inquiry precisely through this synthetic combination or union of subject and substance as variously expressed in Descartes, Locke and Hume. It is due to this dialectic between subjectivity and substantiality that the problem of foundation has ended up identifying

itself, from modernity onwards, as a term implicated in research around the entity of human subjectivity. Even the idealists Johann G. Fichte and Friedrich W. J. Schelling have moved within this furrow. Fichte's idea of the ego (or Ego) as an "absolute subject" and Schelling's "absolute self-consciousness" directly or indirectly reactualise Spinoza's philosophy of substance. This is particularly evident in Fichte's 1794 book, *The Science of Knowledge*. In its first chapter we find a significant passage related to a study on the dialectics between the non-ego and the ego. In it, the ego is also conceived of and defined as something beyond this distinction, and dialectics is treated as an "absolute and unlimited substance":

The Ego and the Non-Ego, as posited in equality and opposition to each other, are both something (accidences) in the Ego, as divisible substance, and posited through the Ego as absolute and unlimited substance, to which nothing is equal and nothing opposed; [...] an absolute Ego is established as absolutely unconditioned and determinable by nothing higher than itself. (I, 3)

However, starting from the mid-nineteenth century, the perspective began to change significantly with regard to the differentiation and sectorialisation of the philosophical discourse, the advancement and specialization of the sciences and, again, the innumerable forms of interaction and dialectics of philosophy and science. On the one hand, in the twentieth century, we find the problematisation of the question of the subject is approached traditionally; in one way or another, this is the case with Heidegger's philosophy of the *Dasein*, for example, in which the subject constitutes a consistent and unified/uniform reality. On the other hand, we can find both denialist conceptions—for example, with Ludwig Wittgenstein's view—and rigid conceptions, as seen in philosophers such as Nicolai Hartmann (who considers subjectivity as a solely cognitive function), Edmund Husserl (who considers the ego as a function and as a historically unified reality) and John Dewey (who, again, interprets subjectivity as a function, a kind of mix between experience and knowledge).

Distinctively, it is Paul Ricoeur who has developed a critical reflection around the various modern and contemporary perspectives on personal identity. Working on the theoretical ground, he considers both speculative and scientific analyses and argumentations about the entities of subjectivity and personal identity, looking for a new, comprehensive philosophy of the human being. He is highly aware of the complex degree of problematization generated as a consequence of the enormous

development of scientific knowledges and their progressive differentiation. In fact, in his 1965 essay on Freud (*Freud and Philosophy*) he states:

We have at our disposal a symbolic logic, an exegetical science, an anthropology, and a psychoanalysis and, perhaps for the first time, we are able to encompass in a single question the problem of the unification of human discourse. The very progress of the aforementioned disparate disciplines has both revealed and intensified the dismemberment of that discourse. Today the unity of human language poses a problem. (Ricoeur, 1970: 3–4)

This discourse today goes together with a dominant ideological paradigm on the true nature of human identity. Ricoeur defines it as a paradigm determined by the “tactic of suspicion” in which, in one way or another, personal identity is just a “mask”. He explains:

Three masters, seemingly mutually exclusive, dominate the school of suspicion: Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud. It is easier to show their common opposition to a phenomenology of the sacred, understood as a propaedeutic to the “revelation” of meaning, than their interrelationships within a single method of demystification. [...] Marx is relegated to economics and the absurd theory of the reflex consciousness; Nietzsche is drawn toward biologism and a perspectivism incapable of expressing itself without contradiction; Freud is restricted to psychiatry and decked out with a simplistic pansexualism. (Ibid.: 32–33)

Freud is associated with Marx and Nietzsche for the fact that all three consider human consciousness as something fundamentally false. This *école du soupçon* has taught us not only that the certainty of consciousness is illusory, but that the very idea of transparency of consciousness in itself is illusory.

Freud entered the problem of false consciousness via the double road of dreams and neurotic symptoms; his working hypothesis has the same limits as his angle of attack, which was, as we shall state fully in the sequel, an economics of instincts. Marx attacks the problem of ideologies from within the limits of economic alienation, now in the sense of political economy. Nietzsche, focusing on the problem of “value”–of evaluation and transvaluation–looks for the key to lying and masks on the side of the “force” and “weakness” of the will to power. (Ibid., 34)

The development of Ricoeur's research introduces other critical elements, such as the narrative-representational dimension and the historical-experiential factuality, in problematising the consistency and emancipatory flexibility of personal identity. However, he chooses to maintain the centrality of the dialectical tension generated with the modern ideological paradigm of suspicion and the fragmentary approach of hyperspecialised sciences of the human being. "How to unify in a comprehensive discourse our knowledges around the human being? How to explain and justify the variability and (at the same time) substantiality of personal identity?" These were Ricoeur's major dilemmas.

It is true that with the progressive articulation and diversification of perspectives, the theoretical developments and the disciplinary contributions related to the theme of personal identity, we are witnessing an exponential increase in terminological uses in contemporary times. In addition, meanings, determinations, differentiations and (similar or contradictory) uses are so varied as to constitute a complex conceptual web, a "conceptual network of subjectivity" with similarities and contradictory views and understandings (obviously, in accordance with different theorisations and interpretations).

The concept of "spirit" is perhaps among the most obsolete today, but no less important than concepts such as subjectivity or personality, as it is mirrored in the variety of its cultural and theoretical understandings and interpretations. Primarily, it is used to define the introspective sphere of interiority, and the mind. The anthropological use of this concept can be traced back to Stoicism via the use of the Greek term *πνεύμα*, "animating breath". However, it enters the modern speculative world thanks to Descartes's interpretation of spirit as something concerning the rational sphere or, better, as a synonym of the intellect or reason, that is the *Cogito* or the "thinking thing". By unifying "spirit" with the *Cogito* and reason, Descartes aligns his rationalist view with Locke's empiricist concept of "mind"—which forms today's predominant idea of spirit as mind. Beyond the persistent (and productive) contemporary philosophical-religious discourse, the most significant theoretical-speculative variation on "spirit" currently comes from psychoanalysis: more precisely from analytical psychology, which develops Carl G. Jung's theory about the couple 'animus'/'anima'. Jung introduced this distinction to define archetypal structures of the collective unconscious endowed with a compensatory function with respect to the conscious kind of identity. This new use was in response to the need to define a dialectic of complementarity between the poles, at the deep level of psychic life.

Another essential concept within the conceptual network of subjectivity is the old, perpetually renewed term “identity”. In the philosophical field it has had very distinct definitions, the oldest of which is Aristotle’s use, which constitutes its most significant definition in the context of our research around personal identity. In his *Metaphysics*, Aristotle defines “identity”, or rather, “sameness”, as a kind of unity that belongs to many or to what is treated as many (“sameness is a unity of the being either of more than one thing or of one thing when it is treated as more than one, i.e. when we say a thing is the same as itself; for we treat it as two”; *Metaphysics*, book V.9 1018a7). In other words, a relation of identity or sameness is “a unity that belongs to a substantial nature” (see Halper 2009). This is a qualification that remained unchanged—even in science—over the centuries, through countless traditions and doctrines of the Middle Ages, modernity and the contemporary era. Although it does not appear in Freud’s terminology, the concept of identity is present in psychoanalysis and has been at least since the second half of the 1950s, thanks to Erik Erikson’s work on adolescence, in reference to which he introduces the use of the term “ego identity”. This term defines the existential stage of overcoming a series of identification steps and subsequent conflicting stages of integration, up to a state of “higher” synthesis, in adolescence, between the dimension of the ego and the dimension of the belonging to a group.

The concept of “consciousness” is also significantly implied in the conceptual network of subjectivity, both for the philosophical and psychological sciences. Historically speaking, only within Stoicism is the full sense of consciousness as *awareness of one’s own and of one’s own acts of thought* understood. Later, Augustine of Hippo follows the Stoics’ line, mainly in reference to the act of self-reflective return to oneself (conceiving of it as a spiritual experience). In modern times, it is again Descartes who establishes its paradigmatic use, that is, that use designed to mark the following centuries, exactly in the use that is found in the trend towards modern and contemporary thinkers and scholars, at least up to Freud in science and up to Heidegger in philosophy. While Heidegger demolishes the ideal of the metaphysical primacy of consciousness, establishing the *in-der-Welt-sein* idea as the essential characteristic of the *Dasein*, Freud deeply transforms the relationship between subjectivity, mind and inner life, entirely revolutionising the understanding of the psychic life. Freud completely redefines the problem of personal identity via the introduction of new terms (pre-conscious/consciousness, unconscious/unconsciousness, super-ego, id) which redetermine the connections and relationships between each term of the conceptual web of subjectivity. Without doubt, one of the major changes has to do with the new understanding of what the ego is.

Beyond the general dynamic approach (which has a significant impact against all ideas of ego as something autonomous and stable), starting from 1920, Freud considered the ego as partially unconscious and as a “superficial” function of the mental apparatus. Directly or indirectly, such a perspective reactualised Hume’s criticism against the idea of personal identity as substance. And in some ways, his lesson was to be taken up again and enhanced in the wake of Kant and Idealism, starting from Existentialism, with the affirmation of the idea of the identity of the ego as a *relationship* or defining it according to a somewhat more fragile, variable and unstable entity (and not as a *unity*, as it was persistently treated by philosophers like Kant). For Søren Kierkegaard, for example, the ego is the result of a kind of synthesis between the natural dimensions of the body and the soul. Even Pragmatism develops something similar, putting in *relational* connection different aspects and dimensions of psycho-biological and sociological life. John Dewey, for example, fully develops the implications of the idea of ego as a relationship (1) to oneself, (2) to one’s reality and (3) to the world. In particular, he highlights the creative capacity of action and initiative, that is, the role played by personal experience, pragmatic doing and interaction in the process of psychological, sociological and moral development.

Among pragmatist scholars, another important theoretical-speculative contribution comes from the philosopher and scientist Georg H. Mead. In his book *Mind, Self and Society* (1934), he discusses the emergence of mind and self from the interaction and communicational-behavioural processes between organisms. As we know, this social behaviourism played a central function in defining a new scientific discipline: social psychology. Actually, in Mead it is impossible to separate the description and understanding of the process of maturation of a person as a social being from the processes that characterise the human mind. He particularly focuses the self as a kind of dialectical synthesis between action, interaction, language and emancipation. At the beginning of the third part of the book, Mead’s explains:

The language process is essential for the development of the self. The self has a character which is different from that of the physiological organism proper. The self is something which has a development; it is not initially there, at birth, but arises in the process of social experience and activity, that is, develops in the given individual as a result of his relations to that process as a whole and to other individuals within that process. (Mead 1934, 135)

Returning to psychoanalysis, we underline the rich theoretical differentiation among psychoanalysts. Where Freud explains that “The ego is not master in its own house” (Freud 1968, 143), Jacques Lacan interprets

the ego as a function deriving from the “stage of the mirror”. The identification that takes place in the mirror stage is a fundamental transformation that the subject undergoes by taking the image as his own. It is a transformation by identification that precedes the subsequent process of identification with others through the mediation of language, and which is entirely based on the “mediating function” of the body. It is in relation to the reflection of it that the child conquers the ego in a progressive and structuring way. Piera Aulagnier follows a similar line of reasoning. On the one hand, Aulagnier defines the ego simply as *ego knowledge by the ego*; on the other, she welcomes Lacan’s theorisation, by (1) downgrading his structuralist discourse for a more historicising perspective and (2) connecting the identification process essentially to the identification phase of the child with the mother. Another significant theoretical and paradigmatic achievement in psychoanalysis comes from Heinz Hartmann’s 1939 book, in which a new important disciplinary domain focused on the ego is established: the “ego psychology”. Hartmann takes as his starting point the idea that the ego has an autonomous function which operates beyond the internal dialectics it has with the id and the super-ego. Not only is the problem of foundation discarded as such, but the very idea of psychic life and personal identity is pragmatically welded to the external world and to the experiential dimension, since the aforementioned functions are primarily functions of adaptation to the external world. Other analysts have a particular relevance in readdressing the understanding of the ego. Among them, we mention Jung, with his analytical psychology, and Heinz Kohut for the different ways in which they thematise the self in dialectic with the ego. For Jung, the self is initially understood as an “empirical concept” designating the entire reality of psychic phenomena and expressing the unity of the personality in its entirety. The unconscious life pushes the self to a place between the experiential and the inexperiential within which the symbolic life and the empirical symbols are located. These symbols are loaded with emotional value and play an important mediating role as they operate in a sort of inter-kingdom within which the fundamental struggle for personal emancipation or individuation is played out. In Jung, individuation “means becoming a single, homogeneous being, and, in so far as ‘individuality’ embraces our innermost, last, and incomparable uniqueness, it also implies becoming one’s own self. We could therefore translate individuation as ‘coming to self-hood’ or ‘self-actualisation’” (*Collected Works*, 7, paragraph 266). For his part, Kohut has had considerable influence in the Anglo-Saxon world; his perspective has been compared to Heinz Hartmann, Ernst Kris and Rudolph M. Loewenstein’s ego psychology. Kohut interprets the self as a principle of motivation in the

making, or as a faculty oriented to the achievement of a progressive, relative, autonomy as a principle of motivation integrating the drives according to the order of its realisation plan and in accordance with a dimension of relationality in the world.

2. Identity construction: the psychoanalytic perspective

We can imagine, from both a philosophical and psychoanalytical point of view, the identity question inserted in a sort of pyramidal hierarchy that finds the concepts of self, subject and person at the top. We have seen how, in the philosophical field, the path unravels from the subject to the foundation (with all its metaphysical load), up to the idea of person and personal identity (to which we will return at the end of this work). Psychoanalysis and psychopathology give us a warning as to precisely where identity undergoes the most serious destruction, apparently testifying in favour of the inconsistency and relativity of the notion of subject. It is precisely here that the immeasurable difference between the identitarian crisis of psychosis and the identitarian crisis of modern subjectivity is shown. Therefore, they indirectly denounce the inconsistency of absolute relativism: the possibility of infinitely shaping identity “at one’s pleasure” can be realised only in delusion. The evanescence of the subject, its “interruption”, and its radical transformation in an incomprehensible way are possible, but they are not universal connotations of human nature. They occur in very particular and very painful situations, which also implies the coexistence of two conditions: a) a denial of shared reality and the possible construction of a new and private reality (i.e. delusion) and b) a great psychic suffering. The self is imprisoned within the system of thought that it has generated itself. In psychoses, the evanescence of the subject, asserted by a certain post-modern philosophy, does not imply an extension of existential possibilities and a greater freedom of change, but rather the reverse. The more the subject crosses the void, the less he/she will be able to transform. However, a clarification must be made. The subject never dissolves completely and definitively, not even in cases of more serious psychotic destructuring, such as schizophrenia. Even the most serious psychotic patients maintain a healthy part, as Bion asserted, or in any case, a non-psychotic dimension which provides coherence and continuity (albeit of a reduced degree) to the person. It is thanks to this that we can build a relationship with the other, even in the acute phase of the disease, that is, the one in which the destructuring of the subject is most evident.

As mentioned, it is the enigmatic paradoxicality of the subject who is no longer master of his home (which, however, does not imply its denial,

if *Wo Es war, soll Ich werden* [Freud 1932]) that represents the first contribution of psychoanalysis to the dismantling of the subject as a foundation.

In this sense, Freud's text is already entirely covered by a dialectical tension that continuously allows it to deconstruct and reconstruct the subject. It is a tension that is lost, to the extent that it is denied or emphasised, within the framework of those orientations which, curiously recalling both to post-modernism, attest both to its negation (in Europe, with the "weak thinking", French structuralism and Lacanism) and to its sometimes uncritical reconsideration (in America, with self psychology, intersubjectivism and interactionism). As Ogden reminds us, the subject is a *decentered* subject (Ogden 1994, 16). If Ogden speaks of becoming a subject, Castoriadis, for his part, speaks of the subject as a unity *à faire* and as a *projet psychanalytique* (Castoriadis 1975–1990). For Ogden, a dialectic arises, even beyond the specific moment of analysis, between the living, the psychic and the social. The necessary return to consciousness to which Ogden refers here translates into an emphasis on sublimation processes, once again correlated with the dimensions of becoming, of the original incompleteness. He states: "Le sujet humain n'est pas simplement réel, il n'est pas donné, il est à faire et il se fait moyennant certaines conditions et dans certaines circonstances... il est une possibilité abstraite... il est création historique et création dont on peut suivre l'histoire" (Castoriadis 1975–1990, 195). Human subjectivity, explains Castoriadis, is characterised by *reflectivity* (which should not be mistaken with thinking) and the *will* (see *ibid.*). Thus, the demolition and construction of identity represent not only the two always coexisting polarities of the psychoanalytic process and what is psychic, but also the continuous and unresolved movement of every existence. It finds foundation in those identification processes that allow our psychic birth and which accompany us in all ages of life. Identification is always marked by a complex dialectical game between mirroring in others—that is, the imitative assumption of the identity of the object—and internalisation, that is, the ability (a) to make the different identifications flow within the self, (b) to transform them and (c) to make them the building blocks of our personal and particular identity. This is why psychoanalysis, although opposed to Descartes's certainty and despite having introduced the *Spaltung* to the heart of the subject, remains extraneous to its demolition. It is no longer seen as a foundation, but as a project which aims at unity but (a) implies multiplicity and (b) offers a multiplicity which aspires to realisation through recognition of the inevitability and the benefits of incompleteness.

As Alfredo Lombardozi suggests, in identity, psychoanalysis captures both a factor of continuity, which also rests on unconscious fantasies, and a fluidity, largely generated by life experiences (see Lombardozi 2015, XVII). Identification processes play an essential role in this. Their function is, in fact, *generative* of human identity in the beginning (with the infant and child), and *transformative* of the already organised personality of the adult individual. All identification processes require an interaction between individuals, but necessarily also pass through the internal world of the subject in an exchange with the identifications already acquired. Therefore, identification processes weld the intrapsychic dimension to the interpersonal one in an inseparable way. It is Freud himself, within Lecture 31 (“The Anatomy of the Mental Personality”) of his *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* (1932), who provides a concise definition of identification: “the assimilation of one ego to another one, as a result of which the first ego behaves like the second in certain respects, imitates it and in a sense takes it up into itself” (Freud 1932, 68). However, aggressive or even significant values are not extraneous to this process. Indeed it is Freud who recalls that identification can take the form of a cannibal incorporation (ibid.). He also differentiates two sides of identification. The first leads to the formation of the super-ego, starting from identification with parental figures; the other generates identification with the lost object. This dynamic had already been a subject of reflection in Freud’s *Mourning and Melancholia* (1915) and is summed up in the famous aphorism: “the shadow of the object fell upon the ego” (Freud 1915, 249). The person—previously loved and hated ambivalently, and now lost as a result of a separation or mourning—now settles within the ego, becomes part of it, thus generating a sense of guilt and self-hatred. Hence Freud places three modalities of identification, understanding it as (a) an original form of an emotional bond, (b) the replacement of a libidinal bond thanks to the introjection of the object into the ego, and (c) the communion of characteristics with another person who is not subject to sexual instincts (Freud 1921, chap. VII). However, these distinctions have today lost some of their effectiveness and their theoretical relevance. Conversely, what seems to be essential is the distinction that Freud established between primary and secondary identification. With the former we refer to the more ancestral identification mechanisms, such as incorporation and projective identification. These can prevail and persist abnormally in serious disorders, but at the same time they are also the psychological basis for the subsequent development of the individual and for the acquisition of stable and differentiated identifications. Primary identifications allow a progressive emergence from a state of relative somato-psychic indifferenciation and the