

Identity, Liberal Learning, Democracy: Reflections

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Identity is a curious notion. Suggesting a kind of unity within ourselves, it nonetheless reveals difference at the very core of our being. Reflecting further on that initially odd observation, we can realize that coming to know ourselves involves not so much discovery as creativity, and that we do not undertake the quest alone. That a human being needs to and can ask "Who am I?" is related to the reasons we need to be and can be educated; need to and can develop moral consciences; can and do flourish in democracy. These human projects are differentiated, but they need not be divided, in opposition, or sequential. On the contrary: given the chance to be in communication with each other, these projects can serve and significantly enhance each other.

Opening the Gap

The moment we ask, "Who am I?" a gap opens between self as subject and self as object. I becomes not only conscious, but self-conscious, reflexively seeking to become more self-aware. I wants to know me. What Socrates called "the two-in-one" of soundless dialogue we experience as thinking is reawakened. When we are in our own company as subject and object simultaneously, we encounter our inherent non-unity most intimately.

To be sure, self-consciousness is not always a pleasant state in which to be. We are caught up in self-consciousness when we are socially embarrassed, feeling awkward or ashamed. Turning our mind's eye inward, self-consciousness makes us stumble in the world. We can dwell so intensely with ourselves that we shut out others, at the risk of becoming limited within ourselves and perhaps even dangerous to others.

Nonetheless, consciousness, for good as for ill, opens space for us to become aware, to become attentive, to think both within and beyond ourselves. The gap that opens when we become self-conscious by asking "Who am I?" enables us to practice our ability to think with as well as about others, and to do so imaginatively even when others are absent. The two-in-one can become the robust "I" that contains multitudes, as that poet of democracy, Walt Whitman, so eloquently called us to remember.

Identity in Relation

Humans are creatures of consciousness, and consciousness is relational. When we are not conscious, we are aware of nothing, learn nothing, do nothing. "She's not responding at all" is virtually synonymous with, "She's unconscious." Both the gap of difference and our being-in-relation are right there in the word consciousness, whose roots remind us that we know (sci) together (con). Or, as Whitehead said, we comprehend: we com ([bring] together) prehend (grasp, take in) (1967). At a basic level, consciousness is how we come into and can become aware that we are in relation.

As conscious beings, we are more than creatures of necessity. Even when subject to a natural law (gravity, for example), we respond to and eventually are able to think about our experience (of falling or dropping something). Within the most intense experiences, we can find ourselves observing what is happening--opening the gap, the space of consciousness. More important still: We are capable of reflexivity--the thinking that arcs over the gap--so that we are not only affected by, and not only aware

of, conditions within and around us, but can be reflexively and reflectively aware of our own awareness: of sounds and smells; of hunger and sleepiness; of anger and amusement; of speech; of meaningfulness. With this reflexive self-consciousness, all sorts of possibilities arise.

Among the possibilities that open with the space of consciousness and the arc of reflexivity is that I become able to come into the particular relation with myself that we speak of as "having an identity." Were I never aware of myself as both subject and object, the issue of having an identity could hardly surface. Self arises along with not-self, and with definition and limits comes relation: there has to be difference for there to be relation at all. We know this experientially. Think of being lost in a daydream and abruptly coming to when you bump into someone. Self, other, and world return together.

Crucially, had I no experience and awareness of my self in relation with multiple differing others, my identity would be severely limited. Significantly, the basic experience of difference and being-in-relation we have when we ask "Who am I?" corresponds with the experiences we have among differing others in the public spaces of our social, cultural, and political worlds. The more richly, diversely, and equitably populated the spaces within and without ourselves, the more articulated and capacious the self that can respond when we ask again, "Who am I?" Each interesting difference, each similarity, each startling novelty, each fresh perspective of which we become aware, on which we can reflect, with and about which we can think, adds its brush strokes to both knower and known. Through such multiple relations, we can come to comprehend how our samenesses and differences interweave in our own uniqueness and that of others. As Zora Neale Hurston said, we live by comparison.

Freedom and Responsibility

The inner space of consciousness prefigures freedom just as it enables us to comprehend and to practice it. As Michel Foucault observed, "Thought...is what allows one to step back from this way of acting or reacting, to present it to oneself as an object of thought and question it as to its meaning, its conditions, its goals. Thought is freedom..." (1984, 388). The outer spaces of public life can and should correspond with the inner space of freedom. When they do, our thinking, questioning, acting, and coming to know ourselves as we do so are both liberated and enhanced.

There is a curious necessity to this freedom. We have it precisely because we are not self-sufficient. Because we are not entire unto ourselves, but are able to be consciously in relation with our selves and with others, we need to think, to learn, to choose, to act. To become--to create--most fully who we can be, we need democracy just as we need liberal education: to bring us into the fullest possible communication with ourselves and others, within which we can seek knowledge and find guidance. From that need of freedom comes also our capacity for conscience, which emerges from consciousness as we practice our reflexive abilities to comprehend, and then presses us to ask, "But how am I to know what is right, what wrong?"

A being incapable of consciousness is not aware of its identity. Such a being needs no education, no morality, no laws and political systems. It just is what it is, without choice or action. There is then no question of freedom, as freedom is literally inconceivable. In contrast, conscious, reflexive, thinking beings try very hard to create satisfying responses to questions such as "Who am I? Who are you? What should we do? What is true?"--because we need to. And we need to because, while we are conscious and able to think and reflect, the space within as well as among us inserts difference, keeping us unsure, unsettled, unstable--free.

With freedom comes responsibility. Because we can think reflexively about who we are, what we do,

alone and with others, we are also capable of evaluating ourselves. Responsibility, like self-consciousness, can be uncomfortable. We can choose to turn down our awareness: to try not to reflect, to question, or to think. The same gap of consciousness, the same space of freedom, that allows me to ask "Who am I?" allows me to refuse to reflect.

A very common way of doing so is by compartmentalizing: dividing and walling off our minds, our identities, our consciences, and our knowledge. We compartmentalize when we do not reflect at home on what we did at work, as if the I who is a demeaning boss is not the me who believes in treating people respectfully. We can live with such contradictions for a long time, but it takes a lot of work to keep the walls standing. We can always be startled back into the reflexive thinking that arcs over the walls. We can realize that we are compartmentalizing, and can reflect on the consequences of doing so. We remain responsible.

Clearly, thinking (reflexive or not) does not make chains fall off our bodies, release us from poverty or jail, confer citizenship rights that have been denied, or overcome the systemic compartmentalizing that unjustly ranks and divides us. But it does allow us to step back from unmediated experiences just as we step outside of ourselves in asking, "Who am I?" We can become aware that we are fettered or unfettered, divided, exploited, oppressed, or privileged. We can ask how and why, what it means, and what can be done.

Liberal Education for the Examined Life

To realize, as Augustine wrote of himself, that "I have become a question for myself" allows, even presses, us to ask more than "Who am I?" Indeed, it can evoke the weightiest of questions: "Why are we here? What can we believe? What ought we to do?" In time, the realization that we not only ask but are questions helps us make sense of the call to lead an examined life, in which questioning is more than a means to an end. We cannot fill up and close the gap of freedom that is our consciousness by tossing ever more answers into it.

If we cannot, or will not, always think about, question, reflect on, and evaluate afresh what we think we know or can do, we risk failing in attentiveness to others and to novel situations and experiences. Without reflection, when we choose to act, we may fail in judgment, in practical wisdom, and in moral response. As John Dewey wrote in *Democracy and Education*, "Interest in learning from all the contacts of life is the essential moral interest" (1997, 360; emphasis added).

As educators, we should reflect together on the dangers of education that focuses on content and technique but does not also and always provide practice in the arts of thinking freely as the conscious, relational beings we are. Such an education not only fails to prepare our students (and us as educators) to lead the examined life, but may lessen our chances of moving toward the moral ideal of democracy.

References

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