

Alas, Poor Hamlet — or Identity Crisis for Dummies

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Robert Heslep offers his version of identity theory that is both cool and rational. This is something very much in need in the heated and politically charged debates on identity. He takes a step back and asks, OK, what is this identity thing, again? Let us see if his approach is working.

As it turns out, despite abundance of theoretical approaches, contemporary philosophy does not have much to offer educators in their thinking about forming students' personal identities. Heslep deals with social identities only momentarily. He writes that a social identity only influences personal identity when an individual makes sense of it and accepts or rejects how society identifies him.

The argument begins with trying to understand why a voluntary agent would want to provide an identity for himself or herself. Essentially, he writes, one may want to achieve the following aims:

1. To be in control of one's identity rather than wait for others to ascribe such an identity from without.
2. To become more efficient in choosing and planning one's actions.
3. To establish the values, rights, and duties special to one's individual self.
4. To make sense of one's whole life.

Next, he shows that choosing an identity involves freedom of choice, knowledge, rational judgment, and such values as individual freedom, knowledge, rational judgment, purposefulness, and deliberativeness. What is the role of education in identity formation? "Education should shape the personal identities to the extent that it ought to help them become occurrent voluntary agents," writes Heslep.

The argument of this essay seems to be circular. Since human beings are rational voluntary agents, their dealing with personal identities involves rational, informed free choice. Once they rationally choose their own identity, they prove that they consider themselves to be rational voluntary agents. If we prepare children to be rational voluntary agents, they will not have any trouble with attaining sound identities.

Yet the nature of the argument is the least of my disagreements with Heslep. The argument is still convincing, once you accept the suppositions. And this is something I cannot do. The assumption that we voluntarily choose our identities is not only a simplistic one; it is also very unrealistic. There would be no debate, no crisis, and no agony over identities, if we simply chose our identities by accepting or rejecting whatever is coming from external sources.

The voluntary agent concept alone does not provide much help in the identity debate. First, one cannot simply dismiss the social component of identity by saying that socially imposed identities only become personal ones when we either confirm or reject them. Could one really say that we all are equally free to choose our

identities regardless of our race, gender, ethnicity, and class? If you are a white male, you can easily go directly to the business of identifying yourself as a doctor, SCUBA diver, or a libertarian. If you are black, or gay, poor, or disabled, you must first make sense of these big things, and only then do the other things, if you have any energy or interest left. Being “overdetermined from without,” as Frantz Fanon puts it, is something not to be taken lightly in the conversation on identity.¹

I agree that the final point of identity attainment is to transcend the social identities and the relational component of identities; the goal is just to be oneself, of one’s own choosing. However, it is considerably easier to do so if your skin color, sexual preferences, or tax return figures are of a “normal” kind. Choosing between being a Republican or a Democrat is then really not such a big deal. White guys like myself are freer to choose identities because they are so unproblematic. We like to think of ourselves as free, detached rational agents, bravely struggling against whatever constraints society might put upon our freedom. When someone tries to point out that being a white man is as big a burden as being an Asian woman, that this is something heavy on our backs, something each of us needs to make sense of, — oh, then we feel uncomfortable, we would rather have everyone else be as free as we are; why are they not?

But let us assume for a second that there is nothing to the whole identity hoopla but being a good and consistent voluntary agent, whose individual interests are developed in accordance with the virtues of a voluntary agent. As Robert Heslep thinks, being a consistent and rational voluntary agent automatically rules out making bad choices. From his point of view, “Voluntary agents logically do not experiment with being heroin addicts or AIDS victims. People who are voluntary agents but who nevertheless violate the norms of voluntary agency have to be ashamed of themselves.”

It is not clear to me how the virtues of a voluntary agent are nominated. Agency is a category of freedom, and freedom does not lie in the same dimension as morality. Of course, one can make an argument to the contrary, but Heslep does not make such an argument. Why exactly voluntary agents should also choose to be moral human beings remains a mystery to me.

One specific reason for why Heslep is attracted to the concept of voluntary agency is that such a concept helps educators avoid dealing with difficult issues of social and cultural identities. To be fair, I want to emphasize that he wants to avoid these issues only because he does not want education to impose any specific identities on children. This is surely a valid concern. However, his solution falls short. If a teacher wants to teach his students to be voluntary agents, he or she must provide some specific examples of agency, or some real situations in which agency is exercised. And one cannot learn to choose an identity while playing chess or studying geometry. I doubt that generic skills of a voluntary agent will help in a very specific, very personal task of identity attainment. Following Heslep’s logic, we can teach children to be universal voluntary agents and solve most of the youth problems, since voluntary agency is something theoretically needed for any sort of choice.

Heslep understands something that Hamlet could not: Decisiveness is a virtue of the voluntary agent. However, Hamlet did not want to be a voluntary agent; he just wanted to remain a decent human in an impossible situation. So, Hamlet understood something that Robert Heslep does not: Sometimes there are no good choices. But there is no place for tragedies in the perfect world of voluntary agents. Alas, poor Hamlet.

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1. Frantz Fanon, "The Fact of Blackness," *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 116.