

Against Personal Identity?

Remarks on Alexander Douglas: *Against Identity – The Wisdom of Escaping the Self*¹

The book's title is vociferous and misleading. It does not address the concept of identity in general, but the narrower concept of personal identity. And – as I intend to show – it does not really go against >personal identity<, but commends a certain non-aggressive and flexible style to manage it.

That 'philosophy' means literally 'love of wisdom' seems to make this book of the Australian born professor [of the history of philosophy (and the philosophy of economics)] in St. Andrews a philosophical book par excellence – according to its under-title 'the wisdom of escaping the self'.

But, in the course of its history, philosophy turned out to be the, though foundational, rather limited enterprise of *reflective conceptual clarification*. Douglas' (D.'s) book would have been a contribution to this enterprise, had it really addressed the topic across the board and shed light on the connections on the many uses of 'identity'. Instead the author has been content to deal with the problem of *personal* identity assuming the problems of identity concerning everything else not relevant. And even this problem is not treated of descriptively, as the book advocates and commends escaping the self as the way to be happy – or, with reference to the second of the books's heroes, Spinoza – the way to „beatitude“ (which I take to be a perfection of happiness; ch. 6, 108-124). Douglas subscribes to a conception of philosophy, according to which it is „a certain way of looking at life and the world. Good philosophy should provide us with a feeling of clarity and ease – a new understanding and an ability to navigate life wisely.“ (2)

The two other protagonists in D.'s presentation are the ancient Chinese philosopher/sage Zhuang Zhou [alleged author of the *Zhungzi* (a Daoist compilation of texts; 369-286 BCE)] and the French born contemporary René Girard (1923-2015). These three are expounded in the three parts of the book in order to show that they advocated the very same „wisdom of escaping the self“.

1 Penguin Books 2026.

I

There is a sonett by Goethe entitled >Natur und Kunst< (nature & art) the last three lines of which read >Wer Großes will, muss sich zusammen raffén / In der Beschränkung zeigt sich erst der Meister / und das Gesetz nur kann uns Freiheit geben< (meaning basically 'He, who aims at big things, has to confine himself; only by following the law we shall be free'). This can be read as advocacy for the pursuit of personal identity – especially when aspiring to greatness (as Goethe certainly did).

Going against identity in general would be insane, because identity is a conceptual cornerstone of our basic conceptual scheme, as was captured by Quine's tag >no entity without identity<. It comes with just being *something* specific or, as Quine was not aware of, *someone* – a person with a name. As the author is rather cavalier about identity in general, I shall leave it aside too and focus on personal identity.

We all are given a personal name not long after having been born. A personal name is a linguistic instrument to address or refer to somebody – a person. Baptism would be pointless if there were not the generally justified conviction that the baptized one will speak a language eventually. So persons are taken to be 'speaking animals', as Aristotle – lacking the concept of a person – said about humans. If 'to be is to be the value of a variable' (Quine) *things* that are there are instances of the variable (= of the indefinite pronoun) >something<, *persons* are instances of the variable (= of the indefinite pronoun) >someone (somebody)<. The main difference between the variable for things and that for persons is, that while both admit of characterizing designations and definite descriptions as satisfying complements, >someone< not only *also* admits of personal names, but does so *primarily*. (Objects like mountains, ships or cities have quasi-personal names too, but they evidently cannot be addressed by use of them, at least not literally.)

We all have definite identities minimaliter as speakers of a (propositional) language – as one who can say (assert) or ask or beg or command or intend something. Questions of personal identity arise when there is doubt about the answer to the question >who?<. And this question in face-to-face situations has to be answered with the personal name of the speaker. Outside communicative situations the answer can also be a descriptive term or a definite description, both combined with an indication of place and time of the utterance (or another action). These identities we cannot get rid of.

Moreover we have a personal identity by being a citizen of some nation-state. What personal identity is here is captured by the determinations on an identity card: date and place of birth, gender, corporeal characteristics like height and colour of eyes, etc.²

Is there any identity that we can get rid of? This is what Douglas thinks:

„We will ... die from pursuing an identity. We die, firstly, because identity fixes us in a place while the world is always transforming. Holding onto identity means failing to keep up with the world and being left behind as time flows on. We also die from identity because it is only things with definite identities that *can* die. Death means being so transformed as no longer count as your *self* – this can only happen if you have a self to lose. And, in the most extreme case, identity makes it hard for us to live with others. For you to remain yourself, the world must stay a certain way but this will never be quite as how others need it to be to remain themselves. Identity cannot be isolated from the dynamics of emulation, rivalry and ambition that give rise to it. It will always lead to conflict. The power of these dynamics means that beings with identities cannot, in the end, share a world peacefully with each other, no matter how much they might wish they could.“ (187-8)

Of course, only *living* things – animals and persons – *die*, other things may perish or be destroyed, but they do not *die* (or do so only metaphorically). And they do not die because they pursue the identity that goes with their self-maintenance, but because they have lived some time after having been born. To be born and to die are defining characteristics of living things. So, binding the eventuality of death to the pursuit of personal identity is a non-starter.

Binding the possibility of *conflict* to the pursuit of personal identity is more promising for a start (and violent conflict may result in death). But this seems to be restricted to contexts of direct interaction and it is a long way from there to the devastating forms of conflict that are civil and inter-state wars. And a longer way still to tie these forms of conflict to questions even of collective identity instead of seeing them connected with the well-known material causes and motives.

2 There is something philosophically revealing to be learnt by pondering the question, why many states require their citizens to have and to be able to present an identity-card (when asked by somebody entitled). Cp. my >Wer wir sind – Personidentität im Alltagsverstand< (Who we are – Personal Identity in everyday thought), on: www.emilange.de.

II

With his first protagonist Zhuang Zhou D. is convinced: „The perfect person has no identity.“ (23-40) This is wrong. As we have seen, every person as speaking animal has its identity as a speaker and a hearer of his mother-tongue (definite and indefinite grammatical articles are signals of identity!). But can D. even describe the state of a person without identity? This is one of his attempts:

„ ... our real self ... will never be defined by any of the identities ... that we try to impose on it. The mutual cultivation of self and things is an attempt to impose a value-laden identity on a self and a world that fundamentally resist the imposition. It is a fight, not against the essence of the universe, but its fundamental *inessentiality*: its transformism. Nobody can win this fight; you can only end up enslaved to it. We would be happier and more peaceful letting things flow, vanish, transform, be indistinct, be ambiguous – letting our perspective touching the pivot of the Dao. Rather than trying to be ourselves, we are better off vanishing and transforming into others. Identity is not the way. It is not the way of things, and it is not the way for us.“ (73)

With regard to Spinoza D. contends that his conception of the „beatific soul“ (114-116) is basically the same as Zhuang Zhou's conception of the 'perfect person' which has no identity – the way of escaping a restricting self. But in order to show it, he takes recourse to the novel of an Asian author, Han Suyin (116-118), and then writes about the „Buddhist No-Self“ (119-124). Epistemically, this is cheating.

Glaringly unacceptable is the ascription of the selfless person to D.'s last protagonist, René Girard. For Girard became a catholic believer and in Christian faith and prayer the object of reverence and reference is a personal god. Wittgenstein made only a few theological remarks in his 'grammatical' way. One of them reads: „Gott kannst du nicht mit einem Andern reden hören, sondern nur, wenn du der Angedete bist.“³ (My translation: You can only hear God talk when he talks to you.) And when God talks to you, he addresses you with your name and as a person with the minimal identity of a speaker of your language. Christian faith is basically grounded in personal prayer, is „Gebetsglaube“.

So, the imitation of Jesus' love of man by Christian believers can no way be headed „to the point of self-effacement“ (193), for his commandment does not read: 'Love your neighbour as if you were no-one', but >Love your neighbour like yourself<! To follow it, you evidently

3 Zettel § 717.

have to be yourself and symmetrically take care of yourself and of your neighbour. Sensibly, D.'s campaigning against personal identity can only be directed against a way of having the personal identity we inevitably all have: against the aggressive and competitive style of self-preservation in liberal societies. In the end, D. confesses not to know what 'escaping the self' amounts to „in any practical sense“ (188). We may safely conclude: There just is no going against personal identity as such, let alone the insane project of going against identity in general.

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