

## Challenges of Identity: The Spinozalens Lecture

Ask contemporary Europeans or North Americans to discuss their own identity and they'll have plenty to say. They might mention a country, a faith, a sexuality (at least if they're not straight) and a race (if they're not white); they may avoid saying much about gender at first, not because it isn't central to their identity, but because it might seem too obvious to mention. All these are familiar forms of what we call identity. We all know how to place ourselves on this identity grid.

So it's startling to realize how new this way of talking is. Before the Second World War, so far as I can tell, nobody used the English word "identity" or its cognates in other European languages in this way. When Erik Erikson spoke of an identity crisis in the life of the young Martin Luther, in his 1958 book *Young Man Luther: A Study in Psychoanalysis and History*, he wasn't focusing on a crisis in Luther's relation to the social groups he belonged to. But by 1968, in *Identity: Youth and Crisis*, he writes, that we are dealing "with a process 'located' in the core of the individual and yet also in the core of his communal culture, a process which establishes, in fact, the identity of those two identities."<sup>1</sup> If you had said to someone in 1930 that gender, religion, nationality, sexuality and race were aspects of the same dimension of a person, they would have looked at you blankly.

Yet now, as I say, identity is familiar and it is everywhere. So it is worth developing an account of it. There are, I think, three central things to grasp about the conceptual structure of the very idea of an identity. The first is that identities come with labels. Identifying someone—saying what his or her identity is—begins with giving a name that can apply, at least in principle, to more than one person. Until there is a label that allows us to collect people together, we do not yet have a social identity. Identities are thus inevitably tied up with language: and there are, as a result, no identities among the other creatures in our world.

That may seem obviously wrong. Lions recognize lionesses as different from other lions. True enough. The differences in behavior between a lion meeting a lion and a lion meeting a lioness are the result of the fact that each of these creatures represents male and female members of its kind differently in its thinking: they have distinct concepts for males and females. But to have a concept is not yet to have a label. For a label is something shared and public and used in communication. There are shared criteria for its application. Lions do not treat lionesses differently because they have shared anything. They do not learn the distinction between male and female from one another.

Having the label is only the beginning though. But it is an important beginning. In having a label you have, as I said, a name and shared criteria for its application. You

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<sup>1</sup> Erik Erikson *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1968) Preface, section 3.

can divide the world into those who have the label and those who don't, and then you can discuss with others how you do that.

Pretty soon, here, however, disagreements can arise. Introduce the label "Protestant," and you'll begin to be able to divide the world into Protestants and the rest. You'll say, perhaps, that a Protestant is one of those who followed Luther out of the Roman Catholic Church. But if you know nothing of the church's early history and the divisions between the Eastern and the Western churches, you may think that every Christian is either Protestant or Roman Catholic. You may not know that the Moravians separated from Rome before Luther. You may wonder whether Mormons are Protestant.

People can be talking about the same identity, even if they disagree on how to apply it. It will help her to insist on a philosopher's point; nominalism gives us a better account of identities than realism. What people of a certain identity have in common is the label, not some inner essence. Perhaps the people who introduced the label meant to apply it only to people who shared some special property: accepting Luther's 95 theses in your innermost heart, say. But most people who call themselves Protestant today have no idea about what was in Luther's 95 theses, which are about the meaning of repentance, the limits of the power of papal indulgences, and the possibility of forgiveness of sins.