WHAT IS IDENTITY (AS WE NOW USE THE WORD)?

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ABSTRACT

The paper undertakes an ordinary language analysis of the current meanings of "identity," a complicated and unclear concept that nonetheless plays a central role in ongoing debates in every subfield of political science (for example, debates about national, ethnic, gender, and state identities). "Identity" as we now know it derives mainly the work of psychologist Erik Erikson in the 1950s; dictionary definitions have not caught up, failing to capture the word's current meanings in everyday and social science contexts. The analysis yields the following summary statement. As we use it now, an "identity" refer to either (a) a social category, defined by membership rules and (alleged) characteristic attributes or expected behaviors, or (b) socially distinguishing features that a person takes a special pride in or views as unchangeable but socially consequential (or (a) and (b) at once). In the latter sense, "identity" is modern formulation of dignity, pride, or honor that implicitly links these to social categories. This statement differs from and is more concrete than standard glosses offered by political scientists; I argue in addition that it allows us to better understand how "identity" can help explain political actions, and the meaning of claims such as "identities are socially constructed." Finally, I argue that ordinary language analysis is a valuable and perhaps essential tool in the clarification of social science concepts that have strong roots in everday speech, a very common occurrence.

1 Introduction

In recent years, scholars working in a remarkable array of social science and humanities disciplines have taken an intense interest in questions concerning *identity*. Within political science, for example, we find the concept of "identity" at the center of lively debates in every major subfield. Students of American politics have devoted much new research to the "identity politics" of race, gender and sexuality. In comparative politics, "identity" plays a central role in work on nationalism and ethnic conflict (Horowitz 1985; Smith 1991; Deng 1995; Laitin 1999). In international relations, the idea of "state identity" is at the heart of constructivist critiques of realism and analyses of state sovereignty (Wendt 1992; Wendt 1999; Katzenstein 1996; Lapid and Kratochwil 1996; Biersteker and Weber 1996). And in political theory, questions of "identity" mark numerous arguments on gender, sexuality, nationality, ethnicity, and culture in relation to liberalism and its alternatives (Young 1990; Connolly 1991; Kymlicka 1995; Miller 1995; Taylor 1989)

Compared to recent scholarship in history and the humanities, however, political scientists remain *laggards* when it comes to work on identities. Due to influences ranging from Michel Foucault to the debate on multiculturalism, the historical and cultural construction of identities of all sorts has lately been a preoccupation for both social historians and students of literature and culture.[1]

Despite this vastly increased and broad-ranging interest in "identity," the concept itself remains something of an enigma. What Phillip Gleason (1983) observed 15 years ago remains true today: The meaning of "identity" as we currently use it is not well captured by

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[1] See Brubaker and Cooper (1999) for some citations to this voluminous literature. For a measure of the spread of "identity" in academic discourse, I charted the progress of the word in dissertation abstracts, which can now be searched on-line going back to 1981. The number of dissertation abstracts containing the word "identity" almost tripled between 1981 and 1995, rising from 709 to 1,911. This increase has occurred entirely in the last ten years. The average increase was about 12% per year for 1986 to 1995, while it was roughly flat at -2.3% for 1981 to 1985. Some of this increase could be due to an increase in the total number of dissertations abstracted. I have been unable to get these figures, but I did try searching year-by-year for a neutral "control word" – I used "study" – to get a rough estimate. By this measure, the total number of dissertations abstracted increased by an average of .64% per year for 1981-1985, and 4.4% per year for 1986-1995. Thus the number of dissertations abstracts using the word "identity" has been growing almost three times faster than the rate for all abstracted dissertations.

dictionary definitions, which reflect older senses of the word. Our present idea of "identity" is a fairly recent social construct, and a rather complicated one at that. Even though everyone knows how to use the word properly in everyday discourse, it proves quite difficult to give a short and adequate summary statement that captures the range of its present meanings.

Given the centrality of the concept to so much recent research – and especially in social science where scholars take identities both as things to be explained and things that have explanatory force – this amounts almost to a scandal. At a minimum, it would be useful to have a concise statement of the meaning of the word in simple language that does justice to its present intension.

This is the main purpose of this paper, to distill a statement of the meaning of "identity" from an analysis of current usage in ordinary language and social science discourse. The main results are easily stated, although a fair amount of work on alternative possibilities will be required to reach them. I argue that "identity" is presently used in two linked senses, which may be termed "social" and "personal." In the former sense, an "identity" refers simply to a *social category*, a set of persons marked by a label and distinguished by rules deciding membership and (alleged) characteristic features or attributes. In the second sense of personal identity, an identity is some distinguishing characteristic (or characteristics) that a person takes a special pride in or views as socially consequential but more-or-less unchangeable.

Thus, "identity" in its present incarnation has a double sense. It refers at the same time to social categories and to the sources of an individual's self-respect or dignity. There is no necessary linkage between these things. In ordinary language, at least, one can use "identity" to refer to personal characteristics or attributes that cannot naturally be expressed in terms of a social category, and in some contexts certain categories can be described as "identities" even though no one sees them as central to their personal identity. Nonetheless, "identity" in its present incarnation reflects and evokes the idea that social categories are bound up with the bases of an individual's self-respect. Arguably much of the force and

interest of the term derives its implicit linkage of these two things.[2]

In section 2 below I justify the enterprise at greater length, arguing that for contested, complicated, or unclear social science concepts with strong roots in ordinary language (i.e., most of them), a careful analysis of ordinary language meanings should precede efforts to legislate a definition for particular research purposes. Section 3 considers the inadequacy of dictionary definitions of "identity" and very briefly traces the historical evolution of its new set of meanings.[3] Section 4 begins to ask about the current meaning of "identity" by testing possible definitions against examples from usage. The trail leads first to the formulation of a identity as a social category, and, in section 6, to identity as distinguishing features of a person that form the basis of his or her self-respect or dignity (and more). In between, section 5 develops a potentially valuable distinction between role and "type" identities. Sections 7 and 8 draw out some implications of the analysis for two issues of concern to social science users of concept. In section 7 I use the results of the ordinary language analysis to consider how identities bear on the explanation of actions (political and otherwise). In section 8 I briefly extend the analysis of "identity" applied to individuals to corporate actors such as states and firms. A central argument in recent international relations theory holds that state interests are determined by "state identities." The meaning of this claim obviously depends on the meaning "state identities," which I argue might refer to any of several different things. Section 9 concludes.

2   Why bother?

Given the intense interest in identity and identities across a broad spectrum of disciplines, one might initially expect it easy to find simple and clear statements of what people mean

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[2]The added value of this statement of the current meaning of "identity" is not the distinction between "social" and "personal" sides per se. There is a long tradition of scholars drawing a distinction of this sort, contrasting various formulations of individual or personal identity, on the one hand, and social or group or collective identity on the other. What is novel in the formulation derived here is the specific content of the two sides of the distinction (which can be and has been filled in many ways).

[3]For an excellent and more detailed semantic histories of "identity," see Gleason (1983) and Mackenzie (1978).

when they use these concepts. While I have not done an exhaustive search, I have not found this to be the case. Overwhelmingly, academic users of the word "identity" feel no need to explain its meaning to readers. The readers' understanding is simply taken for granted, even when "identity" is the author's primary dependent or independent variable.[4]

This is perhaps not so surprising. In the first place, while the origins of our present understanding of "identity" lie in the academy, the concept is now quite common in popular discourse. Since we all know how to employ the word and we understand it in other peoples' sentences, why bother with definitions or explanations? Second, in popular discourse identity is often treated as something ineffable and even sacred, while in the academy identity is often treated as something complex and even ineffable.[5] One hesitates to try to define the sacred, the ineffable, or the complex.

Of course, one *can* find brief definitions and clarifications in many places. These run the gamut, from suggestive glosses to some fairly complicated and opaque formulations. Here are some examples, culled mainly but not exclusively from the areas I read most in (political science, international relations):

1. Identity is "people's concepts of who they are, of what sort of people they are, and how they relate to others" (Hogg and Abrams 1988, 2).

2. "Identity is used in this book to describe the way individuals and groups define themselves and are defined by others on the basis of race, ethnicity, religion, language, and culture" (Deng 1995, 1).

3. Identity "refers to the ways in which individuals and collectivities are distinguished in their social relations with other individuals and collectivities" (Jenkins 1996, 4).

4. "National identity describes that condition in which a mass of people have made the same identification with national symbols – have internalised the symbols of the nation ..." (Bloom 1990, 52).

5. Identities are "relatively stable, role-specific understandings and expectations about self" (Wendt 1992, 397).

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[4]See, for instance, Calhoun (1991) or Fox (1985), though any number of similar examples can be given.

[5]For a striking example of the latter, see James Clifford's (1988) essay "Identity in Mashpee." Likewise, Charles Taylor, after spending several pages of *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* explaining what he means by "identity," writes: "But in fact our identity is deeper and more many-sided than any of our possible articulations of it" (Taylor 1989, 29).

6. "Social identities are sets of meanings that an actor attributes to itself while taking the perspective of others, that is, as a social object. ... [Social identities are] at once cognitive schemas that enable an actor to determine 'who I am/we are' in a situation and positions in a social role structure of shared understandings and expectations" (Wendt 1994, 395).

7. "By social identity, I mean the desire for group distinction, dignity, and place within historically specific discourses (or frames of understanding) about the character, structure, and boundaries of the polity and the economy" (Herrigel 1993, 371).

8. "The term [identity] (by convention) references mutually constructed and evolving images of self and other" (Katzenstein 1996, 59).

9. "Identities are ... prescriptive representations of political actors themselves and of their relationships to each other" (Kowert and Legro 1996, 453).

10. "My identity is defined by the commitments and identifications which provide the frame or horizon within which I can try to determine from case to case what is good, or valuable, or what ought to be done, or what I endorse or oppose" (Taylor 1989, 27).

11. "Yet what if identity is conceived not as a boundary to be maintained but as a nexus of relations and transactions actively engaging a subject?" (Clifford 1988, 344).

12. "Identity is any source of action not explicable from biophysical regularities, and to which observers can attribute meaning" (White 1992, 6).

13. "Indeed, identity is objectively defined as location in a certain world and can be subjectively appropriated only *along with* that world. ... [A] coherent identity incorporates within itself all the various internalized roles and attitudes." (Berger and Luckmann 1966, 132).

14. "Identity emerges as a kind of unsettled space, or an unresolved question in that space, between a number of intersecting discourses. ... [Until recently, we have incorrectly thought that identity is] a kind of fixed point of thought and being, a ground of action ... the logic of something like a 'true self.' ... [But] Identity is a process, identity is split. Identity is not a fixed point but an ambivalent point. Identity is also the relationship of the Other to oneself" (Hall 1989).[6]

The range, complexity, and differences among these various formulations are remarkable. In part, the differences reflect the multiple lineages that "identity" has within the

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[6]Excepting the quote from Clifford and an essay by Handler (1994), I have had little luck finding definitions or glosses of "identity" offered by anthropologists, even though (or perhaps because) they tend to rely *very* heavily on the term (for example, in Fox (1985) "identity" appears numerous times on practically every page of the book, but is never defined). This simply indicates that anthropologists tend to take the concept for granted, which is appropriate if they mainly share a common understanding of what it designates. Handler claims that the dictionary definition "approximately" (p. 28) captures the way the word is now used; I argue against this below.

academy. Different research traditions – influenced variously by symbolic interactionism, role theory, Eriksonian psychology, social identity theory, and postmodernism, to name a few – have evolved somewhat different conventions regarding the term. Further, perhaps some of these authors intend merely to *stipulate* a definition of "identity" appropriate or useful for their specific purposes, so some variation might be expected with varying purposes.

Nonetheless, it is also striking that the definitions seem to refer to a common underlying concept. Almost every one evokes a sense of recognition, so that none seems obviously wrong, despite the diversity. This is also to be expected, because "identity" has for some time now been a staple of ordinary language. Regardless of particular research traditions or purposes, it would be *very strange* to offer a definition of "identity" that bore no relation to what we already intuitively understand by the concept.

There is an important and more general point to be made here about the definition of social science concepts. In contrast to many areas in the natural sciences, in social science most of our key concepts either derive from or enter into ordinary language.[7] Power, rationality, democracy, ethnicity, race, the state, and even politics are examples. When one is naming an entity in physics or biochemistry, or defining for the first time a technical term or neologism like "subgame perfection," "bureaucratic authoritarianism," or "postmodernism," it makes perfect sense to stipulate the meaning after the manner of Humpty Dumpty.[8] Indeed, there is no alternative in this case. But when a term has strong roots in ordinary language, it is potentially very confusing to stipulate a definition without paying any explicit attention to the prior, ordinary language meaning of term.

Suppose I stipulate that, henceforth, by "table" I mean "chair," and vice-versa. In addition to being unnecessary, this would rightly be considered an invitation to confusion. There is a stronger case for stipulating a definition for social science concepts such as power or identity, where it is less initially clear what the ordinary language version means. But

[7] Typically, they move back and forth; see the discussion of "identity"'s history below.

[8] "When *I* use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less" (Carroll 1992, 124).

doing so still risks serious confusion to the extent that the stipulated definition diverges from the readers' unarticulated prior understanding. And there is no way to guage this without first explicating the meaning in current usage. In the end, social scientists may often find it necessary to refine and redefine ordinary language meanings. But without a clear statement of the prior meaning, even the stipulator will not know what she is doing with the concept.[9]

Another argument for explicating current usage is that the method can yield a deeper understanding of contested and unclear concepts like "identity." The intuitions behind ordinary language meanings often have much interesting structure, which is likely to be missed if we jump to stipulating definitions. In their analyses of the concept of "identity," both Gleason (1983) and Brubaker and Cooper (1999) conclude that the wholesale, chaotic spread of "identity talk" in popular and academic language has deprived it of any meaning at all.[10] Quoting A.O. Lovejoy on the word "romantic", Gleason says that "identity" has "come to mean so many things that, by itself, it means nothing. It has ceased to perform the function of a verbal sign" (p. 914). Brubaker and Cooper believe that the term has acquired so many contradictory meanings and uses in sociology that it should be purged in favor of more specific terms. I will argue Brubaker and Cooper and Gleason are giving up too soon on both popular and "popular academic" usage.

3   The construction of "identity"

If in need of a definition, one looks first to dictionaries. Here is the most relevant entry for "identity" in the *OED* (2nd edition, 1989): "The sameness of a person or thing at all times or in all circumstances; the condition or fact that a person or thing is itself and not something else; individuality, personality." Note that this does not easily capture what we seem to mean

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[9]One example of the confusion that can result from inattention to ordinary language meanings comes from the use of "rational" in rational-choice-influenced political science applications, where it has been popular to argue that contrary to conventional wisdom, phenomenon X (war, genocide, ethnic violence, etc.) can be explained as the product of rational actors making choices. But the meaning of "rational" in rational choice theory concerns primarily the efficiency of means for attaining desired ends, whereas in ordinary language "rational" also refers to whether a person's ends are comprehensible or even morally defensible.

[10]See also Mackenzie (1978), whose initial dismay at the proliferation of identity talk in the 1970s Britain leads him to speak of the "murder" of the concept.

when we refer to "national identity" or "ethnic identity," for example. Is national identity the sameness of a nation in all times and places, or the condition of being this nation and not another? Certainly the idea of national identity entails an idea of temporal and spatial continuity of a nation, but this isn't what an essay on the national identity of the Russians (for example) would be focused on. Nor is national identity the fact or condition of being different from other nations, but rather something about the content of the differences.

The dictionary definition also fails to capture what we intend by declarations of the form "my identity is [such and such] ...", although "individuality" may come close here ("personality" is clearly way off). Most telling is the comparison between the OED definition and the social scientist's definitions listed above. While there is considerable overlap among social scientist's definitions, there is almost none with the dictionary meaning.

An important point follows: Our present concept of "identity" is recent, or at least recent enough that dictionaries have not caught up with current usage. The *OED* definition is reporting an older meaning of the word that is still used quite frequently in everyday speech but is nonetheless narrower than our present concept of identity. In this older sense, "identity" refers to the (often legal) association of a particular name to a particular person – the quality of being a particular person, or the same person as before, as in "she revealed the identity of the murderer" or "a case of mistaken identity." This usage is still very much with us.[11] For example, there is a minor genre of newspaper articles about the theft of credit and other identification cards that refers to "stolen identities."[12] But note that this is a quite different sense from what we mean when we say "I can't do that because it is inconsistent with my identity" or claim that "Ethnic conflicts are particularly prone to violence because they involve matters of identity."

[11]Mackenzie (1978, 25) calls this the "bureaucratic usage."

[12]Laitin (1998) identifies this genre in an analysis of usage based on a Nexis-Lexis search. He reports the following instance, from *USA Today*: "Authorities have charged Janetzke, 40, of Streamwood with what amounts to the theft of another person's identity. Police say he used the name and credit history of a 35-year-old trucker from Wood Dale ... and even took out a telephone number in his name. 'He just took away my husband's identity,' the truck driver's wife said. 'It's just a big mess.' " In my own random sample of 40 uses of "identity" in major English newspapers identified by Nexis-Lexis, I found that about 40% fit the dictionary, "mistaken identity" sense.

There is a second older meaning of "identity" that need not apply to persons and that is also still in use – for example, "an identity of interests." This sense is defined in the *OED* as follows: "The quality or condition of being the same in substance, composition, nature, properties, or in particular qualities under consideration." The *OED* gives an interesting example here. In South Africa fairly recently, the word was used as a label for a policy that refused to acknowledge any difference between Africans and Europeans – the "policy of identity." As late as 1960, it was said that "the earlier British policy of identity broke down." Note how contrary this is to the current sense, which would much more likely equate a "policy of identity" with one that fostered or strengthened cultural *difference* and awareness of it, perhaps in a positive way.

As Gleason (1983) shows, our present sense of "identity" has evolved in the last forty years, deriving most of all from psychoanalyst Erik Erikson's concept of an "identity crisis." The following excerpt from the preface to a 1965 book by the psychoanalyst David de Levita gives some indication of the novelty of Erikson's usage.

> In Hiddesen, a charming little German town, a meeting was held in 1951 to discuss 'Health and Human Relations,' sponsored jointly by ... . At that conference Erik H. Erikson spoke on 'The Sense of Inner Identity.' I was deeply impressed by Erikson and the exposition of his brilliant ideas. ... We all felt that this 'concept of identity' was extremely important, *but it was not clear what the exact meaning was, so loaded with significance was the new term.*[13]

Erikson's term "identity crisis" *has* made it into dictionaries, and is defined in one as follows: "the condition of being uncertain of one's feelings about oneself, especially with regard to character, goals, and origins, occuring especially in adolesence as a result of growing

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[13]de Levita 1965, emphasis added. The preface was written by H.C. Rumke, M.D. For Erikson's own discussion of the history of the new sense of the term – which he recognized as a conceptual innovation appropriated by popular culture – see Erikson (1968, 15-25). The closest Erikson comes here to defining his understanding of the concept of "identity" is this complex formulation: "identity formation employs a process of simultaneous reflection and observation, taking place on all levels of mental functioning, by which the individual judges himself in light of what he perceives to be the way in which others judge him in comparison to themselves and to a typology significant to them; while he judges their way of judging him in light of how he perceives himself in comparison to them and to types that have become relevant to him."

up under disruptive, fast-changing conditions."[14]

This statement implicitly defines "identity" as one's feelings about one's self, character, goals, and origins. While much closer to our current meaning than the older meaning discussed above, this is closer still to "self-image." As we use it now, "my identity" is not the same thing as my *feelings* about my self, character, goals, and origins, but rather something about my *definition* of my self, character, and so on.

This brief look at what dictionaries have to say suggests that our current notion of "identity" is historically fairly recent. Identity is a new concept and not something that people have eternally needed or sought as such. If they were trying to establish, defend, or protect their identities, they thought about what they were doing in different terms.[15] Thus, research intended to show how identity is socially constructed and historically contingent must presume that our present concept of identity is transhistorically and transculturally applicable, so that we can ask just as easily about the identities of 18th century English peasants as about peoples' identities today, for example. If we want to apply a fairly recent social construct transhistorically, this is another reason to be as clear as we can about its meaning.[16]

So what does this word mean as we use it now? Recognizing that no short statement will adequately cover all usages, I argue below that the word "identity" as used today has two distinct but intertwined meanings, and that much of the force and interest of the concept turns on the implicit question of precisely how these meanings intertwine.

As noted above, the two senses may be designated "social" and "personal" identity. In the former, an identity is just a social category, a group of people designated by a label (or labels) that is commonly used either by the people designated, others, or both. This is the sense employed when we refer to "American," "French," "Muslim," "father," "homosexual,"

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[14] *Webster's New World Dictionary*, 1979, p. 696.

[15] In a 1997 lecture at the University of Chicago, Charles Taylor made this point with the observation that Luther would have been either baffled or scandalized by Erik Erikson's characterization of his youthful "identity crisis" in *Young Man Luther*.

[16] Gleason (1983) provides an interesting analysis of the social construction of "identity" in academic and popular discourse through the 70s.

"worker," "professor," or "citizen" as identities.

If this first sense is more typical of academic than popular usage, the reverse is true for "identity" as personal identity. This is the meaning invoked in declarations of the form "my identity is ... " or "I could never do that because it would be inconsistent with, or would violate, my identity." Here is the best I have been able to do: Personal identity is a set of attributes, beliefs, desires, or principles of action that a person thinks distinguish her in socially relevant ways and that (a) the person takes a special pride in; (b) the person takes no special pride in, but which so orient her behavior that she would be at a loss about how to act and what to do without them; or (c) the person feels she could not change even if she wanted to. Most often, I will argue, the (a) meaning applies, so that for usage in ordinary language personal identity can typically be glossed as the *aspects or attributes of a person that form the basis for his or her dignity or self-respect.* Used in this sense, "identity" has become a partial and indirect substitute for "dignity," "honor," and "pride."

This second definition is a mouthful, and requires explication to be given below. It should be noted, immediately, however, that by this statement social identity (membership in a social category) might enter into or partially constitute personal identity, through any of (a), (b) or (c).

In what follows, I develop each of these statements by posing simpler definitions and asking how they square with or whether they capture senses of "identity" in common academic and popular usage. The trail of argument leads first to social identity and then to personal identity.

4 Social Identity

A simple answer to the question "what is identity?" would be this: It is how one answers the question "who are you?" Or, my identity is how I define who I am. When academic authors offer brief clarification of what they mean by the word, this is often the way they do it ("a person's identity is how the person defines who he or she is").[17]

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[17]See, for some examples, definitions 1, 2, 6, and 13, or Hopf (1998, 175).

One might answer the question "who are you?" entirely differently in different circumstances. For example, depending on the context, I might answer "an American," "a professor," "a son-in-law," "a taxpayer," "a Democrat." In some situations I might even give my social security number. By this simple definition, then, it is trivial that one might have multiple identities, understood simply as answers to the question "who are you?", since how you answer the question will depend on the specific context.

So here is a first cut at a definition. An identity is something that fits as X in the sentence "I am an X." In logical terms, an identity is a predicate that applies (or may apply) to a person, that is, a quality or property of a person.

This isn't enough, since it allows things that clearly would not qualify as "legitimate" (that is, recognizable to usage) identities, even taking a broad sense of the word. For example, consider X = a person with ten fingers, or X = a person with two moles on my right arm, or X = a person who saw the dentist last Tuesday. So an identity must be *a particular sort of predicate* attachable to a person.

But what sort of predicate? At this point we might try the route taken in philosophy, where philosophers have long debated over a particular and often rather technical understanding of the word "identity." In this debate, the identity of a thing (not just a person) consists of those properties or qualities in virtue of which it is that thing. That is, if you changed these properties or qualities, it would cease to be that thing and be something different. Inquiry into identity in this sense gives rise to conundrums like the following: What makes that tree the same tree that was there 20 years ago? If you rebuild a boat plank by plank, does it remain the same boat? Or, in terms of persons, what would have to be different about me for me to no longer be who I am? What are the properties or qualities in virtue of which I am James Fearon?

In this philosophical sense, personal identity is those predicates of a person such that if they are changed, it is no longer the same person, the properties that are *essential* to him or her being that person rather than being merely *contingent*. For example, if you lose a finger we would say that you are the same person as before; if you suffer from an advanced state of Alzheimer's, we might not. As I discuss below, this sense is related to the dictionary

definition and to the way we currently understand the concept. We do think of identity as consisting of things that are in some way essential to us being who we are, whereas other things, like the type of ice cream I happen to want today, are merely contingent.

But what philosophers have meant by "identity" in this sense is not what we currently mean in social science academic or in popular discourse. For example, I might say that a crucial part of my identity is that I like to listen to punk rock, but if I stopped liking this music I would not think that I was literally a different person – I would not imagine that I ceased being James Fearon even though I might understand my identity to have changed. The same might be said of national identity, if I change national affiliations.

So we still need a qualification on the definition that says an identity is an X that satisfies "I am an X" in some context or situation. Looking to usage, the typical predicate is very often a social category, as in several of the examples listed earlier. Consider, then, a simple definition that says an identity is just a *social category*, and to have a particular identity means to assign oneself to a particular social category or perhaps just to be assigned to it by others.[18]

To be complete, this simple definition requires a statement of what a social category is, a straightforward but necessary exercise. To begin with, a social category is a set of people designated by a label (or labels) commonly given to, or used by, a set of people. The label must be invoked often enough or in sufficiently important situations that people condition their behavior or thinking on it. For example, we can think of the category of people who have nine fingers, but this does not arise, or is not relevant in the sense that no behaviors or beliefs are regularly conditioned it. Thus we probably would not admit this as a social category. (Or perhaps we would just call it an irrelevant one.)

Social categories have two distinguishing features. First, they are defined and by implicit or explicit *rules of membership*, according to which individuals are assigned or not to the category (some examples are discussed below). Second, social categories are understood

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[18]Social scientists sometimes seem to want to restrict "identity" to a social category whose members subjectively identify with the category. This won't capture ordinary language usage, where it is not necessary that individuals identify with a category for it to be called an identity. For example, a person's ethnic identity might be German even if he or she is completely indifferent to this fact.

in terms of sets of characteristics – for example, beliefs, desires, moral commitments, or physical attributes – thought typical of members of the category, or behaviors expected or obliged of members in certain situations, as in the case of roles, such as a professor, student, or police officer. I will call these the *content* of a social category. Both membership rules and the content of a social category may, of course, be the subject of dispute. Indeed, contestation over the membership rules, the content, and the moral valuation or political treatment of social categories is what poltical scientists refer to as "identity politics."[19]

My impression is that this very simple definition – an identity is a social category – takes one quite far in terms of understanding what academics frequently mean when they use the word. To ask about identities of such-and-such people is often to ask about the social categories in which they placed themselves (or were placed by others) and how they thought about their content or rules of membership. In many cases it might be clearer and better to use "social category" rather than "identity."

While identity-as-a-social-category captures much of what academics often mean by the term, this simple definition does not cover all that we mean by the word. In particular, "an identity is a social category" doesn't work when we use identity in the sense of personal identity, which may be formulated in terms of a group affiliation but need not be.[20] In addition, even when the word *does* refer primarily to a social category – nation, gender, sexuality, for instance – it can mean somewhat more than just "social category" because of an implicit linkage with the idea of personal identity.

To see how, consider the central proposition of much constructivist scholarship, that identities are socially constructed. Without a sharp statement of the meaning of "identity," this central claim must remain somewhat mysterious. Suppose we offer the translation, "social categories are socially constructed," and take "socially constructed" to mean that social categories vary over time, historically, and are the products of human thinking, discourse, and action.

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[19]One social category may have multiple labels with different social valuations, so that "identity politics" is often played out in contestation over labels and their moral valence (e.g., gay vs. queer vs. homosexual).

[20]"Identity" in this second sense is explicated below.

This is not a terribly wrong translation, and it certainly has the advantage in terms of clarity. The translation also raises a question: What is the important insight in the claim that identities are socially constructed? *Of course* social categories are socially constructed, if this means that they vary over time as a result of human thinking, discourse and action. What else would they be? The claim that "identities" are changeable and historically contingent may sound like an insight, due in part to an implicit play on the older idea of identity as the constitutive properties of a thing that remain the same through time. But consider "social categories change over time and are historically contingent." Of course they do. Milkmen have ceased to be a live social category, except in certain jokes. Or "clerk," "blacksmith," or "Visigoth" – all are categories no longer in active use. And of course other, new social categories have been created, such as software engineer and soccer mom.

How could social categories be something other than socially constructed? The answer implicit in most constructivist scholarship is that people often believe, incorrectly, that certain social categories are natural, inevitable, and unchanging facts about the social world. They believe that particular social categories are fixed by human nature rather than social convention and practice. Much constructivist labor has been dedicated to destabilizing such beliefs by showing how the content and even membership rules of taken-for-granted categories such as man/woman or heterosexual/homosexual have changed over time.[21] It cannot be surprising that people view identities-as-social-categories as objective features of their social worlds that they confront as unchangeable constraints (thus, "natural" in one sense). Social categories generally *are* objective social facts beyond the reach of any one individual to change. For instance, no one individual in the U.S. can change the fact that in many interactions one will be coded as white, black, hispanic, or asian, often with important consequences. It is more surprising, and an important constructivist insight, that people tend "naturalize" systems of social categories in the sense of viewing them also as normatively or morally right, and often as having the same necessity as laws of natural world.[22]

[21]See, for a good example, Chauncey (1994).

[22]This constructivist insight amounts in part to the observation that social categories are subject to the is/ought fallacy, with important political and social consequences. Cf. Hardin (1995).

But even if "identity is socially constructed" can be productively translated and analyzed as "social categories are socially constructed," this does not do full justice to the claim. Rather, the statement "identity is socially constructed" trades on the implicit and unarticulated double sense of "identity" in present usage. It means at once that social categories are socially constructed and something like "peoples' sense of themselves as distinct individuals is socially constructed." In part, what gives such statements their force, interest, and subversive appeal is the notion that a social process beyond the individual's control crucially shapes something that the individual may understand as deeply personal. It is worth noting that the claim is subversive when set against background assumptions derived from classical liberalism, which since Hobbes has employed a notion of a presocial, autonomous individual as an axiom and, arguably, as a normative ideal. In liberalism, constraints or influences on individuals that emanate from beyond the individual and without conscious consent are viewed as suspect or illegitimate.[23]

Therefore, while often serviceable for uses like "national identity," "ethnic identity," and the like, the short definition "an identity is a social category" misses an unelaborated argument implicit in the contemporary concept of identity. The argument holds that social categories enter into our sense of ourselves as individuals (a temporary gloss for personal identity) in complex and possibly nefarious or coercive ways. Thus, "identity" can invoke not just a social category (content plus membership rules) but also the unarticulated ways that social identity constitutes personal identity.

5 Role and type identities

Before proceeding to investigate the meaning that corresponds to personal identity, I offer some further disctinctions and arguments regarding identities as social categories that are used subsequently. In particular, I distinguish between two classes of identities, role and

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[23]For example, the sense of scandal that pervades Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* is based on a demonstration that the practical application of liberal theory has entailed the coercive manufacture of a particular sort of individual, which seems directly contrary to some of liberalism's stated ideals (not to say that Foucault's work is straightforwardly liberal).

type. These are ideal types, in that many social categories have elements of both.

Role identities refer to labels applied to people who are expected or obligated to perform some set of actions, behaviors, routines, or functions in particular situations. For example, taxi driver, toll collector, mother, father, president, professor, businessman, student. Type identities refer to labels applied to persons who share or are thought to share some characteristic or characteristics, in appearance, behavioral traits, beliefs, attitudes, values, skills (e.g., language), knowledge, opinions, experience, historical commonalities (like region or place of birth), and so on. There is a presumption that the characteristics are more than transitory, although a type identity such as "teenager" may not be permanent.

National identities, like American or Russian, are examples of type identities. There are almost no contexts in which it would make sense to speak of the "the role of an American," except in a theatre play where "role" means part. Other social categories that are almost wholly type identities include party affiliation (e.g., Democrat or Republican), sexual identity (heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, etc.), and ethnic identity.

Some identities or social categories involve both role and type. For example, "mother" is a role, but nonetheless we expect certain beliefs, attitudes, values, preferences, moral virtues, and so on, to be characteristic of people performing the role of mother (understandings that may change through time.) On the other hand, some role identities, which mainly but not exclusively comprise occupational categories, have few if any type features associated with them (for example, toll booth collector).

Both type and role identities are defined in terms of membership rules and social content, as argued above. For roles, membership rules are often formal, socially recognized procedures, such as the bar exam or the whole set of electoral contests and ceremonies that make U.S. presidents. Someone who performs the expected actions but has not satisfied the membership rules is merely "impersonating a police officer," for example.

With type identities, membership rules are frequently less formal, though still very much social conventions. Take, for an example, ethnic identity. The membership rule that we seem to use implicity when deciding ethnic identity is this: You are member of an ethnic group X if you can claim to have parents or maybe grandparents who were also recognized

as members of the ethnic group X. That is, membership in an ethnic group is understood to be determined by a descent relationship.

Thus, if I convert to Judaism, I may be considered "religiously Jewish," but few would not say that I was "ethnically Jewish" or that my ethnic identity was Jewish. And this could be true even if I adopt all manner of beliefs, customs, attitudes, etc., that are thought to be characteristic of the category "Jews" (which is already highly diverse and contested). Thus, to "have an identity" in the sense of a social category, it is not necessary that one share what are thought to be typical features of members of the category. The point sharply illustrates the distinction between the two senses of the word, social and personal. We might say that "John's ethnic identity is Jewish" and "John does not consider being Jewish as an important part of his identity" *and be perfectly correct in both cases.*

The membership rules defining a type identity are thus distinct from the set of features thought typical of people in this social category (the identity's content). For another example, take the national identity "American," which has a membership rule saying that a person is a member of the category if he or she is able legally to obtain a U.S. passport, and a content that may or may not characterize many individuals who satisfy the membership rule. Note further that the membership rules defining type identities can be quite arbitrary and inconsistent. In the U.S., having a single, non-too-distant ancestor who was coded as white does not make one "white," but one may be coded as black if one has "a single drop of black blood," as the racist saying goes. There is of course no biological reason or justification for this; it is just an arbitrary membership rule.

While some occupational and other role identities have a good deal of "type content" associated with them (e.g., mother), others have very little (e.g., toll booth collector). Kreps (1989) "corporate culture" theory may be applicable here for explaining why some do and some don't. Following Kreps, the simpler the tasks or functions – and the less likely is the person in the role to encounter novel situations that cannot be specified in advance – the less likely we are to see the development of content features associated with the role. A toll booth collector's functions can be completely specified very simply, and novel situations rarely arise. A mother or father, on the other hand, encounters myriad novel and unforeseeable situations

when raising a child (the role function), and it makes sense to have some general principles, which Kreps call "corporate culture," to use as rough guides for making decisions as these situations arise. The guidelines might be cast as moral virtues ("good mothers are protective of their children"), as rules of thumb ("don't trust members of another clan"), or corporate guidelines ("the customer is always right"). These principles or guidelines are the social content of such identities and are often the subjects of political dispute.

Kreps' main argument was that the principles (in my terms, content) constituting corporate and other identities might be explained as instrumentally useful to their bearers, on the grounds that identity principles can allow a person or firm to develop and maintain a reputation, which can be a valuable asset. There are other reasons that principles of action entering into the content of an identity might be instrumentally useful to the bearer. For example, they might simply reduce confusion and facilitate the achievement of various ends in diverse circumstances, by coordinating peoples' expectations about how to act and what to do in various encounters. Schelling (1960, 92) observed that

> The concept of *role* in sociology, which explicitly involves the expectation that others have about one's behavior, as well as one's expectations about how others will behave toward him, can in part be interpreted in terms of the stability of "convergent expectations," of the same type that are involved in [a] coordination game. One is trapped in a particular role, or by another's role, because it is the only role that in the circumstances can be identified by a process of tacit consent.

Schelling's suggestion is that role identities (at least) might be usefully seen as analogous to focal equilibria in coordination problems, that is, as social conventions like driving on the right side of the road, or language, where we generally do not care which set of sounds corresponds to an object or idea as long as we all coordinate on the same sounds.

A number of research traditions have stressed the argument that identities can have a coercive or constraining aspect, which is usually explained in terms of the individual psychological effects of social categorization.[24] Thinking about systems of social categories as coordination equilibria might shed a different sort of light on the coercive side of social

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[24]Two examples from very different traditions are de Beauvoir (1980) and Turner (1987).

identity. An important feature of coordination problems is that individuals can be trapped in a bad equilibrium. It may make no sense for an individual to deviate from the convention (here, to act against the identity) given that others are following the convention, even though the individual might prefer a different convention (here, a different formulation of social categories and their content). No one can unilaterally change the content or rules of membership for a social category; this can only be accomplished through collective action that recoordinates beliefs and expectations.[25] I return briefly to this point below in the discussion of how identities-as-social-categories explain actions.

6 Personal Identity

Asked to explain the meaning of "identity" in the sense of personal identity, one is again tempted to begin with a formulation like "how a person defines who he or she is; self-definition or self-understanding." Once again, however, it is apparent that there are many different ways that a person might define who he or she is. Which one corresponds to personal identity? And "self-understanding" is really too broad and vague to be right. Many things might reasonably be included in "self-understanding" that we would not say are matters of identity.[26]

When we say that my identity is "who I am," we mean "who I *really* am," in some sort of essential or fundamental way. We are talking about an aspect of ourselves that is in some way important to us. It would go against usage and our understanding of the concept to say that some aspect of one's (personal) identity was a matter of complete indifference – that one could take it or leave it with total equanimity. The problem of explaining what personal identity is (as we talk about it) is the problem of stating what aspects of a person it refers to and precisely in what sense these are important or "essential."

In *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, Charles Taylor seems to take this approach. He says: "... the question of identity ... is often spontaneously phrased

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[25]See Laitin (1998) and Mackie (1996) for developed examples of this approach.

[26]This is why I am skeptical of Brubaker and Cooper (1999) suggestion that "self-understanding" is more precise than "identity" in certain contexts.

by people in the form: Who am I? ... What [answers] this question for us is an understanding of what is of crucial importance to us" (p. 27). This can't be right as stated, since oxygen, the Clean Air Act, and lots of other things may be important to me but not be part of my identity. Taylor proceeds by putting restrictions on the things identity consists of and the sense in which they are important: "My identity is defined by the commitments and identifications which provide the frame or horizon within which I can try to determine from case to case what is good, or valuable, or what ought to be done, or what I endorse or oppose" (p. 27). Thus, in Taylor's interpretation, personal identity is a personal moral code or compass, a set of moral principles, ends, or goals that a person uses as a normative framework and a guide to action.

Taylor is of course free to stipulate "identity" as he pleases for his particular analytical ends, but I do not think that this statement does a good job of making sense of the concept as it is presently understood. Without a doubt, what people speak of as their (personal) identities often includes personal moral codes and normative frameworks seen as important. But other things can be sensibly included in a statement of personal identity that are not understood to be about moral orientation and commitment.

For example, consider a person who adopts an idiosyncratic (or just personal) style of dress – say, he wears a brightly colored bow tie almost every day. After many years of purple-bow-tie-wearing, the person might well say that this was part of his identity, even though neither he nor anyone else views this aspect of his identity as a matter of moral orientation or evaluative framework. And this is not a bizarre or exceptional counterexample. Especially in popular discourse, the "question of identity" is frequently interpreted to be a question about personal style – the way a person distinguishes himself or herself by means of consciously chosen manners of dress, speech, cultural likes and dislikes, and so on. While it is often true that choices of personal style invoke or express moral frameworks by indicating membership in a social category (that is, by signaling a social identity), this is not necessarily the case, as the bow-tie example shows. Indeed, quite often the very notion of personal style entails distinguishing oneself as an individual and thus emphatically not as a member of a group. The same can be said about identity. In popular discourse, we will accept statements of a

person's identity phrased in terms of membership in social categories, but also statements that make no reference to group membership. Your personal identity may be expressed as that which distinguishes you as an individual from other *individuals*.[27]

So "personal identity is fundamental moral orientation" is too narrow. The example of personal style also undermines several other ways we might try to specify the sense of "what is very important or essential to us being who we are." First, recognizing that a person might answer the question "Who are you?" by declaring membership in many different social categories, depending on the context, we might try an approach that says personal identity is the social category that is most important to a person's way of life.[28] That is, my personal identity is the social identity whose content I am most committed to or motivated by, the one that trumps others when I have to make choices which imply violating the normative content of one or another of my social identities. Without doubt, it is often the case that people understand their personal identity in terms of membership in a particular social category. But, as the example of personal style shows, this is not necessary. Personal identity may be conceived in terms that intentionally eschew group affiliations.

Second, as intimated earlier, the example of personal style undermines an attempt to make sense of our present concept of identity in the terms of the philosophers' long-standing debate about identity. Such a definition would say that personal identity consists of those properties of a person that cannot be altered without making the subject a different person. But if a person changes her personal style, we would not say that she is a different person, except in a metaphorical flourish, and this is not what philosophers have in mind when they are talking about the sort of properties that define "personal identity" in their sense.[29] When we say that one's identity consists of what is "essential" to being who one is, we don't mean

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[27]In addition, not all group affiliations that might enter into a person's understanding of their identity need entail self-conscious moral frameworks (e.g., a bowling club).

[28]In the symbolic interactionist tradition, this idea has been called the "salience hierarchy." See Stryker (1987).

[29]See Perry (1975) and Rorty (1976). The debate in analytic philosophy proceeds mainly from critiques and defenses of Locke's argument that the identity of a person consists in a continuity of perception and memory of experiences.

"essential" in the philosophical sense of constitutive, but rather in a more ordinary sense of important.

Third, sometimes people speak of their personal identity as consisting of aspects of themselves that they feel powerless to change, or which in their experience they cannot choose, such as sexual orientation or membership in a social category. Clearly, a definition put in these terms alone would not capture the whole sense of the concept, because we will also admit as aspects of personal identity things that are the subject of deliberate choice, like personal style.

Evidently the things we will accept as constituting personal identity are a varied lot. It is clear that personal identity consists of a set of aspects or attributes of a person. These may be physical attributes (e.g., being tall or red-headed might figure into a personal identity), membership in social categories, person-specific beliefs, goals, desires, moral principles, or matters of personal style. Second, they must be aspects or attributes of the person that the person is conscious of, and which distinguish the person from at least some others. Having an oddly shaped gall bladder cannot be a component of my identity if I don't know about it. Nor would it make sense to say "A crucial part of my identity is my status as a vertebrate" (or earth dweller, or even human being).

Beyond this condition, I am unable to discern any single criterion that picks out all and only those attributes that we will include as constituting personal identity. The best I can do is a set of three things that covers all the cases I can think of. The first one captures what is most commonly meant in ordinary language use of "identity."

Very frequently, the attributes or aspects of a person that are reported as making up personal identity are aspects in which the person takes a special pride or the loss of which would entail a loss of self-respect. My unusual height, my beautiful red hair, my personal style, my talented children, my occupation, my ethnic or religious identity, my moral or political convictions, my life-term goals, the specific local culture I belong to (sexual, neighborhood, country club, etc.) – all of these are things that might be understood as making up one's personal identity, and reported as things the speaker is proud of and wants to announce to others as marks of distinction. The things that we understand to distinguish

us as individuals and which we take pride in are of course things that are important to us, because in general people desire to think well of themselves. Quite often, we understand as personal identity *those aspects of ourselves that form the basis for our self-esteem.*

This formulation helps explain how we understand identity to be such a powerful motivator of action and how matters of identity can engage such deep and powerful emotions. Why is it that actions that "violate one's identity" may be rejected almost independent of their material consequences? Quite often, the answer is that such actions would undermine a person's basis for thinking well of himself or herself. Thus, statements such as "ethnic conflicts are particularly prone to violence because they involve matters of identity" might be explained as follows: Ethnic conflicts are prone to violence because membership in ethnic categories is often an important basis for peoples' sense of self-worth or dignity, and threats to this sense are in general likely to produce powerful emotional reactions.[30] This formulation also suggests a straightforward explanation for why nationalism, particularly in its more "ethnic" articulations, often seems to appeal most strongly to people with relatively low socio-economic status.[31] If occupation and social rank are not available as sources of self-esteem because one accepts the prevailing valuation of such social categories, then national and ethnic categories (in which membership is automatic) may be invested with greater significance.[32]

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[30]Horowitz (1985, chap. 3) develops the argument that ethnic conflict in general results from the pursuit of a feeling of comparative self-worth. See also Tajfel (1982) and social identity theory in social psychology more generally. Calhoun (1991) is a example of this kind of argument in a nonethnic setting.

[31]An often-cited instance is the success of nationalism at mobilizing workers for war in 1914, to the puzzlement and consternation of socialist leaders at the time. See also the brief essay on the psychological basis of Balkan nationalism by Danilo Kis, reprinted in Thompson (1992, 336). He writes " This kind of profile, which fits all nationalists, can be freely elaborated to its conclusion: the nationlist is, as a rule, equally piffling as a social being and as an individual ... he is a nonentity." Margalit and Raz (1990) argue that national identity is appealing as a locus for political rights precisely because it is typically a matter of birth rather than achievement, and the good of self-respect is more reliably founded on something that can't be taken away from us.

[32]As Laitin (1998) suggests, it might be interesting to think of this in Hirschman's (1970) terms of *exit* (trying to avoid the humiliating consequences of membership in one category by defining oneself in terms of another, more highly valued category), *voice* (mobilizing to try to change the social valuation of a category to which one is assigned), and *loyalty* (accepting membership in a poorly valued category as one's fate and essence).

Once again, however, this statement of the concept's meaning – personal identity is those aspects of a person that form the basis for his or her sense of self-worth and distinction – is open to non-trivial counterexamples. Consider the following two. First, an elderly man or woman who has lived in the same neighborhood for many years and has a very established daily routine and personal style. It is perfectly possible that the person takes no special pride in many aspects of this routine and style. It is just a long-established habitual way of living. Consider the question "Why don't you buy that pair of shoes, or that car, or why don't you take a yoga class?" Although the answer might not be phrased in terms of "identity," we would recognize (or label) a reply like "I just could never do that" or "I just couldn't imagine myself doing that" as being a statement of personal identity. To say "the man could not do this because it was inconsistent with his identity" would be a perfectly respectable usage of the term. And this might be the case even if the man was *not* saying (in effect) "I can't do this because it is inconsistent with the principles of action of the social category I am a member of" or "I can't do this because it would go against some aspect of myself in which I take a special pride."

For the second counterexample, consider a man who tries for years to live a typical heterosexual life, but eventually decides "I can't keep doing this. Try as I might to deny it, I have to accept the fact that I am gay. This is just a fact about my identity, or who I am." This is again a perfectly respectable usage of the word, but in this example the person takes no special pride in what he concludes to be a crucial component of his (personal and social) identity. Rather, it may even be something he is ashamed of.

I don't know how to treat these counterexamples except a little arbitrarily. Hence the definition:

> Personal identity is a set of attributes, beliefs, desires, or principles of action that a person thinks distinguish her in socially relevant ways and that (a) the person takes a special pride in; (b) the person takes no special pride in, but which so orient her behavior that she would be at a loss about how to act and what to do without them; or (c) the person feels she could not change even if she wanted to.

Conditions (b) and (c) are intended to deal with the counterexamples. (b) recognizes that we sometimes interpret personal identity in terms of a set of principles or rules that

fundamentally orient and structure our behavior but which may have little moral content or significance as bases of self-esteem; they are just rules without which we wouldn't know how to act or what to do. (c) recognizes that we can understand personal identity to involve desires that we experience as beyond our control, or membership in a social category that we cannot escape even if we would like to, independent of how such desires or social identity enter into our self-esteem.

7   Explaining Actions with Identities

Above, I noted that if we see that one side of the meaning of "identity" is essentially the basis of one's dignity or self respect, it becomes less mysterious how this ambiguous construct can powerfully motivate actions. In this section I use the preceding analysis of the word's current meaning to develop a broader account of the different ways that identity may be involved in the explanation of action. Especially in social science, scholars often want the concept of identity to do this kind of work. Indeed, some view identity as interesting and important precisely because it is thought to explain actions that other approaches, such as rational choice, cannot. Alternatively, it is argued that standard rationalist or intentionalist explanations of action must presume or rest on an account of identities to begin with.[33] A clear account of the meaning of "identity" would seem to be a precondition for making such arguments coherent.

Following the analysis above, I would argue that identity can figure into the explanation of action in two main ways, which parallel the two sides of the word's present meaning. Recall that "identity" can mean either a social category or, in the sense of personal identity, distinguishing features of a person that form the basis of his or her dignity or self-respect. Accordingly, "identity" can explain actions either in the sense that membership in a social category can explain actions, or in the sense that the desire to gain or defend one's dignity or self-respect can explain actions.

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[33]For examples of both views in international relations, see Wendt (1994) and Ringmar (1996).

7.1 Actions explained by reference to social categories

Some examples:

1. Why did A grab a bottle, pour a drink, hand it to B, and take some money from B? Because A is a bartender.

2. Luckily, there was a doctor on the airplane, who was able to resuscitate the heart attack victim with CPR.

3. Though she was extremely tired, she made pleasant small talk because she was a guest in their house.

4. The Germans in the room chose not to participate in the singing of the *Marseillaise.*

5. Why is he wearing a turban? Because he is a Sikh.

We constantly explain actions by referring to membership in social categories (and thus to identities in this sense). In the short form illustrated by the examples, these are often "explanation sketches" which may not be not very good explanations by themselves. How, then, does a good explanation-by-reference-to-a-social-category work?

Unpacked, an explanation of action by reference to social identity is frequently an explanation in terms of *social norms*, or standards of conduct that can take the generic form "Good people do (or do not do) X in situations A, B, C ..."[34] What I earlier called the content of a social category is frequently made up of norms attached to or associated with membership in the category. This is true for role identities, like bartender, professor, or prime minister; for type identities, like nationality, ethnicity, sexuality, and gender; and for social categories that have strong elements of both role and type, like mother or father. Thus, explaining a person's action by referring to a social identity frequently amounts to saying that the person was following a norm associated with the category, as in each of the examples given above. The examples can take the general form "Members of category X are supposed to do (or ought to do) Y in situations A, B, C ..."

[34]This slightly modifies Elster's (1989, 98) formulation – "The simplest social norms are of the type 'Do X', or 'Don't do X' " – which I think mistakenly includes rules of prudence such as "Always lock your car." We typically do not consider a rule of conduct to be a social norm unless a shared moral assessment is attached to its observance or non-observance. Elster recognizes this when he adds the condition that "For norms to be *social*, they must be (a) shared by other people and (b) partly sustained by their approval or disapproval" (1989, 99, emphasis in original).

There are other ways besides reference to social norms that social identity can be held to explain choices. For instance, the members of a social category might be understood to share certain beliefs, desires (preferences), or habits that might help explain their actions, even though the beliefs, desires, or habits have no normative aspect. In other words, the content of a social category may include other things besides norms. For example, "Why is he talking so loudly? Because he is an American" explains an action by referring to a preference or habit said to be characteristic of members of a category, but it is not the case that Americans *are supposed to* talk loudly.

Nonetheless, explanation by reference to social identity most often amounts to explanation by reference to social norms associated with the relevant social category (or categories). The next natural question, then, is how exactly does invoking a social norm explain an action? While I cannot do justice to this problem here or anywhere, a few remarks suffice to show that social identity as an explanatory concept stands in for explanation in more basic terms, and to suggest that we often would be better off going to the heart of the matter – explanation in terms of norms.

A full explanation of an action in terms of a norm associated with an identity needs to do at least two things. First, we would like to know what is the person's motivation or reason for acting in accord with the norm, and thus, with the dictates of the social identity. Second, we may want an account of why this particular action is a norm, rather than other possibilities. For instance, why are Sikh men supposed to wear turbans?

Both questions can have multiple answers. On the first, any subset of the following motivations and reasons may explain why one abides with a norm in particular cases:

1. One might believe that following the norm is the right thing to do, whether because of early socialization or one's independent judgement and experience. Relatedly, one might want to follow the norm because one would think badly of oneself otherwise – failing to follow the norm would undermine one's pride, dignity, or self-respect. (This is often called "internalization.")

2. One might be motivated to follow the norm because one desires the approval of others, irrespective of any actions they might take.

3. One might want to follow a norm because otherwise one will be sanctioned (or not rewarded) by the actions of others. For instance, a bartender may follow the norms of

bartending in order to get paid.[35]

4. One might wish to follow a norm because otherwise one's behavior will be unintelligible to others with whom one wishes to communicate or interact, and intelligibility is desired for its own sake or because it is necessary for other ends.

5. One might follow a norm because this is the only way one knows how to act in some circumstance – if asked to act differently, one would not know how to choose among infinitely many possibilities.[36]

On the second question – why is X the norm in this situation rather than Y, or something else? – there are again many possible types of answers, ranging from historical accounts to functionalist and rational choice arguments to evolutionary arguments about why one norm is more likely to survive over time than others.[37]

For social scientists, the explanation of action by reference to an identity-as-a-social-category and nothing else is unlikely to be satisfying or interesting. Used in this fashion, "identity" is a rubric that covers a large and diverse set of possible explanations that mainly rely on reference to norms, which should be unpacked to get to the point of insight.

A common argument in recent social theory is that "Identities are the basis of interests" and thus that "... action along the ... [lines of interest and strategic calculation] presupposes some kind of commitment on, and even resolution of, issues concerning [identity]."[38] As the examples above illustrate, it is reasonable to begin to explain interests or preferences by

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[35]It might be argued that for a bartender to serve drinks is not to follow a social norm, but rather to engage in the activity that constitutes or defines being a bartender. Using terms given earlier, one might say that serving drinks is not part of the content of the category "bartender," but rather the membership rule. The distinction parallels that between constitutive rules, which define what an activity consists of, and regulative rules, which regulate antecedently existing activities (Searle 1995). I would agree that this usage stretches the usual understanding of "social norm," which typically refers to standards of conduct that are not quite so role-specific. But it is possible to be a bartender and never to serve a single drink. This is to be a *bad* bartender (or an unfortunate one, etc.). The membership or constitutive rule defining "bartender" is something like "a person *who is supposed to* serve drinks in certain situations," and not "a person who serves drinks in certain situations." Thus, for a bartender, to serve drinks is to follow a norm.

[36]Schelling's suggestive quote, given above, brings both this and the previous reason to mind. Both have a strong "coordination game" aspect.

[37]On evolutionary arguments, see in particular Sugden (1989).

[38]The first quote is from Wendt (1992, 398), who is best known for this argument in the field of international relations. The second is from Herrigel (1993, 371).

referring to an identity (as a social category). For example, my preference for publishing journal articles cannot be explained without referring to the fact that I am a professor. But it may be misleading to pose a binary schema wherein identities give us our preferences and then rationality (or psychological bias) tells us how to achieve them.[39]

In general, being a member of a social category does not entail having the desire to act in accord with the norms associated with the identity.[40] I can be a professor without desiring to publish journal articles or to get tenure; a state can be a "great power" without desiring to act as a great power should. In other words, preferences need to be invoked to explain why one acts in accord with a social norm attached to a social identity. I may want to publish articles to increase my salary, or to maintain my self-respect or other's good opinions.[41] One might argue in reply that there always must be some "identity" that is behind any desire or preference – for instance, I want to maintain my self-respect because I have some other identity. This response works only if the implicit meaning of "identity" is broadened far beyond the idea of identity as a social category, to the point of emptiness. It is just not true that we have all of our preferences or desires only in virtue of being members of some particular social category. Rather than it being a simple matter of reading preferences out of our identities, it is at least as common to have to formulate preferences over actions that would be consistent and inconsistent with multiple social categories to which we belong.

A perverse consequence of an attempt to draw a line between the sphere of identity from which "interests" are said to emerge, and the sphere of rationality or instrumentality where actors try to maximize their interests, is that this may make it impossible to under-

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[39] In international relations, Wendt (1992, 1999) is best known for this formulation.

[40] The exceptions would be cases where having certain preferences is part of the membership rule of a social category, as in, arguably, heterosexual/homosexual. Here identity is the basis of preferences, but only in a weak definitional sense.

[41] Preferences (or desires) and interests are usefully distinguished in ordinary language but commonly conflated in social science talk (see, for example, much recent constructivist work in international relations theory, such as Wendt (1999)). In ordinary language, interests have a normative element. Thus, I can have a preference for doing something that is not in my interest, such as smoking. In some cases, identities may "explain" interests in the definitional sense that the norms of behavior attach to the social category, but more is needed to explain desires or preferences.

stand the social construction of identity. Rather than being separate, strategy and choice are in fact fundamental to, and inextricably bound up in, processes of the social construction of identity. This is a major theme in recent work by Laitin (1993, 1998). Laitin (1998) considers the construction of political and social identities by Russian-speakers in the former Union Republics of the U.S.S.R. He conceives of the process in terms of a large-scale "tipping" or coordination game of the sort analyzed by Schelling (1978). Many identities are hypothetically possible for the Russian-speakers, but no individual can unilaterally choose what it will be. Further, preferences over different formulations of identity for the Russian-speakers are interdependent. How one person chooses to formulate it (for example, "we are ethnic Russians," "Russian-speakers," or "(assimilated) Ukrainians") depends in part on how he thinks others will formulate it, and on how he thinks titular nationals will react. In more concrete terms, the identity of one's children may depend on the language in which they are schooled, and the language/school one choosea may depend one's beliefs about what other Russian-speaking parents are doing. As Laitin's work shows, the social construction of identity has a powerful aspect of coordination of expectations and strategic dynamics associated with coordination games.

This is not to say that rational choice methods are the best or even a particularly good way to analyze the social construction of identity (as a social category). It is simply to point out that if one believes that identities are socially constructed, then one must believe that there are important aspects of interdependent choice involved in the construction. Thus, it doesn't make sense to rule rationality and choice out of the bounds of identity construction by methodological fiat.

7.2 Actions explained by reference to personal identity

Some examples:

1. We protested in order to affirm our identity.

2. Members of the secessionist movement are motivated by the desire to protect and defend their identity.

3. Even after she moved to Berkeley, she could never wear tie-dye because she felt it was inconsistent with her identity.

4. *In Search of Identity* – the title of Anwar Sadat's autobiography.

5. Trying to deny his identity, he affected mannerisms of the working class.

These examples show how "identity" is used in ordinary language to explain actions. Note that these examples are quite different from the earlier ones where action was explained by reference to the more academic meaning of identity-as-social-category. Most of the time it would be peculiar to say "he served the drink in order to affirm (or protect) his identity as a bartender." The reason is that in these examples "identity" does not mean "social category" but rather something like "the bases of one's dignity or pride." In fact, I find it quite striking that, with the exception of example 5, one can substitute "dignity" or "the bases of dignity or self-respect" for the word "identity" in these sentences with virtually no loss in meaning at all.[42]

Thus, one side of "identity" serves as a recently devised substitute for "dignity," "pride," "status," "honor," "self-respect," and so on. This observation helps solve the puzzle of how it is we can take the concept completely for granted as a centrally important and powerful motivator of human action, while great social thinkers of the past never referred to "identity" (as such) at all. They *did* refer to the importance of dignity, pride, status, and honor as things that people desire, often fervently. Hobbes is nice example. He never speaks of "identity" in our modern sense, and uses no other word that closely mirrors its full meaning. But he sees the human desire for honor, flattery, and the good opinions of others as almost overwhelmingly strong.

If this side of "identity" differs at all from "the bases of one's dignity, honor, or self-respect," it is due precisely to the implicit association with the other side of its meaning. Our modern construction of "identity" tacitly connects the bases of self-respect with membership in social categories.

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[42]To give an example from the academy, Jepperson, Wendt and Katzenstein (1996, 36) write that "unlike Britain, France maintained its commitment to the exchange rate mechanism of the European Monetary System (EMS) partly because it is a founding member – that is, because of identity interests." Neglecting the problem of what "identity" means applied to corporate actors like states and the curious term "identity interests," I would translate this as follows: France maintained its commitment to the EMS partly because it took a special pride in having been a founding member.

I close this section with a brief note on the anomalous example 5, which illustrates the idea of wanting to "deny one's identity." This usage invokes a meaning of (personal) identity not captured by the "bases of self-respect" definition. It refers instead to the idea of identity as an essential nature (desires, preferences, beliefs) that one cannot willfully change – part (c) of the definition given at the end of the section on personal identity. Even so, the reason we may think it tragic to want to deny one's identity is that we assume that one's identity is *normally* the basis of one's pride, and one should not wish to denigrate or disguise what one should take pride in.

8 Identities of corporate actors

Individuals are not the only entities that can described as having identities, whether in ordinary language or social science writing. So too can states, churches, firms, political parties, universities, indeed, practically any corporate actor.[43] To give an important example from political science, a rapidly growing literature sees "state identities" as crucial for understanding both foreign policies and the overall tenor of international politics (Katzenstein 1996; Wendt 1999; Lapid and Kratochwil 1996).

If the preceding analysis of "identity" applied to persons is on target, one might expect it to help clarify terms such as "state identity" as well. How can a state have an identity and what does this mean? Is state identity different from national identity? I will argue that although new issues arise (which I can't fully address here), the above analysis does illuminate the meaning of "identity" applied to corporate actors. Due to its importance in recent debates in international relations, I focus on the much invoked but underspecified concept of state identity, distinguishing between several meanings of state identity that the literature lumps together.

Overwhelmingly, corporate actors such as states or firms are treated in ordinary language and social scientific practice as metaphorical persons endowed with will and agency.[44]

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[43]For instance, a recent *New York Times* headline declared "Catholic Schools Seeks New Identity."

[44]To call something "an actor" is to use just this metaphor. See Wendt (1999) for the argument that the

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Consider, then, cashing out "state identity" in terms of social and personal identity as defined above, but applied to states-as-persons.

In the sense of social identity, "state identity" would then refer to categories of states. Just as individuals are members of social categories, so are there social categories whose members are states. Examples include major power, superpower, democracy, federation, LDC, net creditor, sub-Saharan African state, member of the OECD, NATO, the U.N., the E.U., ASEAN, OPEC, and so on.[45]

By contrast, in the sense of personal identity, "state identity" would refer to distinguishing features of a state that form the basis for its self-respect or pride. When one describes the Russian state as "searching for a new identity" this is the intended meaning. Just as in the case of persons, the bases of a state's sense of distinction and pride may or may not involve membership in a category of other states. Being a democracy might be said to be an important part of U.S. "state identity," but so might U.S.-specific historical memories of the civil war, the revolution against Britain, and so on.[46]

At least regarding states, this analysis is incomplete. As used by international relations scholars, "state identity" can refer also to that package of attributes the possession of which makes something a state and not some other kind of thing. This is closer to the dictionary sense of "identity" and the sense discussed by analytic philosophers – the condition or fact or being a state and not something else. A growing literature on the institution of sovereignty uses "state identity" mainly in this sense, which is rather different from the social-category and bases-of-distinction-from-other-states meanings. Authors in this literature understand states as sovereign political communities, and argue that the meaning of sovereignty is a collectively determined social convention that varies over time (Krasner 1999; Biersteker

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practice is actually more than metaphorical.

[45]Wendt (1994) defined "social identities" in terms of roles, and used examples of this sort to illustrate the meaning of "state identity."

[46]The same kind of analysis applies to other corporate actors. The "identity" of a firm might refer either to a "social category" of firms (e.g., wholesaler, grocery store, corporation, multinational, family business) or to a set of distinguishing features or characteristics that the managers/owners of the firm take a special pride in and wish to advertise to the world (e.g., "Family-run since 1913!" or "Buying a Saturn is like joining a family").

and Weber 1996; Wendt 1999; Ruggie 1983) State identity here refers mainly to what it means to be a state. This sense can be combined with the bases-of-self-respect sense. In studies of isomorphism in the structure of state bureaucracies and militaries, Finnemore (1996) and Eyre and Suchman (1996) argue that norms determine state leaders' perceptions of the attributes a *proper* state should possess, not as a matter of definition (like sovereignty), but as a matter of self-respect (a fancy military, a big national health ministry, for instance). This implies a notion of state identity as the distinguishing features that mark a proper or exemplary state.

Yet more things can be termed "state identities." Analogous to the philosophical debate on personal identity, one can conceive of state identity as those properties in virtue of which a state remains itself through time, despite complete turnover in the body of citizens. Noting that Aristotle addressed this very question in the *Politics*, Booth (1999) uses "state identity" in this sense to analyze the conditions under which a state is politically responsible for acts committed in the past (such as the Holocaust). And finally, international relations scholars often treat national identity as a component of or equivalent to "state identity." There is much potential for confusion here. As we have seen, national identity refers to a social category, a set of persons marked off by a membership rule and (alleged) social content. By contrast, a state is only ambiguously a social category. When "state" is used to refer to a political community (a set of citizens), it is a social category. But in the more common use of "state" as a corporate actor, there is no set of persons that uniquely identifies the state. The state as a political community might have or entail a national identity, but the state as a corporate actor cannot.

9   Conclusion

"Identity" in its current, historically novel complex of meanings derives most of all from Erik Erikson's work in the 1950s. By the 1970s the word used in this sense had acquired a

highly successful life of its own in ordinary language and many social science disciplines.[47] Under the influence of postmodernism and debates over multiculturalism, the late 1980s and 1990s found historians, anthropologists, and most of all humanities scholars relying ever more heavily on "identity" as they explored the cultural politics of race, class, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, citizenship, and other social categories.[48]

With some important exceptions, political scientists have generally held back from this most recent round of inquiry concerning identities, often treating both the concept and humanities research using it with skepticism. This is partly skepticism by association. A rough correlation obtains between recent work focused on "identity" and postmodernism, which often seems to reject social science as an empirical enterprise of any value.

But political scientists' skepticism about "identity" stems also from the vagueness and implicit complexity of the term itself. The examples and analysis above should demonstrate that in this regard apprehension is warranted. Compare the *OED* definition, the list of short definitions by social scientists given in section 2, and the results of the analysis of usage in sections 4 and 6. The formulations are strikingly different despite showing family resemblances. The *OED* definition will work for examples such as "a case of mistaken identity" or "the identity of the murderer," but does not capture the meanings embodied in (for instance) "Russia's politics now turn on a search for national identity," or "being a professor was a crucial part of his identity." The academic glosses in section 2 are quite varied, though in almost no case are they as specific and concrete as what I have are the main meanings implicit in contemporary usage. To summarize these, in ordinary speech and most academic writing, "identity" means either (a) a social category, defined by membership rules and allegedly characteristic attributes or expected behaviors, or (b) a socially distinguishing feature that a person takes a special pride in or views as unchangeable but socially consequential (or, of course, both (a) and (b) at once).

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[47]See Mackenzie (1978), Gleason (1983), and, for political science examples from this period, Glazer and Moynihan (1975).

[48]Appiah and Jr. (1995, 1) begin an edited volume called *Identities* by saying that "A literary historian might very well characterize the eighties as the period when race, class, and gender became the holy trinity of literary criticism."

If this is a reasonable statement of the meaning of "identity" as now used, then political scientists have no good reason to avoid the concept. Quite the contrary, both social categories and the sources of individuals' sense of self-respect or dignity are *obviously* relevant to understanding politics in many of its aspects.[49] It may be that in specific cases it is better to dispense with "identity" and analyze instead the politics of social categories and the political implications of desires for dignity, honor, and self-respect. These are more concrete objects of analysis than "identity," which links together social categories and the sources of self-respect in a somewhat murky (unarticulated) way. Even so, there is no good reason to try to banish "identity" in favor of these more specific component ideas. By putting together social categories and the bases of our self-respect, "identity" makes a suggestive connection between two important aspects of social and psychological reality.[50]

A second motivation for this paper has been to illustrate and advocate ordinary language analysis as a means to interrogate and clarify social science concepts. I have argued that when a complicated or unclear concept used by social scientists has strong roots in ordinary language – a very common occurrence – explication of its ordinary language meaning is a valuable place to start. Standard practice for social scientists in this situation is to legislate a definition, to say that "by X I mean such-and-such, no more no less." But legislation without a good prior understanding of what users already mean is a dangerous business. To the extent that the legislated definition diverges from common understanding one risks confusion (both for author and reader), and there is no way to guage this without explicating the ordinary language meaning. Second, as I hope the case of "identity" illustrates, the intuitions that govern ordinary language use can reflect implicit rules that are more nuanced, subtle, and precise than are academics' efforts at legislated glosses. At a minimum, social scientists interested in clarifying contested and important concepts might

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[49]The politics of social categories have been particularly neglected in the rational choice tradition, though there is no reason that this has to be the case. For counterexamples see Kalyvas (1996), Laitin (1998), and Fearon (1999).

[50]Cf. Brubaker and Cooper (1999), who want to exile "identity" in favor of a different set of component concepts.

add this approach to their arsenal of methods.[51]

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[51]For recent work in political science on the analysis and clarification of concepts, see Collier and Mahoney (1996), Collier and Mahon (1993), and Collier and Levitsky (1997). Fearon and Laitin (1997) proposes an ordinary language analysis of "ethnic group" and "ethnic violence."

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