

TWO KINDS OF IDENTITY

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Abstract: Two kinds of identity are distinguished: the natural or essential identity which is grounded in the nature of a thing, and a relativized identity which we ascribe to a thing by reference to some special interest.

1) Primary and secondary identity

Philosophers tend to be strict about identity. Here is a typical example: In classroom discussions about the problem of personal identity someone, usually a student, would mention a case of, say, a friend who has changed so much that he »is not the same person any more«. The usual response from the teacher is to point out that in this case one is speaking about identity in a loose and metaphorical way. »Same person«, the student is told, does not here really stand for identity — it is just a shorthand for describing the radicalness of change, to say that the student's friend is not the same person any more.

Now, the student might reply: »I agree that my friend is the same person for his physician or his judge. He is, maybe, objectively the same person. But for me the traits he has lost were the most important and precious of his qualities. Moreover ever, since the change has befallen him, I had to treat him as being a different person: no more confidences, no memories in common, no talk about common hobbies and pursuits. The change of his physical appearance has made it easier for me to accept that he has become a different person. And I don't mean it metaphorically — when I talk to him, I have the feeling of literally talking to another man. Moreover, this is not only my impression. All our common friends would agree with what I said.«

What shall we do with this reply?

It seems outrageous that someone's identity should depend on feelings and moods of his friends and acquaintances. But perhaps our student has not gone so far. He has not claimed that his friend has objectively and »absolutely« become someone else, but

that the counts his friend as being another person for all purposes he is interested in.

We should, it seems, distinguish between these two sorts of claims: claims about objective identity of a thing or person, and claims which are concerned with the identity relativised to purposes and needs of the speaker.

At this point one is reminded of the distinction between primary and secondary qualities. Primary qualities are objective in the sense in which objective identity is — they belong to an object independently of its interaction with an information processing organism or, more traditionally, with the knowing subject. Secondary qualities lack objectivity precisely in the sense we are interested in — it is not that they are figments of our fancy, but that they belong to an object only in virtue of its (actual or potential) interaction with information processing organism.

We might use analogy to accommodate the complaint of our student. He makes no claims as to the »primary« identity of his friend. But nonetheless, his complaint is not irrelevant nor »metaphorical«. We might better understand it if we take him as speaking about a different sort of identity — the identity his friend has in virtue of his (potential or actual) interaction with the ascriber. In other words, we should construe his complaint about the loss of a dear friend as a claim about the »secondary« identity: his friend has perhaps retained his primary identity, but his secondary identity is gone.

So, we should perhaps countenance two kinds of identity, primary and secondary identity, by analogy with primary and secondary qualities.

The picture behind this proposal is roughly the following:

In our cognitive endeavours we have an obligation to try to conform to the ways things really are. This includes the way things change and remain same things while changing, and it includes the beginnings and cessation of existence — coming to be and passing away. There is lot of genuine possibilities of discovery: some made long time ago, like the tremendous discovery by our ancestors, worthy of Nobel prize, that that tadpole Harry is identical with Harry The Frog, some made recently, about which tiny particle is identical with which, and many more in the offing. Now, the discovery about tadpoles and frogs is one of those paradigmatic cases in which our concepts »cut the Nature at its joints«, a discovery about real identity in nature. We might like tadpoles, and detest frogs, or adore frogs and abhor tadpoles (one can imagine a frog cult whose adherents claim that Evil Tadpoles are every spring instantly replaced with those

Divine Frogs), but the nature has guided our hand and the identity in question has been discovered. Such are the discoveries of primary identities.

On the other hand, men make a lot of identity claims which are of different kind. Some of them are based on wrong belief, for instance, the just mentioned claims of the followers of the frog cult. They are wrong in that they isolate a phase sortal, and treat it as a name for natural kind, but they are deeply entrenched in the culture, useful for purpose at hand, and reliable locally — as far as avoiding tadpoles and finding mature frogs goes.

Others are result of a decision, and have nothing to do with wrong beliefs. Professor Geach presumably believes that he could speak to the same official without speaking to the same person — namely by first speaking to an official X and then speaking to the person Y who has in the meantime succeeded X as holder of the same office. This belief has been severely criticised in the literature but I can't see that it is wrong. It is simply that for the purpose public officials are presumed to further, it is convenient to treat different persons as being the same »official person«. If the separation of private life and public role becomes more strict, it might one day become mandatory to conform to Geaches intuitions in the case, and to speak of X and Y as about the same official.

Similarly, we often carve peoples actions differently according to different interests. I believe that there is a primary core to every action (a case of groundless belief on my side), but that usual action ascription are interest relative. Is dropping an A-bomb on Hiroshima the same action as causing death of those thousands of people? Is it the same action as provoking fatal changes in the genetic material of the victims? It depends of what your interests are, and on what institutional or other constraints you are working with. (In the context of a pacifist protest it is convenient to say that it was the bomb that caused the genetic changes, in the context of a lecture on details of the effects of radioactivity on genetic make-up it would be to general. But then how about the identity of the action of dropping the bomb? Where does the action end?).

This is where we need the concept of secondary identity.

Before going on, let us pause to agree to use the abbreviation »PSI distinction« for »distinction between primary and secondary identity«.

If we accept the PSI distinction, we shall have a lot of work. First, we should try to make it more precise. Second, we should inquire into logical and ontological properties of primary and of secondary identity. Third, we should defend the PSI distinction on two fronts: against those who would reduce all identity to

primary identity, and against those (relativists) who would like to rob us of the concept of primary identity, and have us work only with some sort of secondary identity. Finally, we should put the PSI distinction to use, and see whether it could help us to solve some of the familiar puzzles about identity.

In the second part I will try to make first steps towards clarification of the PSI distinction. It will not do to start with definitions, or, even worse, with stipulations. The PSI distinction is here to help us systematize some of our intuitions about identity, and one has to proceed accordingly, from intuitions to the full blown concept.

2) *A family of distinctions*

In order to clarify the intended meaning of the PSI distinction, one can usefully compare it to other different but similar distinctions. I'll list three of them.

(I) *primary/secondary vs. natural/conventional*

It might seem that the PSI distinction and the natural/conventional distinction should largely coincide. Indeed, many cases of secondary identity are cases of conventionally established identity, and many cases of primary identity are »natural« in the sense of not depending on human conventions. However, PSI distinction is not the same as natural-conventional distinction. More specifically, in the first place, »natural« in the sense of non-conventional is not equivalent to »primary«, since there will be some ascriptions of identity which we are inclined to make on the basis of our natural make-up (interests, tastes, needs and discriminatory capabilities), and which will therefore be »natural« and »non-conventional«, but still secondary, because they will not faithfully reflect the real identities and differences between things. In other words, there are cases in which an identity will be judged secondary by our PSI-criteria because it is ascribed only on interactional grounds, but natural, because the interaction in question depends on non-conventional facts only.

In the second place, there are cases of primary identity which can be dubbed »natural« only or not at all with a lot of strain — namely cases of identity of artefacts. It is a moot point, but I would be inclined to say that the use oriented (or function oriented) identity criteria for artefacts are criteria of primary identity. If this is true, then the function-based identity of artefacts is a primary identity which is not a natural identity.

So, PSI distinction does not coincide with the distinction between natural and conventional.

(2) *primary/secondary vs. natural/institutional*

The second distinction is similar to the above discussed one, and the points made under (1) apply here as well:

There are cases of non-institutional (»natural«) identity which are also cases of primary, not secondary identity, and some cases, like identity of artefacts, which are primary but are not clearly either natural or institutional.

The new element here are cases of primary institutional identities. These are identities which are grounded solely on the facts essential to an institution. Take some elite club which has among its rules, exact specification of when and how it can or should cease to exist, and of specific modes of continuation of its existence. These specifications are part of the very institution, and are in a sense essential to it. Now, the identity ascertained by these criteria would »carve the society at its joint«, and would be a primary identity.

A follower of Nozick could here dig up the following objection. Suppose that say, the Vienna Circle had a statute with exact specification of its permissible modes of continuation. Suppose further that the specification contained the following rule F (»F« for »fatal« to our theory, to witt): Should the Circle split in two parts, the part which is its closest continuant is to be considered identical with Vienna Circle«. Then, by the thesis formulated above the identity of Vienna Circle with its closest continuant would be primary identity. By the content of F it would be an identity based on the property of being the closest continuant. So, at least one case of primary identity is also a case of closest-continuant identity. But primary identity is incompatible with closest-continuant identity.

I admit that the situation looks somewhat paradoxically. However, the paradox is not deep. It is not the fact that, say, Carnaps group is the closest continuant of Vienna circle as such that makes Carnaps group identical with Vienna circle, but the fact that Carnaps group fulfills condition F, whatever the condition is, and this, together with the fact that F is essential for Vienna Circle makes the identity between Carnaps group and the Vienna Circle primary identity.

(3) *primary/secondary vs. determinate/indeterminate*

The first two contrasts had to do with the content of the concept of identity, this one has to do with a feature of its »form«.

In a way, primary identities seem to be more determinate than the secondary ones. In the case of primary identity the ob-

ject itself guides our appraisal of its identity, and given that the reality is determinate enough, the primary identity will also be determinate. In the case of secondary identity it is we who choose and impose our criteria, and it might seem that we impose them on an previously indeterminate reality. Now this appearance is only partly correct, and only in less important part.

It is true that in the case of secondary identity we choose our criteria somewhat arbitrarily (more precisely, that our choice of criteria is not determined exclusively nor primarily by the nature of the object). This degree of indeterminacy is to be admitted, but it is not indeterminacy in the identity itself. On the contrary, once the criterion is settled upon, the question whether an object fulfills the criteria will admit of an answer as determinate as in the case of primary identity. Secondary identity is not vague or indeterminate once we have a criterion. The only arbitrariness is in the choice of criterion.

This is the reason why the ascription of secondary identity is not an imposition of our concepts upon previously indeterminate reality. Reality is well determined in respect to the features relevant to our criteria — the only indeterminacy there is concerns our choice of criteria, not the objects compliance.

So, both members of our distinction are on the realist side of the fence, and the PSI distinction is not the same as distinction between determinate and indeterminate identity.

(4) *primary/secondary vs. strict/loose and popular*

At the beginning of this paper it was claimed that philosophers are to strict about identity, and the term »secondary identity« was introduced as some kind of loosening of the usual concept of identity. Now, I hope this was only a device of presentation, such as is normally used when extending a concept.

There is a distinction, made by Hume, and reiterated by contemporary writers like Chisholm, between a strict sense of identity and a »loose and popular sense«. Sometimes this distinction is assimilated to the one just discussed between determinate and indeterminate, but more and more to the point often it is seen as distinction between what really is an identity, and something that is only called identity, but is in quite a fact a different relation, some kind of counterparthood, or some kind of succession in time.

If we accept this second view, it is easy to settle a criterion which will set apart the PSI distinction from the Humean distinction of strict vs. loose. We intend secondary identity to be an equivalence relation (this is the least thing one would expect from

any kind of identity). The Humean »loose and popular sense of identity« is such that it admits of relations which are not equivalence relations — counterparthood is not (as D. Lewis was first to show), and the various succession relations (or their ancestrals, or the disjunctions of these with their converses) are not guaranteed to be equivalence relations either.

So, if secondary identity is always an equivalence relation it cannot be identical to the »identity in the loose and popular sense«. So the PSI distinction is distinct from the Humean one.

3. Conjectures

At the end of the first part I have listed some of the tasks attendant upon a defendant of PSI distinction. Now at the end, I shall help myself to the advantages of the conjecture over honest toil, and say a few words about the shape the PSI distinction and its uses might turn out to have.

First, I think that one should accommodate most of the cases of so called relative identity under the heading of secondary identity. This would entail ascribing to secondary identity the logical properties of relative identity: restricted application of Leibniz's Law, and some kind of relativised symmetry, reflexivity and transitivity. I believe that primary identity is absolute.

Second, I think one should be cautious with ontological claims concerning secondary identity. Some readers will probably feel that there is no such thing as secondary identity. If they mean by this that secondary identity is not an identity found *in rerum natura* I reluctantly agree. Perhaps the colour red and the taste of brown olives also do not exist *in rerum natura*. Secondary identity is like secondary qualities in this respect.

Third, I feel that the PSI distinction could help us with practically all interesting puzzles of identity. But this is certainly an exaggerated claim.

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Sažetak

U suvremenoj filozofiji uočeno je da su problemi što ih postavlja pojam i kriteriji identiteta mnogobrojni i vrlo teški. Zdravorazumske intuicije često vode do protuslovnih rezultata, a stroge filozofijske teorije (Hume, Chisholm) izgledaju intuitivno neprihvatljive.

U tekstu se predlaže razlikovanje između dva pojma identiteta. Prvi bi se odnosio takoreći na prirodu stvari i bio bi u tom smislu apsolutan, dok bi drugi bio relativiran spram interesa kojim se pripisivač identiteta rukovodi. Istražuje se dalje odnos ove distinkcije prema distinkciji konvencionalno-nekonvencionalno, realističko-antirealističko i nekim srodnim distinkcijama.

Na kraju se iznosi nagađanje da bi primjena navedenog razlikovanja pomogla da se razriješe prividne proturječnosti i zagonetke koje nastaju na području identiteta.