# Contents

# Acknowledgments

I am deeply grateful to my two professional homes in recent decades—the Department of Philosophy and the Graduate Program of Hermeneutics and Cultural Studies at Bar-Ilan University and the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem. In the fruitful encounter between them I have found space for my personal growth and for the questions that I grapple with.

I have shared many thoughts on the complex issues raised in this book with Donniel Hartman, president of the Shalom Hartman Institute, who has been unfailing in his support and encouragement. I deeply appreciate our longstanding friendship and his untiring efforts in pursuit of the Institute's development. Special thanks to Laura Gilinsky, the Institute's PR officer, for her contribution to the publication of this book.

Thanks to colleagues whose comments on earlier versions of the chapters of this book contributed to its final form: Shraga Bar-On, Yakir Englander, Menachem Fisch, Eliezer Goldman *z"l*, Pini Ifargan, David Kurzweil, Charles Liebman *z"l*, Hanan Mandel, Menachem Mautner, Daniel Statman, Yedidia Stern, and Dror Yinon. Special thanks to my assistant, Roni Barlev.

I dedicate this book with thanks and deep appreciation to my friend Batya Stein, who, for close to thirty years, has translated all my work from Hebrew to English. Batya is not only a translator but a serious partner to the thinking about my texts, who successfully presents their optimal possibilities. Her friendship, her commitment, and her exceptional professionalism have all been a source of inspiration to me.

# Preface

The identity of individuals, as manifest in their lifestyles, practices, myths, memory, and hopes, is not a "natural" datum found "somewhere" in the world. Identity is a signifier denoting the complex story of human existence, and requires a cultural web that both concretizes it and constitutes it. The classic traditional discussion on the question of identity, which had dealt with the relationship between the one and the many, focused on one question: what is the essential element that determines differences and enables the distinction between one and the other? This classic approach, a legacy of Aristotelian thought, has been subject to serious criticism in general and in its application to humans in particular.

This book focuses on the identity of real people who, rather than in some atopical realm, live in a specific place with historical, cultural, and political features. These particular features are constitutive of the individual's identity, not mere additions to a "pure" abstract and universal subject. If this subject indeed exists at all beyond its function as a theoretical hypothesis, it expresses only one dimension of the actual self that is not interchangeable with the person. Descartes' "thinking self" is thus but one possibility of the individual's existence as a concrete being, who emerges through a process involving an ongoing dialogue with others, with history, and with culture. This book aims to expose this process and describe its various aspects and implications. My concern is with manifestations of concrete identity and I have chosen to focus on the identity of people who are Jews, though Jewish identity serves here as a case study for a discussion of identity in general.

The book is divided into two parts. Part One provides the conceptual framework. Chapter One deals with alternative definitions of identity, and Chapters Two and Three gradually shift from the general construct to the actual context of Jewish identity, including an analysis of the traditional identity discourse represented by Hegelian tradition. Chapters Four to Six in Part Two focus on Israel, reflecting various dimensions of its tense identity discourse—the conflict resulting from

the blurred distinction between a discourse of identity and a discourse of rights in Chapter Four, and from the displacement of the identity discourse to the political terms of the religion and state relationship in Chapter Five. Chapter Six focuses on the meaning of the political-geographic realm in the constitution of Jewish identity and, specifically, on the role of the Land of Israel as it plays out in biblical tradition.

# Part One

*Chapter 1*

# From an Essentialist to a Multicultural Identity

My concern here is the discourse on identity. This chapter is thus a reflective, critical account of the prevalent modes of thinking about identity, specifically in the philosophical literature, mapping out the field of discourse with an emphasis on its poles. On one pole is the essentialist discourse, which views identity as "something" found "there" in reality and independent of people as historical-cultural creatures. Identity is already given and people must find it. The identity discourse, then, follows in the wake of the past and returns to it. On the other pole is the approach that views identity as a cultural project of self-molding and self-creativity. Identity emerges through a complex historical, cultural, and political process, shaped more by the future than by the past, and the field of the identity discourse is realized along the time axis. Whereas the essentialist conception of identity is ancient, the other was born during modernity. Giovanni Pico della Mirandola lived in the fifteenth century and was among the first to suggest that the essence of being human is to be undefined, emphasizing that God, through direct speech, imposes on humans the duty of self-creation:

> We have given you, Adam, no fixed seat or form of your own, no talent peculiar to you alone. This we have done so that whatever seat, whatever form, whatever talent you may judge desirable, these same may you have and possess according to your desire and judgment … . We have made you neither of heaven nor of earth, neither mortal nor immortal, so that you may, as the free and extraordinary shaper of yourself, fashion yourself in whatever form you prefer.[1]

Pico della Mirandolla's stance sharply conveys the transition between the old and the new. He speaks in the old language of essences, but argues that the human essence is defined by its emptiness. Rather than being a finished creature whose identity merely awaits discovery, humans find their dignity in being "chameleons,"[2] meaning creatures who often change and

[1] Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *Oration on the Dignity of Man: A New Translation and Commentary*, ed. Francesco Borghesi, Michael Papio, and Massimo Riva (Cambridge: Cambrige University Press, 2012), 117.

[2] Ibid., 225.

thereby create themselves. Pico assigns to humans a divine rank—God creates the world and humans create themselves. This emphasis on self-molding, however, is still very far from the contemporary view of identity as a product of culture and history. Pico's hero is the individual that gives rise to the human individual *ex nihilo*. The essence of human dignity lies in the capacity to create, not in the resulting specific product and certainly not in the context of one's life as a cultural historical entity. Humans transcend the modes of their identities' realization, which are merely potential manifestations of their identity as creative creatures. Therefore, Pico's stance marks the transition between the classic essentialist view and the new one, though neither of the two, as will be shown, has disappeared from the identity discourse and all are still present in it in one way or another.

In this chapter, I adopt a critical perspective to trace the idea of identity from a philosophical rather than a historical angle, following the inner movement of the identity discourse from the essentialist to the cultural.

## IDENTITY AND IDENTIFICATION

One of the most significant distinctions in the analysis of the identity discourse is that between "identity" and "identification." As Peter Strawson argued, the act of identification unfolds through names, descriptions, characteristics, and so forth.[3] This act enables a discourse on a specific object through its individuation and distinction from others, and all it requires is to ensure that the participants in the discourse know what is at stake. Through the act of identification, all perceive the object spoken about as the same thing—a stable, defined entity that can be discussed.[4]

The act of identification, however, does not answer the question of identity and the object does not play an active role in its own identification, which is imposed by the speakers about it "from outside." The element through which the object was identified may play a role in its identity, but this function is not a necessary condition for the identification act.

The act of identification may fixate the identity of the object being spoken about, but this will only be its identity as perceived by the speakers about it. The object could eventually endorse this perspective of others on itself and adopt its identity from outside, as Jonathan Friedman noted: "By

[3] Peter F. Strawson, *Individuals: An Essay in Descriptive Metaphysics* (London: Methuen, 1959), 15-30.

[4] Cora Diamond, "Sahibs and Jews," in *Jewish Identity,* ed. David Theo Goldberg and Michael Krausz (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 95; Michael Krausz, "On Being Jewish," in ibid., 264.

speaking [of] him, or for him, we ultimately force him to speak through our categories."[5]

But even if the external identification does become identity, even if the original identity is erased and replaced by an identification imposed from outside, the personality's basic outline cannot be wiped out. Humans interpret themselves and, thereby, ceaselessly shape themselves anew. Humans, then, are capable of directing their own wishes.[6] And yet, precisely on these grounds, an act of external identification may override the original identity, because people can easily endorse a perspective imposed from outside and turn it into the constitutive element of their will and self-interpretation.

Contrary to the identification imposed from outside, people can choose to identify with the feelings, consciousness, values, or practices of a particular group. Ostensibly, this act is a necessary and sufficient condition to be included in that group and express its identity. Indeed, for those who were not born within a specific culture and tradition and voluntarily join it, self-identification emerges as a necessary condition for adopting an identity, since it triggers a process of internalization and self-molding based on elements drawn from the object with which they identify. This identification triggers a change in people's identity and draws them closer to the members of the given culture.

Yet, individuals can identify with others, their world, and their values without undergoing a fundamental identity transformation.[7] At least three elements are required for identification to generate the process of constituting or changing one's identity: a *formal* element—fundamentally one of consciousness, that is, a genuine will to be a member of the group with which one identifies; a *substantive* element—adopting the group's identity as the group itself explains it, that is, endorsing the meaning of the group's practices, including their historical, cultural, and social contexts; and a *practical* element—actually adopting the practices of the group with which one identifies.

Thematic knowledge, however, is not a necessary condition for absorbing the identity of a given group, neither for its members nor for those who

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5 Jonathan Friedman, *Cultural Identity and Global Process* (London: Sage, 1994), 168.

6 See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), especially 32-33; Harry G. Frankfurt, "Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person," *The Journal of Philosophy* 68 (1971): 5-20; Charles Taylor, *Human Agency and Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 45-76; 97-114.

7 Diamond, "Sahibs and Jews," 100.

wish to join it. The group's members are not necessarily aware of the thematic contexts underlying the practices that constitute identity. A culture is not a conceptual analysis but a way of life perceived as obvious, a platform constituting the basic patterns of perception, knowledge, and orientation in the world. And given the primacy of practices in the constitution of identity and their nature as day-to-day familiar expressions, reflecting on them may not be easy. Indeed, it is precisely this absence of thematic reflection that conveys the obviousness of identity, its nature as the a priori, constitutive element of being.[8] As Martin Heidegger shows, practices are thematized when disrupted, interrupted, or delayed.[9] People act when the consciousness accompanying their activity is pre-reflective or pre-thematic. Full reflection on practices or on identity occurs only at times of crisis, when the continuity and the duration typical of action are disturbed.[10] The identification of group members with the practices constitutive of their identity, then, does not necessarily imply reflective thematization of the historical-cultural contexts that endow their identity with meaning.

Seemingly, this conclusion applies only to the members of a culture but not to those seeking to join it. For outsiders involved in a process of identity transformation, to whom the historical-cultural contexts of the practices constitutive of identity are *not* obvious, thematic and reflective identification are needed for this process to be meaningful.

A process of identity change is thus a conscious decision to identify with the identity of a given group. It is not, however, necessarily accompanied by thematic reflection about the cultural-historical contexts related to this identity. Identification is not the act of a critical philosopher but of individuals encountering practices that seem meaningful to them. The encounter is horizontal rather than vertical, synchronic rather than diachronic. People encounter the practices as they emerge, without their historical-cultural contexts. They are not prevented from reflecting on them, but their doing so is a concrete biographical matter, specific to some of the individuals who adopt the identity or are born into it.

The conclusion of this analysis is that, even if adopting a given identity does not require thematic reflection about its constitutive contexts, it does assume these contexts, at least implicitly, as an existing foundation. Adopting an identity thus means adopting an existing context of

8 Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 47.

9 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 102-107.

10 Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991), 53.

meaning rather than introducing practices into new contexts that are entirely alien to the circumstances of these practices' creation. We can pour existing practices into new and strange contexts that disregard their historical-cultural depth, but the result is the creation of an entirely new identity rather than the adoption of an existing one.

In sum, adopting an identity means adopting the history and the culture that were at its roots, though without implying that this process is tantamount to entering a "closed box," a given objective framework. A cultural tradition is not a closed datum, as Hans Georg Gadamer excelled at describing, but a constantly ongoing dialogue between present and past. Identity, therefore—seemingly the entry to this dialogue—is dynamic and constantly undergoing restructuring and reorganization, but the restructuring process relates to an existing datum. Jean Améry experienced identity rift as a constitutive element of his being, and offered a clear formulation of this view: "One can reestablish the link with a tradition that one has lost, but one cannot freely invent it for oneself, that is the problem."[11] Primo Levi, who grapples with Améry in Chapter Six of *The Drowned and the Saved*, reiterates this stance in relation to Jewish identity: "Whoever is not born within the Jewish tradition is not a Jew, and cannot easily become one: by definition, a tradition is inherited; it is the product of centuries, it cannot be fabricated *a posteriori*."[12]

The analysis of the identity discourse that follows will refine these determinations.

## The Identity Problem: Between Philosophical Subject and Concrete Personality

Identity has been a recurring problem since the dawn of philosophy, and it is thus no wonder that attemps to contend with it tend to endorse a philosophical perspective. This perspective, however, often blurs and dims the problem.

In philosophical terms, the identity problem of the human subject is part of the identity problem of objects in general. The self is not essentially different from other objects in the world, meaning it is a kind of object to which various characteristics, different from those of other objects, are ascribed.[13] The essential characteristic present in the human self and

[11] Jean Améry, *At the Mind's Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor of Auschwitz and Its Realities*, trans. Sidney Rosenfeld and Stella P. Rosenfeld (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1980), 84.

[12] Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (London: Michael Joseph, 1989), 103.

[13] Taylor, *Human Agency and Language*, 98.

missing from other objects is consciousness. In this approach, the self as such is the subject of these characteristics, above all that of consciousness.

Two contrary views on this issue feature in the history of philosophy. One, which culminated in Edmund Husserl's thought, argued for the existence of a human subject that can be fully described and analyzed. The other approach, which culminated in David Hume's thought, cast doubt on the very concept of a human subject and argued that it is merely an imaginary construct. A more suitable description of the human self, it claimed, is that suggested by the phenomenalist approach, which renounces altogether the assumption of a subject bearing characteristics.[14]

Despite the difference between these two approaches, Michael Luntley's formulation makes it possible to view both of them as partners in the modernist project— both seek the self outside the real historical-cultural context of human existence and describe it as an abstract being.[15] The Husserlian trend holds that human knowledge can explain this self and, since it succeeds in pointing out a way of knowing it, declares that it exists. The Humean trend accepts the basic premises of the former one—it assumes that, if there is a self, it is a subject bearing characteristics—but shows that its existence cannot be demonstrated and, therefore, it is more appropriate to describe it as lacking a center, as phenomenal. Phenomenalism is thus an inverse image of the former approach.

The philosophical discussion, however, does not take into account the fact that the human being is not only a subject bearing characteristics. The human self is also a choosing self, judging and evaluating, planning its life through goals it sets itself. In Heidegger's terms, the self is a being that cares for its existence and reshapes its world and its life according to the values and conceptions it adopts.[16] Classic philosophical analysis, however, related to the self as static and assumed that its identity is given or should have been given, without taking into account that it is a self-interpreting being constituted in the course of real life.[17]

Against the classic philosophical approaches, Søren Kierkegaard presented another model of the self as a relationship between three elements.

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14 See Rom Harré, "Persons and Selves," in *Persons and Personality: A Contemporary Inquiry*, ed. Arthur R. Peacocke and Grant Gillet (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), 100.

15 Michael Luntley, *Reason, Truth and Self: The Postmodern Reconditioned* (London: Routledge, 1995), 151-172.

16 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 32-35.

17 Taylor, *Human Agency and Language*, chap. 2 and 4; David Theo Goldberg and Michael Krausz, "Introduction: The Culture of Identity," in *Jewish Identity*, 1-2; Bernard Berofsky, "The Identity of Cultural and Personal Identity," in ibid, 41-48.

For Kierkegaard, the basic datum of human life is the tension between finitude and infinity. The finitude pole denotes the range of the factual data within which we find ourselves: the physiological structure, the environment, the concrete circumstances of our birth, and so forth—the self's past in its broad meaning. The infinity pole denotes the human ability to transcend this givenness. This pole, which is constituted by imagination, enables us to imagine situations and possibilities beyond our modes of concrete givenness and, therefore, denotes our freedom and our future.

These two poles alone, however, are not yet a self. Kierkegaard's central claim is: "A human being is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite … of freedom and necessity, in short, a synthesis. A synthesis is a relation between two. Considered in this way, a human being is still not a self."[18] The third element that constitutes and shapes the self is its attitude toward the two constitutive poles of finitude and infinity. The self, then, is made up of three elements—its two constitutive poles and the attitude toward them. The first two denote what is, while the third denotes the how.[19]

This new view of the self points to its temporal-historical character. The self, then, rather than a given datum found within real history, is constituted within history—it is essentially historical. Its time is not the Aristotelian time that measures the course of an object in space. Time—and in existentialist terminology, temporality—is constitutive to the self that, by definition, assumes its shape in the course of its concrete life.

The existentialist approach dismisses the philosophical concept of the subject altogether. According to this view, the problem is not whether we can recognize the self as a subject, since, even if we can, the real self is not a subject. The subject is an abstraction, and the real self is existence, a being that assumes form within reality. The existentialist view assumes that identity is concrete and historical, attained in the course of real existence—a lifetime project.

This view represents a major turning point in the analysis of the self and in bringing philosophical reflection closer to real life. Its problem, however, is that it locates history and culture in one pole of the self's structure—finite givenness—while the actual shaping of the individual occurs outside this givenness through the third element, which balances and mediates between its two poles—the attitude toward, or consciousness of, the self. This attitude

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[18] Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death: A Christian Psychological Exposition for Upbuilding and Awakening*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), 13.

[19] Ibid., 13-14. For a detailed analysis of Kierkegaard's position, see Avi Sagi, *Kierkegaard, Religion, and Existence: The Voyage of the Self*, trans. Batya Stein (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000).

conveys an element that transcends history and culture, is rooted in the person's absolute freedom, and exceeds the two poles that determine concrete existence. History and culture do play a central role, but, since they are located in the pole of the self's finitude, the key element in the constitution of the self is beyond them. Ultimately, the attitude toward the self is a spontaneous, a priori, and individual element. The question of human identity is therefore always a question of the individual enclosed within his or her own individuality, whereas Kierkegaardian selfhood is fundamentally closed and "windowless," even if its materials can be known.

The existentialist model, which began as a shift from the classic approach toward a historical-cultural view of the self, returns to an essentialist, extracultural perception of human identity that emerges as extremely close to its classic philosophical cradle. In the end, this model replaced the classic subject with the attitude of the self, as a free creature, toward its own existence.

## Human Identity between Essentialism and Constructionism

Classic philosophy, then, and to some extent existentialism as well, suggest an essentialist view of the self. The essentialist approach assumes the existence of a self that is neither conditioned by, nor dependent on, historical, social, and cultural contexts. Luntley claims that this approach, which is the modernist view of the self, does acknowledge political or cultural "characteristics" such as gender, religion, and so forth, but not that the self is constituted by them. In Luntley's concise wording:

> From the perspective of modernity we are citizens not of the here and now; our true selves are not subjects of the historically real and contingent conditions of real culture and society. From the perspective of modernity, we are subjects of an abstract ahistorical realm from which we must then select our culture, our morals, politics and social institutions. Central of all the characteristics of the modern self is its individualism. In the first instance, the modern self stands alone.[20]

The perception of the self as outside any context isolates it not only from real history and culture but also from the other, and the modernist view does not view the attitude toward the other as constitutive of the self's identity.[21] The mainstream ethos of authenticity excels at articulating this matter.

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20 Luntley, *Reason, Truth and Self*, 152-153.

21 Ibid., 153.

From Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Kierkegaard up to Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre, the other is perceived as diverting the self from its selfhood, while authenticity is construed as related to a selfhood isolated and detached from any connection to the other. The other is "the mass," "*Das Man*" that threatens authenticity. Heidegger's claim that "being with the other" is a basic construct of human existence[22] seemingly deviates from the isolated authenticity approach, but it actually reiterates it. Readers of *Being and Time* cannot but notice that the discussion about the modes of "being with the other" is mostly devoted to an analysis of inauthentic reality, wherein the other threatens the isolated self. Heidegger refers to it as "falling,"[23] that is, as a reality wherein people fail in the transparent realization of their existence. The connection with the other is authentic only in the other's role as a conscience that awakens us to return to our individual selfhood.[24] For Heidegger too, then, authentic human existence is individual existence, and we return to it with profound anxiety.[25]

As Paul Ricoeur notes,[26] the understanding of the self in Heidegger's thought develops in relation of being in the world rather than in the relation with the other. Ricoeur shows that, thematically, Heidegger's discussion takes place in the context of a person's relationship with the objects in the world,[27] that is, in the context of "*being-in-the-world*" rather than "*being-with* another." In Ricoeur's terms: "The question of the *world* takes the place of the question of the *other*."[28] Thereby Heidegger, like the existentialists who preceded him, is a partner to the modernist ethos.

This essentialist view of human identity applies to cultures and peoples as well, and not only to individuals. As Stuart Hall notes:

> There are at least two different ways of thinking about "cultural identity." The first position defines "cultural identity" in terms of one, shared culture, a sort of collective "one true self," hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed "selves," which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common. Within the terms of this definition, our cultural identities reflect the common

22 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 149-224.
23 Ibid., 219-224.
24 Ibid., 158, 344.
25 Ibid., 232, 235.
26 Paul Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action and Interpretation*, trans. John B. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 55-56.
27 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 188-190.
28 Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, 56.

> historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us, as "one people," with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of our actual history.[29]

This approach raises two questions: what is the essence of a specific culture, and what are its basic values? In the essentialist view, identifying a member of a social or cultural community is not a serious problem—those who bear the essential characteristics of this specific community are members, and those who do not, are not.

The essentialist perception of cultural identity views the synchronic discourse with the other, the stranger or the atypical, as redundant. The other plays no role in structuring the cultural identity, which is not constituted in an open historical, social, and cultural process. Instead, this identity is found "there," in the historical world, and is therefore disclosed by drawing "inward," into the given culture. The essentialist view approaches the rituals, the myths, or the ethos of a particular culture as similar, if not identical, to natural elements. The epistemological and ontological language that the essentialist discourse uses to talk about culture is the one used to talk about objects in the world. Hence, just as the essence of an object is not contingent on the other and remains stable and unchanging, the same is true of cultural identity.

The antithesis of this essentialist position is the constructionist approach.[30] The constructionist view holds that thinking about identity as if it were a natural object is flawed because identity is shaped and created within historical, social, and cultural contexts. Whereas the essentialist view highlights the complete, harmonious, and static nature of identity, the constructionist one emphasizes its fragmentary, dialectic, and contradictory character and views identity as a lifetime project. The essentialist approach seeks to transcend the concrete human story, while the constructionist one holds that the identity of individuals is the story they tell themselves in the historical-cultural contexts of their lives. This story, like any story, weaves facts into a web of imagination and invention. Rather than returning to a beginning beyond its borders, this story remains within them and invents its past. One striking example of this aspect is the opening sentence

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29 Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990), 223.

30 Craig Calhoun, "Social Theory and the Politics of Identity," in *Social Theory and the Politics of Identity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 13-27.

of Edward Said's autobiography: "All families invent their parents and children, give each of them a story, character, fate, and even a language."[31] It is in the nature of a story that it is retold or, at the very least, can be retold in many diverse ways. People are more than one story. They are a cluster of different stories that may be more or less related to one another, as Bronwyn Davies and Rom Harré point out:

> An individual emerges through the processes of social interaction, not as a relatively fixed end product but as one who is constituted and reconstituted through the various discursive practices in which they participate. Accordingly, who one is is always an open question with a shifting answer depending upon the positions made available within one's own and others' discursive practices and within those practices, the stories through which we make sense of our own and others' lives. Stories are located within a number of different discourses, and thus vary dramatically.[32]

The constructionist view applies not only to individuals but to cultural communities and to nations. Hall describes cultural identity as follows:

> Cultural identity … is a matter of "becoming" as well as of "being." It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous "play" of history, culture and power. Far from being grounded in a mere "recovery" of the past, which is waiting to be found … identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past.[33]

The constructionist view answers the identity question in two ways. According to the first, which I will call "strong constructionism," the traditional concept of identity collapses altogether. No connection ties the various cultural contexts of people's lives. They tell themselves different stories at different times and in different situations, without a basic core

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31 Edward W. Said, *Out of Place: A Memoir* (London: Granta Books, 1999), 9.

32 Bronwyn Davies and Rom Harré, "Positioning: The Discursive Production of Selves," *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 20 (1990): 46. See also Krausz, "On Being Jewish," 264-267; Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*, 5; Wolfram Fischer-Rosenthal, "From Identity to Biography," in *A Quest for Identity: Post War Jewish Biographies*, ed. Yitzhak Kashti et al. (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, 1996), 9-20.

33 Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," 225. See also Stuart Z. Charmé, "Varieties of Authenticity in Contemporary Identity," *Jewish Social Studies* 6 (2000): 144.

that organizes these contexts into one coherent framework of meaning. The alternative is a "moderate constructionism," which assumes that, even if no self is assumed to exist beyond culture, history, and society, the self's absolute collapse is not a required premise.

In the moderate constructionist approach, identity retains continuity and unity but is not static and complete. Although individuals and societies do undergo change processes, these processes are highly coherent and enable us to relate to the individual or to the society as continuous. In extreme situations, coherence may disappear and identity can then be determined to have collapsed. But the disintegration of identity, rather than the primary or even the standard option, is only one possible way of acknowledging the constitutive role of culture, history, and society.[34]

## On the Sources of the Essentialist Approach

What are the sources of the essentialist view of identity? It is in the context of constructionist approaches, which assume that culture is the constitutive context of identity, that this question arises. An extensive discussion of this issue is beyond the scope of this chapter, and my comments will be limited to a few preliminary remarks.

The first answer to this question claims that the essentialist approach is a product of Western culture. The dichotomous assumption of classic tradition—the existence of a subject or the collapse of the self into a series of unrelated moments—originates in the metaphor of the self in Western culture:

> … the person has often been imagined as a machine—most recently as a computer—that carries its basic operating instructions on the inside, that controls behavior, and that functions the same way no matter where it is located or what it stores. But other understandings of the person are possible. For example, in many Asian contexts, the self is metaphorized not as a machine, but as something from nature, like a plant. In this view, the soil (or the culture) is essential for the plant's development, nourishment, and cultivation. The plant metaphor suggests that a person is porous and open, rather than bounded, and it blurs the inside-outside, self-society, and person-environment distinctions that are deeply embedded in European-American understandings.[35]

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34 Luntley, *Reason, Truth and Self*, 184-189.

35 Hazel Rose Markus, Patricia R. Mullally, and Shinobu Kitayama, "Selfways: Diversity in Modes of Cultural Participation," in *The Conceptual Self in Context: Culture, Experience, Self-Understanding*, ed. Ulric Neisser and David A. Jopling (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 16-17.

This is a constitutive metaphor of the identity discourse, which recurrently raises the essentialist perception of the self while actually reflecting the opposite—the collapse of the self. In other words: either the self is the subject, the entity, or the essence bearing manifest characteristics, or—when consciousness despairs of finding this self, as Hume showed—the self is broken down into a series of entirely unrelated moments. The more fundamental question, however, still remains unanswered: what led Western culture to create this metaphor? Several thinkers have related to this issue, particularly Friedrich Nietzsche and his followers, but dealing with it exceeds my present concern.

Another explanation of the essentialist approach is related to the status of the self in the modern era, when the self turned into a reflective project.[36] The reflective discourse on the self locates it as an object within consciousness, strengthening the temptation to characterize it through features suited to objects. Whereas the former explanation had claimed that it was the culture that had created the metaphor of the self, the latter directs attention to the reflective discourse.

Be that as it may, it was only the growing recognition of the significance of culture in the creation of identity and the emergence of constructionist approaches that replaced the essentialist view that succeeded in toning down the essentialist temptation. The most important manifestation of the constructionist approach is the multiculturalist conception, which is at the center of the discussion in this chapter.

## ON IDENTITY AND CULTURE

People have a culture just as they have a face. Culture is not merely an addition to their existence—without it, they are not human beings. People are born into a culture, which establishes their identity as concrete entities, their language, and most of the mechanisms through which they experience existence. It provides both the materials of memory and its conscious parameters and plays an important role in shaping their hopes and their future.

These statements, which are borne out by our life experience, are counterfactual to classic rationalist philosophies as well as to romantic conceptions, where the hero is the self-fulfilling autarchic individual who does not depend on social and cultural variables. Only in the eighteenth

36 Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*, 32.