

The Identity from Unity to Dissimilation

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Abstract: Identity is a matter of dissimilation, and standing on a definitive judgment or opinion is not an easy task. For some, identity represents unity and stability within the multiplicity experienced by the self. The problem that arises when theorizing identity stems from the different perspectives involved. And the preliminary readings reveal that concept and principle of identity have undergone a semantic shift from the meaning of existence to the meaning of the (I), and then the meaning of the (being). Moreover, identity is a concept derived from the term (He/it), not from the (I). the issue now is that the meaning of the (I) has become intertwined and interconnected with the meaning of the (he) which refers to the other. Hence, we ask the question, was the conventional sculpture of identity intentionally crafted by its setter, or was it a random and arbitrary choice? We will address the issue through the studies presented by the thinker Hassan Hanafi, in which appears the mercurial path that identity has taken through various cultural contexts.

Keywords: Identity, Unity, Differences, Contexts, Hasan Hanafi.

Introduction

Imitating and emulating the teacher is a source of pride and honor for the student. And defining the topic and outlining the methodology of the study are among the fundamental principles we have learned from the thinker Hassan Hanafi which are the keys to research hand the gateways to study. There can be no clarity of vision without precise definition and conceptual clarity. Moreover, the central conceptual frameworks in this study are related to identity which established in the mind of the recipient the connotation of stability, constancy and stillness. Beside, reconciling this with the transformation in a logical issue poses a conflicting dissonance in which the mind does not accept one meaning except by excluding the other.

In the thesis of the Arab thinker Hassan Hanafi, we find sincere efforts to bridge the gap between stability and identity transformation. For him, transformation is an essential characteristic of even a stable identity; though it may appear incidental, it is seldom a change occurring within the self or the existential sphere of the being. Thus, there is no conflict, division, or rupture in the structure and unity of identity when the individual identity experiences alienation from the realm of stillness. For, by its nature, identity is a space for the struggle of opposites, it is a unified multiplicity and a multiple unity and every indicator or principle established to arrive at a definitive judgment about personal identity is inherently relative, resembling the Galilean reference point that physicists created to measure motion on Earth. It is not an absolute principle, but rather a rule that determines a starting point relative to a particular frame. Similarly, the unity that identity has, has become relative, based on the

starting point of movement, which itself depends on the angle from which the phenomenon is observed. Therefore, identity is a philosophical, psychological, and political construct, and any judgment made about it is, from the perspective of another, a mere opinion.

Through the phenomenological approach that Hassan Hanafi relies, identity takes on a subjective path, embodied in the self's perception of itself. This perception becomes a form of capital in constructing and maintaining the balance of personal identity. However, it can also lead the individual into spaces where the identity deviates from established norms. There is also the intersubjective perspective, which views identities as entities that intersect through organic and social characteristics, citizenship being a prime example, at the same time, identities may exist independently with their own ethnicities, often rooted in unconscious backgrounds that are perceived as threats to the existence of others. This dynamic is particularly evident in the issue of Arabs and Muslims in relation to Israel, where the question of nationalism also plays a central role. The tensions and fluctuations of the self between subjective and objective poles of identification impose transformations, causing identity to shift from one axis to another, and from one state to another.

A researcher exploring the written and oral legacy (including lectures) of Hassan Hanafi will clearly observe the persistent concern and anxiety surrounding subjectivity, both as an individual and collective identity, in his work. For, his intellectual project is at its core a search for the suppressed identity: the identity of the collective self (the "raḥṭī" or tribal self), which has not yet emerged from its Hamlet-like condition. It remains trapped in the existential dilemma of "to be or not to be," with its crisis rooted in its own inherited tradition.

Contemporary Arab studies on heritage and its evaluation continue to be a central research issue within modern Arab thought. In *Heritage and Renewal* (al-Turāth wa al-Tajdīd), Hanafi presents his deconstructive mechanisms and touches on the voids within heritage that have contributed to the fragmentation of identity, both personal and collective. This becomes particularly evident in his treatment of belief (or creed) and its role in the dynamism of identity. Moreover, for Hassan Hanafi, alienation is not merely an individual, emotional condition, it is a comprehensive worldview, a way of perceiving the universe, the self, and the Other.

Furthermore, Hanafi found in Muhammad Iqbal a philosophical and spiritual partner in confronting the crisis of heritage and the existential dilemma. Iqbal became, for him, a philosopher of subjectivity and a collaborator in the intellectual project he had established, Hanafi says: "...Iqbal's works and lines of thought can be categorized according to the three fronts of the 'Heritage and Renewal' project: the position on classical heritage, the position on Western heritage, and the position on contemporary reality, and In Iqbal's terms: the self or subjectivity, the other or the counter-subjectivity, and the reality in which the interaction occurs between subjectivity and counter-subjectivity. The difficulty lies in the entanglement of these three fronts..."

Identity and Transformations:

• Conceptual Level:

Hassan Hanafi's linguistic excavation into the concept of identity reveals the alienation and absence embedded in the term itself. Through its semantic roots, the word "identity" points not to the self, but to the non-self, or the absence of self, if identity is commonly understood as an expression of subjectivity, Hanafi argues that what is actually being referred to is the

“he” (huwa), the other, rather than the “I” (ana) for which the concept was supposedly coined. As he states: “From the pronoun ‘he’ it becomes a noun. Its meaning is for a person to be ‘he is he.’ It is a demonstrative that refers to the other, not to the self. This is equivalent to the Latin root letters ‘Id,’ from which the term ‘identity’ is also derived.” (Hanafi) Thus, identity is understood as “being” through the gaze of the other, a selfhood constructed from without. Hanafī draws a distinction between this and “Ipseity” (inniyyah), the state of being “I” in one’s own essence. He explains: “The term ‘inniyyah’ corresponds to the Latin ‘Ipse,’ from which the term ‘Ipseity’ is derived.”

Thus, all egocentrism and exclusivity are negated, since identity affirms the Other before it affirms the Self. The word identity (huwiyya) is not derived from the first-person pronoun “I” (ana) except in the negative sense of egoism, as opposed to otherness. On the other hand, the term Ipeity (inniyya) is derived from the Arabic particle inna, which is used for emphasis and affirmation. Its meaning implies that the existence and essence of a thing are confirmed through definition. Hence, from a linguistic perspective, identity does not truly express the intended philosophical concept of subjectivity or harmony with the self, and to overcome these semantic limitations, Tunisian philosopher Fethi Meskini proposes a distinction between identity “hūwiyya” (with a damma: الهُويّة) and hawiyya (with a fatha: الهويّة). Hūwiyya (ipséité in French) implies an internalized selfhood, expressing the individual (I) or a notion of sameness (la mêmeté). Hawiyya, on the other hand, corresponds to identité (identity) and, according to Meskini, "is nothing more than a generic 'they' – le On, Das Man – a worn-out daily collectivity subjected to the political temporality of a rights-based state." (Al-Maskini, 2001, p. 21)

The semantic shift in the notion of identity began with a move away from the meaning of the pronoun (“he”), which originally referred to being (estîn) in ancient Greek, signifying being in its universal sense. This shifted to thinking being (rescogitans), which later evolved into the thinking subject, or le sujet, the famous cogito. Eventually, in the thought of Kant and Hegel, this became the identical self (Das identische Selbst in German, le soi identique in French).

As Meskini puts it: “We must clearly perceive the various shifts, from a grammatical ‘he’, to a logical ‘he’, to an ontological ‘he’, then to an ontological identity in classical Arabic philosophy, and finally to an anthropological and cultural identity within the contemporary sociological-historical-theological discourse.” (Al-Maskini, 2001, p. 9)

Thus, transformation is not merely an attribute used in defining identity, it is the foundational reference point in the construction of its meaning, in Hassan Hanafi’s thought, transformation is not only what constitutes identity, but also what marks its eventual end. For, settling into a fixed state in the formation or composition of the personal entity is not considered natural, but pathological. For, every trait within the structure of identity is merely a relative expression of it, not the identity in its entirety, but partial specificities or simple identities, in contrast to the composite identity of the personal self, and the semantic root of identity according to Meskini Selbstheit is based on continuity in time that is the dynamism of existence, or ta-hawwī (becoming), as expressed by the philosopher al-Kindi.

• **Logical Level:**

"They turned it into a law..." (Hanafi, p. 9) Formulation and abstraction have been the continuous pursuit of philosophers since the beginning and the tendency to disdain the sensory aspects of daily life and historical thinking reflects a deep philosophical impulse toward abstraction. Philosophical dualism hinges on the axis of pure, transcendent reason, a

crossroads for various conceptions, visions, and aims. The reference point here is the philosophers' persistent attempt to project a metaphysical, transcendent character onto the principle. The ambiguity surrounding metaphysical vision is a direct result of the foundational assumptions built by the "spiders" of metaphysics regarding the principle of identity.

The symbolic formulation of the principle of identity by philosophers, often represented as "A = A," presents formal issues related more to method than to content. As Martin Heidegger states: "This equation A = A asserts the equality between A and A. The principle does not aim to express merely this fact, every equality presupposes at least two terms... it does not present A as being itself. In fact, the commonly accepted equation of the identity principle hides precisely what the principle is meant to say: that A is A. In other words, that every A is, in itself, itself." (Heidegger, 1988, p. 34) The unity and stability of identity arise from and are grounded in the individual's stance toward both the self and the other. For, the self is seen as an indivisible unity when reflected in (the self) mirror, and the idea that the self changes and does not remain constant has been a topic of interest for Islamic philosophers. A well-known example is the debate between Bahmanyar (al-Azharijani) and his teacher Avicenna (Ibn Sina) about the unity of the self, which ultimately led to the belief in the unity of substance, or what we might term the constancy of identity from the perspective of the self itself. However, examining the nature and truth of the self reveals it as composed of disparate and even conflicting elements because the human commonality, in its biological, psychological, and social diversity, plays a major role in shaping identity. Besides, the essence of identity, as Heidegger puts it, "belongs inherently to shared appropriation."⁸

Yet logical identity overlaps and interweaves with other forms of identity at several key points, as philosopher Hassan Hanafi outlines. For him, the term identity corresponds to essence (māhiyya) in philosophical discourse, that is the core and truth of a thing. While identity represents a correspondence between the I (the self) and the he (the other), essence represents a correspondence between a thing and itself. Interestingly, the Arabic term māhiyya is linguistically derived from the interrogative mā ("what") and the third-person feminine pronoun hiya ("she/it").

Used for defining identity, the term "identity" is used in the context of existence, whereas "essence" is employed for definition. The word "essence" (Arabic: jawhar) comes from the imagery of precious metals and signifies the core or the most valuable truth of a thing. (Hanafi) Paul Ricœur offers a glimmer of resolution to the problem of logical identity by distinguishing between two concepts: "Sameness" (mêmeté): referring to the object-like, fixed, thing-oriented identity, and "selfhood" (ipséité): referring to the dynamic, lived, subjective identity.

The logical meaning of identity, which seeks permanence within the self, appears in the notion of sameness, through continuity over time, in this context character becomes the primary and stable appearance of identity. Ricœur defines character as: "The meaning of unity, coherence, and maximum similarity, both quantitatively and qualitatively, within the same individual's trajectory over time. It leads to identifying identity as something unchanging (an essence or substance), and this is what grants it a lasting continuity over time. In this sense, continuity is the continuity of character: the sum of traits that distinguish the individual as the same individual, a persistent clinging of the self to its own preservation." (Abah)

Behavioral Level:

Reality acts as the standard and fundamental measure used by humans to evaluate personality balance. For, the judgment of identity, whether individual or collective, is gauged by action. For example, the strength of collective identity is recognized through its presence and influence on the regional or international stage, and by this standard, Arab or Islamic identity is weak and failing to assert itself, while European identity, founded on diversity and multiple principles, proves effective and powerful. The same applies to individuals: there is no value in an identity that cannot defend itself and to clarify this criterion, we focus on belief as the theoretical background of action and behavior.

Doctrinal/Belief Level:

Behavior is the main test of human value, through which a person is honored or degraded, It is manifested in actions or reactions from the human being. But not only action matters, reactions are not always negative; empathic responses are necessary to build and maintain psychological balance, both individually and collectively. Action and reaction are natural and social mechanisms for forming adaptive stances. Yet, classifying human activity into voluntary and involuntary reveals the importance of thought and perceptions in shaping intended action. The deliberation among potential desires gives action higher value—especially in the ability to choose or transcend one option over others, even when predicting that choice is impossible. Hassan Hanafi offers a vision of the type of active determinant behind the “becoming” of identity—its transformation from one state to another. According to him, religious alienation is clearly expressed in theology and Sufism: “Creeds divide the world into two realms: the higher and the lower, Creator and creature, eternal and temporal, immortal and perishable... The first is where the soul finds rest, while in the second, it suffers...” (Hanafi, p. 41)

This conception establishes a kind of emotional duality within the individual. For, true life is not the one connected to the body, the place, or the homeland. Thus, identity becomes merely a temporary mechanism for reaching the higher world that one aspires to attain, so identity, in this sense is a relative domain and a constraint on the true self. Therefore, we observe that the Muslim experiences a duality in their sense of national belonging, divided between attachments and yearnings toward sacred places, and their hearts always longing for those sites. The individual is thus not truly himself, but rather outside the “self” he lives. Thence, Professor Hichem Djait points us to the most critical phenomenon experienced by Arabs in general, and Muslims in particular, the phenomenon of personality duality, which if we may say, sometimes reaches multiplicity rather than mere duality. Besides, the determinants of the "self" are open, unrestricted by geographical or civil boundaries, and shaped instead by the Islamic identity, which is governed by doctrinal determinants. Unfortunately, the multiplicity within Islamic belief, expressed through its theological and jurisprudential doctrines, clearly affects the behaviors of this "self", which ignorance and psychological complexes of inferiority toward the West have nourished. **Djait** notes: "The 'self' of the old conservative graduate of the University of Zaytuna is the Islamic self at its highest level, it was certainly nurtured and raised in the Tunisian homeland, remaining loyal to the way of life he grew up with since childhood, Tunisia is his physical homeland, while his spiritual homeland is the entirety of (Dar al-Islam)." (Djait, 1990, p. 17)

This feeling of alienation from one's tangible, civil homeland does not stop there, but according to **Djait**, it extends to the diminishment of the individual's own civil society and cultural history. Thus, for such individuals, what is considered authentic and valid is everything linked to the broader Islamic world, unfortunately, the represented (constructed)

Islam, rather than the original, authentic one. Besides, what we witness today across the Islamic world are fragmented identities, existing within a mentally constructed overarching identity.

Level of Action:

If we were to draw upon the Arabic language to understand the concept of "action," we would find that change not constancy is the fundamental feature. Seeing that, action according to Arabic grammarians, is: "What signifies a meaning in itself and is connected to one of the three times (past, present, or future)." (Al-Jurjani, 1988, p. 168) Thus, action is an event tied to time, reflecting ongoing dynamic movement and time itself is a mental construct related to spatial motion, sensible (physical) time, the space in which action occurs, is a finely divisible and segmentable field, making it a domain of interpretation which aligns with the experimental findings of physics.

However, the human experience of time grants it a human dimension, making it resist simple interpretation, transforming it into an interpretive field, which **Henri Bergson** called duration (*la durée*). Duration is a continuous, flowing movement that cannot be precisely demarcated, it is at best a point without length or breadth that separates a past that has ended from the present moment of perceptual and emotional existence. Thus, the dynamism of time, as a physical constant, confirms the movement and dynamism of the self. There is no fixed identity of the ego through its givens and determinants, it is a domain of change and transformation.

In narrative identity, as developed by **Paul Ricoeur**, we find evidence of this constant change in self-identity. Identity is: "A formative process crafted through narrative art and a dynamic interaction between the self and the other as the foundation of existence." It is an ever-changing, ongoing process that never knows true stability or rest. Claims of a static, unchanging identity are mere hypotheses, subject to refutation as much as to affirmation. The contributions of psychoanalysis, led by **Freud** and his students In the nature of psychological and social conflict between the "ego", the "id", and the "superego", provide further proof of the fluid nature of self-identity. For, identity does not live in a state of stability but in a hidden struggle between the instinctual forces embodied in **libido** and the internalized societal values in the **superego**. Moreover, the conflict between the needs of biological nature and the standards accepted by society establishes an awareness of identity, by its uniqueness and distinction from others as a feeling of harmony and coherence with one's own self, It is the culmination of what belongs uniquely to the self and not to others. (Hatem Al-Warfali, 2009, p. 19) Identity, therefore, is a history of conflict and dialectic between selfhood (ipseity) and otherness. Otherness itself is **polysemic**, having multiple meanings and cannot be precisely theorized or conceptualized, it remains an interpretive domain. "Thus, identity is not a static being with fixed traits and components; it combines both constant and variable. Accordingly, the logical, fixed notion of identity only applies within the realm of abstractions such as logic and mathematics, and even within these fields, it remains a subject of debate, in the domains of reality and life, change and stability are intertwined and inseparable." (Hatem Al-Warfali, 2009, p. 25/26)

Narration, as a form of storytelling and self-expression, becomes a bridge for identity to emerge into the ontological world of existence. Since narration is a linguistic mechanism and a symbolic capability, the presence of the other in the narrative is clear and prominent. There is no symbolism outside the social space; thus, the "other" simultaneously serves both as a means for identity and as a suppression of it. According to **Paul Ricoeur**, narrative identity

works by “producing a textual output based on the duality of the self and the other, interpreting and explaining the self through a process where the other is a participant in the act of reception and understanding. Identity is thus formed within a temporal context, according to modalities of ipseity (selfhood) and identity as fundamental determinants through which the self recognizes itself.” (Hatem Al-Warfali, 2009, p. 27)

In conclusion, asserting the permanence of identity — whether individual or collective — is a matter of convention and agreement, meant to affirm the individual and distinguish him from the other. However, identity that exists within time is also tied to time’s dynamism and ongoing flow, and there is no stability for the self outside of time and outside of cultural transformations. The "I" is a process, a decision, and a human project, not simply a static being.

Identity and Context:

"Identity is originally a philosophical subject," (Hanafi, p. 9) as philosopher **Hassan Hanafi** acknowledges, his affirmation of the philosophical aspect of identity is justified: the philosophical and political debate around the principle of identity chronicles the opposing directions it can take. Even the very meaning it carries is philosophically diverse, for everyone looks at it from their own perspective and what we seek to clarify regarding the meaning we accept for the philosophical specificity of identity in order to avoid confusion or distortion is that the philosophical dimension lies in the multiple oppositions and contexts that shape engagement with the subject.

The presence of a concept or meaning across multiple frameworks and fields of knowledge is what grants a term or notion its passport into the world of philosophy. Additionally, human concepts are inherently candidates for philosophical reflection, and while scientific concepts can also enter philosophical discourse, this happens to a lesser degree, unless they touch the "red" or "yellow" lines drawn by humans themselves. Thus, the matter takes on the color of its context, just as water takes the color of its container, as the mystics say.

For example, determinism, as a research topic, is considered scientific if it is addressed within the fields of physics, chemistry, biology, or human sciences, but if it is addressed at a purely theoretical level, where philosophers argue and reason about its presence or absence, we then move into the realm of what **Francis Bacon** called "spiders", the advocates of pure idealism, that is described in the history of philosophy as "necessity." And It takes on a theological dimension when discussed in relation to divine omnipotence and the conditioning of creation, which is the realm of theological fatalism (jabr). Above and beyond, from a philosophical standpoint, what matters is the intersection between different fields and thought systems. For, philosophical inquiry about freedom often results from convergence between different fields of knowledge, the epistemological principle that insists on the necessity and originality of integration between scientific fields underpins this view. Thus, identity is a fundamental issue for politicians, religious scholars, psychologists, sociologists, and others. As a result, when we study identity, we encounter contradictory visions that render the issue problematic and lead to divergent perspectives. Philosophy, through its elite, views identity as the law of permanence in being. For the religious scholar, identity represents positive expression of sincerity and loyalty, in contrast to hypocrisy, which represents duplicity and existential anxiety in the believer who has not truly internalized faith, according to the Qur'anic description. For the politician, identity becomes a criterion of citizenship, upon which rights and duties are based.

In his presentation of the concepts through which identity has been understood, Hassan Hanafi shows great precision in defining meanings and a fluidity of style that allows Arab readers of varying intellectual levels to grasp and comprehend the nuances of identity, **Hanafi** presents identity across its multiple contexts, showcasing his impressive mastery of the various fields and applications in which identity has been studied. This is unsurprising, for Hassan Hanafi embodies the model of the encyclopedic philosopher, the dominant tradition in Islamic culture, where there is no strict specialization in knowledge unless necessary. His work immerses the reader in the intensity of the problematics surrounding the issue of identity, each context provides its own credibility to the discussion, yet also brings contradictions and limitations, reflecting the relativity of reality. **Hanafi** offers a detailed study of the different ways identity has been problematized across contexts, showing how each field developed its own specific challenges and limitations.

Identity and Language:

"Arabness stems from the Arabic language; Arabness is not inherited from a father or a mother, rather, it is the tongue. Whoever speaks Arabic is an Arab. Thus, there is an Arab identity which forms the foundation of Arab nationalism and Arab culture." (Hanafi, p. 69) Nationalist movements established national identity based on language, as seen with the German and Italian nations during the process of unifying their states, an approach that some Arab thinkers, such as Sati' al-Husri (A Syrian-Iraqi thinker)(1879–1968).

It is noticeable, however, that the nationalist current in the Arab world collided with the religious structure that constitutes a major part of Arab culture. For, the Arabic language alone failed to create a viable identity capable of resisting Arab disintegration, particularly in the face of aggressive Western cultural invasion and the Zionist occupation of Arab Palestine. The future that we are currently living has confirmed the failure and collapse of the nationalist project, which sought to found identity solely on the basis of language.

Identity and Culture:

The meanings that culture as a term takes in the social sciences vary according to the nature of the thinking about it, and the frameworks and mechanisms shaped by personal and social determinants. Among the most significant perspectives on culture are the American and German views. With the American anthropologist **Edward Tylor**, culture became semantically synonymous with civilization, representing the material and moral products of humanity. In contrast, the Germans emphasized spiritual aspects as the original and referential meaning of the term. Thus, cultural identity or the "we-identity" (identity of the collective), that expresses the individuality and subjectivity of the collective "self." Anthropologists such as Claude Lévi-Strauss studied this form of identity, which in essence represents the historical accumulation of a group's behavior. However, by nature, it is variable and relative: even within a single community, there is not just one identity, but multiple identities. Accordingly, identity loses its legitimacy as a foundation for creating a general or universal identity though existential anxiety and fear often drive attempts to do so.

Conclusion:

Identity is a deeply problematic concept. Ideology has played a major role in steering social beliefs about identity, drawing its core foundations and aims from political systems. It is important to point out that, linguistically speaking the concept of identity has yet to be precisely defined. Thus, positions taken on the matter are seldom relative judgments, because

the semantic and referential basis in language determines the mode of interpretation and understanding for the recipient. Since meaning is fluid and mercurial, it becomes necessary to first undertake a linguistic revision by selecting the desired meaning. Meaning is not something that simply "is"; rather, it is a projection from the imagination of the self and the group onto the term.

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