

Review of Vincent Descombes, *Puzzling Identities* (trans. Stephen Adam Schwartz, Harvard University Press, 2016)

This rich and engaging book addresses a nest of questions that have been mostly neglected in recent Anglophone philosophy. These questions concern ordinary uses of the concept 'identity' in speaking e.g. of identity *crises*, of one's identity as something that can be *lost* or *maintained*, of identification *with* certain groups, traits, values, or beliefs, and so on. That there are these uses, and that they are an important feature of contemporary culture, is beyond question: witness the difficulty in helping undergraduates focus in the classroom on what 'we' (that is, professional philosophers working in the tradition of Locke, Reid, Williams, and Parfit) mean by personal identity, where this meaning is supposed to be distinct from the substantive use of 'identity' to mean something that a person *has*, and that can change or be replaced over the course of their continued life. Seemingly connected to this popular understanding of identity are other ordinary concepts like those of self-discovery (or 'finding' oneself) and authenticity ('being' oneself), and the seriousness with which people ask and try to answer questions like 'Who am I?' To understand these uses would be to understand a main part of the contemporary conception of a person.

The difficulty in every case is manifold. In particular, it is simply not clear in the first place what people who use the language of 'identity' in these ways suppose it *is* to discover oneself or be oneself, to change one's identity or come to identify with such-and-such, or to ask or answer the question 'Who am I?' One thing that's evident is how different all this is supposed to be from the discovery, change, etc. of ordinary facts, including facts about other human beings: *discovering oneself* is nothing like picking one's image out in a crowded photograph, and a person wondering *who she is* is not going to be satisfied by being told her name, occupation, and so on. But this only compounds the further problem of understanding what any of this talk has to do with the concept 'identity' as it is used in making judgments of the form 'A = B'. Is it just a lexical accident that the same word used in speaking about the persistence and individuation of objects is also used in connection with these gripping but somewhat inarticulate existential concerns?

A pessimistic view might accept that this is, indeed, a mere accident of usage. More radically, one might even hold that the supposed conception of identity that's at stake in a question like 'Who am I?', where this cannot be answered just by saying 'I am NN' or 'I am the F that is G', is simply incoherent and calls for philosophical therapy rather than conceptual analysis. (Certainly the push for clarification tends to dumbfound most undergraduates.) But Descombes rejects these responses. He insists that there is something real, and of real human importance, at stake in this aspect of ordinary 'identity'-talk, and that its meaning cannot be entirely disconnected from the concept of personal identity that has received more attention in the recent philosophical literature. The aim of *Puzzling Identities* is to discover this connection and use it to shed light on the significance of ordinary 'identity'-talk and what this reveals about our concept of a person.

Stemming from this aim arise further questions, which I will not be able to discuss in detail here, about similar uses of the language of identity in connection with the nature and status of human *collectivities*. Just as a person may puzzle over her identity in asking herself ‘Who am I?’, so members of a collectivity—such as an ethnic community, a religious body, a neighborhood, or a nation-state—may see *its* identity at stake in posing the question ‘Who are *we*?’ All of the same complexities arise here as with talk of the identities of individual persons, yet for obvious reasons the resolution of them cannot be just the same. As Descombes shows in discussing these matters in the final part of his book, part of what is at stake in them is the question what it *is* to be (what I am here calling) a genuine collectivity rather than an aggregate or a merely classificatory human group: for only by members of a collectivity can the question ‘Who are *we*?’ really be asked, and only such a body can be said to *have* an identity, where this involves something more than merely *being* identified (which is to say: categorized) as such-and-such a group according to certain criteria.

Descombes’s treatment of ‘identity’-talk as applied to individual humans will be the focus of the present essay. He proposes to help us ‘relearn’ the meaning and significance of our ordinary concept of personal identity, beginning with its use in factual identity judgments of the form ‘This is NN’. Consider the *lived* concerns to which these judgments, and thus the conditions of their truth, are relevant: they are taken for granted in our practices of promising and keeping promises, incurring and resolving debts, and admitting and denying responsibility, and generally in the ways we regard one another as the appropriate targets of attitudes like love, gratitude, fear, resentment, and so on. As Descombes observes, what is presupposed in all of this is not a concept of *identity* but rather a concept of a *person* as someone who can exist over time despite changes in certain of her qualities. Possessing such a concept requires having a grasp, usually implicit and perhaps vague at some of its boundaries, of what *individuates* a person—a grasp, that is, of the conditions under which a given person can be picked out by a certain proper name or definite description.

But as we have seen, articulating these conditions would not be enough to explain what people mean in talking of identity in the puzzling senses that are Descombes’s real interest. That is because in contrast to merely ‘factual’ statements of who so-and-so is, these ‘moral’ uses of the concept of personal identity are in a way *subjective*: meant in this distinctive way, the question ‘Who am I?’ differs from ‘Who is she?’ because its answer has to come *from* the very person who asks it. Consider an illustrative passage from Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, in which the anonymous narrator struggles with his identity after the destruction of his youthful illusions:

I had no doubt I could do something, but what, and how? I had no contacts and I believed in nothing. And the obsession with my identity which I had developed in the factory hospital returned with a vengeance. Who was I, how had I come to be? Certainly I couldn’t help being different from when I left

the campus; but now a new, painful contradictory voice had grown up within me, and between its demands for revengeful action and Mary's silent pressure I throbbed with guilt and puzzlement. I wanted peace and quiet, tranquility, but was too much aboil inside. (Vintage International, 2nd ed., 1995, p. 259)

The narrator's obsession with understanding his identity develops after an operation that leaves him unable to remember his name or the name of his mother, but continues even after this knowledge has been restored. This reveals that *for him*, the question who he is cannot be answered just by appeal to facts about his name, parentage, place of birth, and so on. Asked by someone else, questions of the narrator's identity concern whether or not he is X, where 'X' is a proper name or definite description, and answering these questions is a matter of ascertaining the relevant facts. For the narrator himself, something further is at stake.

Descombes distinguishes two ways we might understand the idea that first-personal questions of identity are 'subjective'. The first, which is broadly Lockean, treats the identity of a person as a matter of private knowledge, the object of a consciousness that a person has of herself which can be shared only indirectly with others. Descombes argues that this will not do: in order for there to be such a thing as knowing, in a way that only a person herself can, that one is the same person (or 'self') as so-and-so, there would have to be criteria for making such judgments, and a possibility of getting them wrong. Yet none of this can be explained in terms of a theory of subjective identity as an object of inner knowledge.

The other possibility, which Descombes favors, is to ground the subjectivity of moral identity in the idea that a person's answer to the question 'Who am I?' is an *expression* of who she is, amounting to a *decision* on her part to identify herself in one way or another. This is suggested in the passage quoted above from *Invisible Man*, where the narrator's obsession with his identity can only be satisfied by resolving the ways that contradictory voices inside him give opposing answers to the questions what *to* do and believe. These questions are, as Descombes puts it, *practical* rather than cognitive: they are questions that concern what to *make* of oneself, what to *be* or *become*. As such, something different is at stake in them than in a mere question of who so-and-so is, where this is a request for *information* in virtue of which a given person can be identified and so engaged with appropriately.¹

What is it for a person to pose to herself the question 'Who am I?', meaning this question so that it can be answered only by the person herself, where this answer manifests not some private knowledge but a decision on her part to be as she identifies herself to be? Descombes considers two possible accounts. The first treats questions of identity as resting on a 'radical choice' of the sort envisioned by Sartre and other existentialists. In such a choice 'the entire existence of the subject is at

¹ For some similar observations in connection with the nature and moral importance of self-knowledge, see Richard Moran, *Authority and Estrangement* (Princeton University Press, 2001).

stake' (92): the choice is an attempt to determine *who she is* in a way that does not presuppose any practical identity that has been given to her as a result of birth, upbringing, social status, and so on. In this way, the subject's responsibility for herself is supposed to be 'expanded to every one of [her] attributes' (95)—not in the sense that she can choose whether or not to *have been* so born, brought up, etc., but because she refuses to grant these attributes any normative significance that contributes to determining who she *will be*.

Descombes argues that this concept of radical choice is incoherent, or in any case not something that could supply an answer to the question 'Who am I?' On the account we are considering that question is a practical one, calling for a decision on the part of the subject to identify herself in one way or another. But any practical question must be *finite*: it must ask 'what should I do, here and now, knowing that I have this or that possibility open to me?' (130). And the subject who purports to make a radical choice cannot frame the question in this way, since 'he has no reason to envisage one possibility as preferable to another from the perspective of the ends that he would have if he were an individuated agent'. That is, such a subject 'has no reasons that are his own, reasons that, by indicating what he should do, allow him to think of his decision as an expression of himself, of what he is and of what he wants in life' (ibid.). As Iris Murdoch asks, 'If we are so strangely separate from the world at moments of choice' as the existentialist view depicts us, then in these supposed decisions 'are we really choosing at all, are we right indeed to identify *ourselves* with this giddy empty will?'² Descombes agrees with Murdoch that the answer will be 'No'.

I believe there are two distinct points that are not always kept sufficiently separate in this discussion. First, a practical question can be asked only by an *individuated* agent—someone who is in a particular place in the world with certain possibilities open to her, e.g. to take one of two paths at a crossroads. This means that such a question 'can be raised only by an agent who is sure of the conditions of his choice, conditions that result from his individuation in a particular place in the world' (130-131). Second, for a choice to be *deliberate* it must be grounded in some reason that bears on the choiceworthiness of the options: I may choose this path because it leads to A, or choose the other because it leads to B, or choose to flip a coin because I am simply indifferent between these options. Descombes envisions the subject of a purported radical choice as paralyzed in both respects: this subject 'suppresses the normative fact of her individuation *and thus* loses every given practical identity', thereby 'deny[ing] herself any reasons that she might personally have to make one choice rather than another' (128; emphasis added). The phrase I have italicized makes it clear that there are supposed to be two distinct but related ideas at work here, but more could be said about the connection between them. In exactly what sense must the subject of a radical choice ignore (or pretend to ignore) her particular place in the world? And what is the connection between the *de facto*

² Iris Murdoch, 'The Idea of Perfection', in *The Sovereignty of Good* (1970, London: Routledge, 2001), at p. 35.

limits imposed by such material particularity and any properly normative considerations that would bear on the subject's 'practical identity'?

Still it is clear that there is serious trouble here for the idea that practical identity is grounded in radical choice of who one will be. Charles Taylor puts this well in commenting on Sartre's story of the young man who must choose whether to leave his mother or join the Resistance: as Taylor writes, the man's situation is indeed 'a cruel dilemma', but it is so 'only because the claims themselves are not created by radical choice'.³ If the respective claims of the man's country and his mother did rest on such a choice, then the man 'could do away with the dilemma at any moment by simply declaring one of the rival claims as dead and inoperative' (ibid.). This is not to say that the man *cannot* call these claims into question: he might e.g. consider whether to reject any allegiance to his family. But it is only insofar as he *has* such an allegiance that the question can arise in this way at all. And only in light of what Taylor calls a 'contrastive characterization' of the respective options as loyal or disloyal, cowardly or courageous, and so on can they be appreciated as meriting consideration in the first place, such that a choice of one over the other can be made explicable and thus be seen as the sort of thing with which the man might identify *himself*.

What alternative is there to the theory of radical choice for understanding the distinctively practical, indeed *existential* force of the question 'Who am I?' Here Descombes draws directly on Taylor's work, arguing that the possibility of defining one's moral identity presupposes what Taylor calls the 'great disembedding' of individual persons from inherited roles, traditions, and social structures.⁴ Taylor suggests that person's conception of herself as an *individual* in the modern sense is manifested in her ability to entertain thoughts of how she would have been even if the circumstances of her birth and childhood had been radically different—had she been born in a different era, or to parents with different jobs or social statuses, or raised in a different religion, or had skin of a different color. A person who thinks of herself in these ways has *disembedded* her self-conception from the social and material circumstances in which she finds herself, which then raises the question what, if not these circumstances, determines the kind of person she is going to be. Such a person must address the question 'Who am I?' in a way that one whose self-conception has not been disembedded in this way will not.

In one of the best sections of *Puzzling Identities*, Descombes uses a pair of Pascal's works to illustrate the process by which a modern individual can come to ask and answer the question 'Who am I?' in such a disembedded way. One of these works records conversations that Pascal had with a young nobleman, whom he instructs to imagine himself as akin to a man who has been shipwrecked on an island and mistaken by its inhabitants for their king. Pascal's point is that the respect the

³ Charles Taylor, 'Responsibility for Self', in A. O. Rorty, ed., *The Identities of Persons* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), at p. 291.

⁴ See Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), pp. 146-158.

nobleman receives in virtue of his inherited title is analogous to that received by the man who was shipwrecked, since there is nothing in his 'natural condition' or personal achievements in virtue of which this unequal treatment is deserved. Descombes suggests that this exercise, which any of us can engage in as well, is a form of 'self-definition through disembedding', through which one learns 'to stop thinking of oneself as being naturally—and thus legitimately—what one is as a result of one's genealogy' (119).

However, as Descombes notes the 'double thought' that Pascal recommends to the young nobleman—that is, the thought that while he is truly undeserving of unequal respect, to conform with his society he will embrace that respect in his external actions—is inherently unstable, and one who adopts this strategy will likely 'aspire to a more "authentic" existence, one that is more in accordance with the demand for a match between the internal and the external' (121-122). In one of his *Pensées* Pascal describes what Descombes calls a 'spiritual danger' (123) that threatens any person who has such an aspiration: after we have removed all the 'borrowed qualities' that a person has only contingently and thus cannot identify with her 'true self', the purely *abstract* subject or 'self' that remains is no longer recognizable as worthy of love or esteem at all. As Descombes writes, 'It is absurd and unjust to ask to be loved for oneself, for there is nothing lovable in the fact of being oneself' (127)—nothing, that is, in the *mere* fact of being oneself that warrants any *particular* respect.

The problem, in other words, is that for the disembedded subject to identify herself with more than the empty 'I am I', she must choose some *given* characteristic to identify herself with. As we have seen, in order for this self-identification to be intelligible as such, the subject must understand the characteristic with which she identifies, not as simply necessitated, but as choiceworthy in light of some *reason* for identifying herself as this or that. And this means that there is a limit to how far a person's self-conception can be disembedded from her contingent circumstances: 'in order to make his choice after having considered the reasons he might have for doing or not doing something, the subject will have had to accept the ontological fact of his individuation. He will have had to accept that his identity is defined by his human origins rather than by pure subjective fiat' (131).

I expect that the phrase 'defined by' in that last sentence is not quite what Descombes is after. (It is not a mistranslation, though: the French phrase it translates is simply 'défini par'.) If there were a direct line to be drawn from a person's origins to the definition of her identity, then moral identity would not be subjective in *any* sense. Instead it would just be a matter of recording the circumstances of one's birth and upbringing, which could be done just as well by a third party as by the person herself. Descombes's point is rather that the definition of one's identity is not so *purely* subjective as to render the objective facts of a person's individuation normatively irrelevant, or relevant only insofar as the person chooses *ex nihilo* to regard them as such. This makes a person's origins definitive only in the limited sense that they establish the context within which the question

'Who am I?' can meaningfully be answered. But within this context there will be a way of answering this question that can only come from the subject herself, since the given facticity that *situates* her answer and renders it intelligible as an expression of personal choice does not thereby define who she is. At the very least, it seems to be part of our modern conception of the person that this is so.

This book really is a pleasure to read and think through. It is 'analytic' in the best sense: short, carefully argued, attentive to linguistic nuance without being pedantic, and largely free of obscure or technical terminology. Descombes's erudition is on display throughout as he engages creatively with texts from a range of eras, traditions, and disciplines. And Stephen Adam Schwartz, who has also translated several more of Descombes's books, renders the text in a clear and almost conversational English that seems to convey the rhythm and style of the original French. *Puzzling Identities* will not be the final word on the subjects it treats. But it deserves to help set the terms of our discussion.⁵

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