

Identity and consciousness across the life span

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Abstract

There is a close relationship between the developments of personal identity and consciousness throughout life. Underlying both is a fundamental question for each of us: Who am I? However, this relationship has mainly been studied in certain socio-cultural contexts. Moreover, previous studies that have integrated pre-personality and trans-personality as natural extensions of personal identity do not offer a critical, philosophical and humanistic analysis informed by the latest advances in neuroscience. I distinguish five basic identities: biological, social, autotelic, universal and presential. Narrative identity is characterized as the major impediment to the discovery of the other identities. The possible existence of an authentic identity beyond any identification is discussed. Parallels between motivation for action and the developments of identity and consciousness are also highlighted. It is proposed to combine the multidimensional and hierarchical perspectives in order to obtain a more realistic, integrative and logically structured view of the different individual pathways. Finally, I establish connections with lines of humanism, philosophy, psychology, and theology not usually linked to the study of identity, to offer a global and integrative vision.

Introduction

My purpose is to model the transformation that identity undergoes over time in relation to the progressive development of consciousness. The close relationship between identity and consciousness has a long tradition in the philosophical and scientific literature. For example, the relationship between public and private self-consciousness and social and personal identities respectively is well established [4]. Personal identity and consciousness have been scientifically studied by analyzing surgically divided brains [18, 55]. The importance of physical continuity to the survival of the identity has been stressed [60], and the effect of the unity of perceptual experience at a time point and across time to personal identity has also been studied [59]. However, most studies on identity and consciousness have been conducted in certain contexts of social or cultural anthropology and sociology (e.g., [5, 17, 41, 56]).

Likewise, the study of identity development across the lifespan has also been restricted to specific social and cultural contexts (e.g., [6, 21, 23, 68]), to specific stages of such development [24], or has focused on narrative identity (e.g., [9, 36, 43, 48, 49, 62]) and its capacity to construct meaning [54].

In this identity development, different authors have proposed different successive stages. Marcia's four identity stages (diffusion, foreclosure, moratorium, and achievement) are focused on exploration and commitment [33]. Erikson's well-known eight stages highlight the acquisition of the basic virtues [11]. Goffman emphasized the nature of actors of human beings as an expression of their identity in *The presentation of self in everyday life* [19], whose precedents go back to Shakespeare himself: all the world is a stage, and we all are actors and actresses upon it; But for McAdams we are actors who eventually become agents, and, finally, authors [37]. Some authors approach whether identity is transformed as a kind of ascension in which one must pass through each of the steps (see [34] p. 197).

Transpersonal identity has also been the subject of specific study [32,61,63] with diverse multidimensional analyses [31]. The distinction between prepersonal, personal and transpersonal identity has been well established [65]. Transpersonality has been studied from perspectives ranging from a structural and hierarchical model [61,63,65], to the ecologic one [15,70], passing through perspectives as the spiral dynamic perspective which focuses on deep sources of life submerged in modern societies [64], the participatory perspective [14] and based in Maturana and Varela ideas [35], and the feminist perspective [67].

What is missing, therefore, is a general study of the relationship between identity and consciousness applicable to the individual beyond the sociocultural context integrating prepersonal, personal and transpersonal stages from a critical, philosophical and humanistic analysis informed by the latest advances in neuroscience. I will distinguish five basic identities: The biological, the social, the autotelic, the universal and the presential. Narrative identity is placed inside the social identity as a stage to be overcome in the development of the individual's identity, emphasizing the contrast between narrative identity and transpersonal identities. The proposed model is integrated from a humanistic perspective supported by the increasingly universal acceptance of the techniques associated with mindfulness and the corresponding latest advances in the associated neuroscientific knowledge. I also try to highlight the parallelism that motivation for action has with developments in identity and consciousness; It is proposed to combine the multidimensional and the hierarchical perspectives to obtain a realistic view of the different individual paths. Finally, I make connections with humanism, philosophy, psychology, and theology from lines not linked to the study of identity and the transpersonal to suggest a more integrative vision of the subject.

Our personal identity determines our way of acting, our attitude towards life, our reality. It can be understood as the answer to the question that every human being can ask her/himself: Who am I? In Philosophy, the problem of personal identity has been posed in different ways according to the authors. The question has ranged from the determination of whether two persons are the same at different time points (this would be properly speaking be the problem of personal identity through time) to that of authenticity as posed by existentialism. In the first case, Noonan [42] defines it as the problem of providing an explanation of the logically necessary and sufficient conditions for a person identified at a given time to be the same person as a person identified at a different time. An example of identity as authenticity is found in Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*. The French existentialist takes as an example of an inauthentic individual a waiter immersed in his role (see [53] p. 59). The waiter is what he is not, he is alienated. This lack of authenticity is what Sartre called *bad faith*.

In this article, personal identity is defined in a sense related to the two previous ones: our personal identity as what we identify with. This, in fact, is the most widespread use of the term. When, for example, we speak of identity search or building, we are talking

about creating an identity based on elements that, while not strictly corresponding to the self, become one's own. Specifically, here the identification is of myself with something that is not really me. Disidentification results from being conscious of that it was not me. The authentic self could be the final result of carrying out all the possible disidentifications.

This circular definition of the self only underlines the fact that what we are is not defined, but the result of a continuous process, a process that is the subject of study in this article. What we identify with is closely related to what we think we are, but goes beyond that. Before we learn a language or articulate thoughts, we already experience some kind of identification in the first years of life. We are necessarily identified with something, even if we have never consciously faced the question of what we are. What reveals our actual identity are our desires, motivations, actions and, above all, what hurts us.

These identifications evolve throughout our life span, and do so as our awareness of ourselves and the world progresses. This progress occurs, for example, each time we become aware of our current identifications and the degree of consciousness is such that allows us to transcend them. Let us note that identity does not imply self-consciousness of this identity because we usually deceive ourselves: we are not able to place us at the right level when we are asked about it. They are our way of acting, our motivations and our vulnerabilities in everyday situations which reveal our main identifications.

1 Biological identity

We act by virtue of our identity. Initially, the activity we develop, especially what is due to the struggle for survival, is an obligation, a necessity. We come into the world with a previous genetic programming that serves us to *know* what we need as living beings: we feel impulses that impel us to seek what allows us to survive, desires that have not been externally induced and that constitute our biological identity. All living things seek to survive, to grow, to reproduce, and this tendency, in human beings, is prior thought and spoken language, it is inherent in their existence as living beings. We have biological identity from the moment we come into the world.

A fundamental identification in the first years of our life is the maternal one. In the first phases of existence the basic needs are covered by the mother and the power of the child is to reclaim maternal feelings. Later, this identification will be recreated in her/his adult life through other beings on whom she/he depends. Our coming into the world takes place within the mother, and, when we physically leave her, we remain enveloped in her material and emotional protection, depending on her until we are finally emancipated.

Our experiences during this period leave a well of ingrained beliefs that are difficult to get rid of. There are people scared by periods of peremptory needs and who have not awakened from those feelings. Others remain psychologically dependent on those from whom they have already emancipated themselves materially, for example, by seeking their approval. All this will be a burden on the progress of the consciousness. The feeling of need can come from a period prior the development of language, remaining engraved in the non-verbal memory. The official language of biological identity is that of impulses, desires, needs, and emotions. It does not understand complex stories such as those that can be understood in a later adult phase. It is a pre-personal identity in which there is no possible narrative. Finally, it is our biological constitution that guarantees the unity of action: We follow those impulses that prevail over the others, a

phenomenon that is increasingly better understood without resorting to the traditional concept of agent (see [10] pp. 39-40).

2 Social identity

When the person realizes that she/he is capable of surviving comfortably, she/he can transcend her/his biological identity. Her/his actions will be a means to demonstrate to her/himself and to others her/his value and potential. In other words, as a means for my social identity to grow and assert itself. That is the reason why we strive so hard, the origin of the obligation to study, work, make extraordinary merits and continually improve ourselves. To the extent that we achieve success, that we progress -which is really our objective-, we are happy; otherwise, we are unhappy.

But, how is our particular social identity shaped? Let us remember that our species is characterized by coming into the world more dependent than any other. We live on the protection of our parents during the first years of life to a greater extent than other animals. Our parents provide us with what we need and as our abilities develop they teach us how to get it for ourselves. Personal identity is defined first by reference to ancestors and parents. Our identity is not fixed by separating ourselves, but on the contrary, by including our ascendants and belongings ([40], p. 93).

While our biology has hardly changed in thousands of years, our societies have not stopped evolving. The help of parents and educators is fundamental in this continuous adaptation that each generation has to undertake. We learn to deal with a specific social environment that imposes its own conditions if we want society to provide us with what we need. This game, learned in an educational process, sometimes becomes a domestication. In any case, the individual acquires her/his social identity, whether she/he chooses it consciously or not. Biological impulses that are inappropriate in the context of society will be repressed by society. The educational process reaches its climax when the individual begins to obey. Even in cases of rebellion against society, the individual end up negotiating her/his relationship with it to the extent that biological needs cannot be satisfied individually.

It is important to see how social identity is based on biological identity. Society hits the individual where it hurts the most: in her/his biological identity. This does not mean that there is a plan orchestrated by society to submit the individual to its will. Individuals of one generation encounter norms and customs that they do not feel are their own, but which they pass on to prepare the next generation. In this way, the next generation will develop in the best possible way, even if it is in serious contradiction with its biological identity and personal preferences.

In this social stage, we move from the pre-personal to the personal stage, since from this point onwards the self can refer to itself. It is precisely this referring to oneself that constitutes the personal self (see [43], p. 90). The so-called narrative identity appears in this context: the self narrates itself as the protagonist of its own story. It is a narrative not only in the perspective of its relations with the constitution of human time, but also in its contribution to the constitution of the self (see [49] pp. 106-107).

The self narrates itself using the language provided by the culture of its society. The society transmits to the child what they think of her/him according to her/his behavior. This is where the problem begins because it is only this behavior, and not her/his intrinsic values as an individual, that society, and particularly the family, evaluate. From then on, the child looks at himself through the eyes of the other. Thus, society introduces the concept of self into the mind of the individual: The gaze of the family

placed inside the child [38]. They not only form my self-concept but also convince me that I am someone concrete, a person, an agent responsible for my actions. Thus, those on whom we depend impose their patterns or models of how we should think, feel and act. The concept of self has little to do with a true identity, since it comes from the people on whom we depend, and they see us according to their interests. The contrast between reality as I live it and these models forges the idea of myself. This idea is usually below the patterns -I am never good enough- and produces a series of goals and objectives, as compensation, which will be our ideal to reach for the rest of our life.

This is how identification, false identity or social identity arises. As a result of frustration, this arises in the child to a lesser or greater degree: from an adaptation to social norms to pathological degrees that alienate him/her from him/herself [66]. It is a defensive reaction to the mother's failure to assume the functions of care and protection, so that, the child adapts to the environment by protecting her/himself from supposed threats or even destruction. If the mother does not respond to the needs of the child, he will replace his spontaneity with a forced conformity that becomes the basis for the earliest form of false identity. At the base is the mother's inability to tune in to what is most genuine in her child. The complacent false identity reacts by wanting to grow up to be like the models imposed by society. The false identity is a mask that constantly tries to anticipate the demand of the other in to maintain the relationship, to comply with social norms, such as being polite or following external codes. All this is unconscious, and the false identity comes to be confused with the self by others and even, more worryingly, by oneself. Under the appearance of social success will appear feelings of unreality, of not really being alive, of unhappiness.

The true identity expresses the vitality of the person and will be partly or wholly hidden. Both the person and society consider the false identity as healthy and even truer than the true self. Everyone will need relationships or activities with which to connect with his or her own inner world, with his or her own spontaneity and creativity, without the demand to be integrated. Stress could be understood as the permanent vigilance of external stimuli and the consequent inability to connect with oneself. The great separation between the two identities makes the real one disappear completely, and the individual feels discomfort with himself [66].

This false identity is expressed as a character that is narrated as the protagonist of a story. The self (fictional protagonist) is the result of a narrative invented by our brain (author) [9]. In the story we tell ourselves, we struggle to transform our life from the deficient idea of it to its ideal fullness. The arbitrariness or contingency of many of our decisions is narrated by the false self as if there were a previous coherence or identity. We confer reality to the content of our story by endowing the protagonist with defined psychological traits, as would the author of a novel.

However, this fictional protagonist is real to the extent that my autobiography influences what I do -and not only what I do influences the way I narrate myself. If a self-narrator works in both directions, then the self she/he invents is not just an idle fiction, a useful abstraction for interpreting her/his behavior. The narrator's representation really does control her/his behavior to some extent [62].

This reciprocal influence is based on a feeling of fidelity in action to the character I play. The agent and the character feed back on each other. In the context of the neuropsychology of identity, Gazzaniga has found evidence that, somewhere in the left hemisphere, these interpretations of events are created, which are intended to give coherence to our actions based on the unity of the agent. The left-hemisphere interpreter was revealed during a simultaneous concept test, in which split-brain patients were presented with two pictures. The left brain weaves its story to convince itself and others that it is in full control (see [18] pp. 24-25).

We have many levels of personal narration, some public and others private [4]. Often the complexity of social life prevents the integration of the different levels to be absolute, and in each social game we play a different role. The non-consciousness of these performances are a burden in the progress of consciousness. Individuals make efforts to extract meaning from their narratives, and an actual or imagined audience for these narratives affects the degree and kind of meaning expressed [54]. According to a certain interpretation of Freudian psychoanalysis, psychological suffering would be originated, at least in part, by a personal account full of incoherence or by an inadequate narrative explanation. On the other hand, good stories are those that manage to bring the apparently unaccountable chaos of the unconscious under conscious narrative control (see [50] p. 140). In this interpretation, the subconscious would be made up of those stories that are not integrated with the main story (see [51] p. 200).

Our mind is full of stories, identifying us especially with some of them [16]. Stories are our natural habitat, what we are surrounded by and, therefore, the code with which we explain ourselves. Although the specific format of the story is transmitted by culture, there are some archetypal stories that are more in line with the innate biological project, genetically inherited; these are work plans to be developed in life that produce discomfort and frustration when they are not achieved. They constitute the framework of typical plots of novels and movies, the most hackneyed stories which are a public success. They go beyond the specific society in which they are developed, although it gives them the appropriate form to their context. Social success consists in actualizing in practice that story that we potentially carry inside us.

The narrativist paradigm has revealed the most pleasant way to compile information. We have been educated in the language of stories and tales since we were children. In teaching, a good narrative is more comprehensible to the learner, and the teacher uses it to construct stories out of what were data sets. What a narrative thread has is better assimilated. The study of narrative allows us to know ourselves and the world better: analyzing the way we deform and humanize reality can serve to restore it. If we are aware of our social identity in order to discover the part that has been acquired—which is not properly ours—, if we recognize our roles in order to transcend them, our identity will evolve.

We must sometimes use the narrative identity to get out of it, as one who uses one's dream to wake up from it. Every label we put on us, every victory and every defeat that makes our self-esteem rise and fall like a price on the stock market, should not affect my true identity. It is possible to suppose that there is a deeper, more authentic identity that is not subject to this back-and-forth [3, 34].

Why are we afraid of disidentifying ourselves from our character or social identity? Not only older people are resistant to change. People experience vertigo when many things change in their lives in a short period of time. It is much more comfortable and easier to continue to act out the same storyline than to make the effort to take control of one's own life again. We usually consider self-consistency as something positive: Being true to oneself [30]. But behind it is the fear of feeling completely lost. We prefer to eliminate what does not fit and what has to be hidden [52]. Following the plot of a play in which the main character barely evolves—or only does so according to the plot that drags her/him along—is much easier than becoming aware that we are the creators and can transcend it. It is less difficult to make decisions having assumed a role than interpreting life as an adventure for which only we are responsible.

3 Autotelic identity

Later, when the person has struggled for social success long enough, he/she realizes that he/she is chasing an illusion. Success is always relative and can be surpassed. Any activity, lived in this way, ends up exhausting you. Success is tiring because it makes us feel a provisional fulfillment that pushes us to seek new goals naturally. And continuous failure is also tiring as it is always to play the same game. Either we transcend social identity, or it may even end up destroyed along with a character who has seen the total failure of his/her project to achieve the ideals he/she set for him/herself.

Then we see that our actions can have another meaning: to express myself, while I enjoy doing. Not to look for something material, prestige, self-affirmation, but because in doing so, I am creative, I feel deeply myself, and I am an active part of the world and of life. It is the way to reveal oneself, to self-realize oneself. At that moment, the whole meaning of my activity, work, and relationship with others is transformed: we are no longer dependent on an external objective. All people need safety, love, and status from their environment. But once satiated with these elementary necessities, each person proceeds to develop in her/his own style. Development becomes more determined from within rather than from without (see [34] p. 33-34).

The proof that the narrative —of successes and failures— does not constitute our fundamental identity is that we can silence it and live without representing ourselves. If we could make silence in the conscience of my personal story, the potential stifled by the weight of my argument, of my particularity, would emerge. A potential that has always been there, hidden, covered by my personal narrative, by my urgencies and representations.

For the vast majority, the problem of personal identity only arises in some way in times of crisis. For example, when the adolescent has to look for his place in life by her/himself and becomes self-conscious. At the end of adolescence, she/he establishes a life project that is only revised when identity crises reappear. In these crises, we become adolescents again, and we use identity as a defense mechanism in the absence of meaning. And everything is usually resolved in terms of changing one character for another, one narrative tone for another, but without transcending the narrative identity.

Throughout this process of successive crises and periods of calm in between, most people do not advance beyond the first two steps: the biological and social identities. Attention is directed by genetic instructions, social conventions, and habits. And what we experience have been programmed for us, and our experience plays out the script written by biology and culture. The only way to take over of life is by directing psychic energy towards our own goals [8].

It is not surprising that most of the studies on the evolution of identity are limited to social and narrative identities [9, 36, 43, 48, 49, 54, 62]. We will have to transcend culture and society because they represent what I have received. But, to go back to the biological? First, it is very difficult to establish the boundary between what is biologically inherited and what is culturally and socially inherited. What is received from culture and society is as external as what is received from inherited biology. And secondly, we call biological identity fundamentally the destitution, the hunger, the requirement of meeting the needs to survive. But man does not live by bread alone.

In the same way that society has taken advantage of our biological identity for its own benefit, the individual himself can transcend his own biology to enjoy it himself, to put it at his disposal. This autotelic phase - a word composed of two Greek roots *auto* (for oneself) and *telos* (goal) - begins from the moment that the individual stops doing things to survive, out of mere necessity or to receive from society something in return.

From now on, she/he will seek his own satisfaction because the activity itself satisfies her/him and not only its consequences.

The paradigmatic example is play. We can take advantage of our biological nature since we are programmed to enjoy learning. Play is conducive to learning -something we, social mammals, share. Another example is the mystical experience. Here, identity ceases to be narrative. Mystical experience is ineffable, it cannot be narrated [25].

When the individual experiences her/himself directly, she/he becomes her/his own goal and stops narrating her/himself. The reality of the here and now is fully accepted, and there is no need to digest it in the form of a story that smooths things out. There is no greed or aversion or their associated emotions. Beliefs and opinions cease to be important, for one can disidentify oneself from them. Only what one can see clearly for oneself is true. Inner impulses have been replaced by a vital energy that is directly experienced. Psychic energy of autotelic individuals seems inexhaustible. They pay more attention to what happens around them without expecting an immediate return. If we only get interested in whatever will promote our welfare, we do not have much attention left over to participate in the world on its own terms, to learn new things. Autotelic persons are less concerned with themselves, and have more free psychic energy to experience life (see [8] p. 125). This should be the natural way to acquire skills, but the mediation of society imposes on the still dependent child a system of exogenous rewards and punishments which modulate her/his social identity.

The flow state is characteristic of the autotelic identity. It tends to occur when a person's capabilities are fully engaged in overcoming an attainable challenge and there is a clear set of goals that demand appropriate responses. It is characterized by the attenuation of emotions, narratives, and impulses that would be distractions to immersion in the activity. The character or social identity disappears in such a state. The autotelic identity is based on the discovery that, beyond what the natural and social environment provides me, by myself I am capable of achieving gratification in my tasks. An autotelic person needs few possessions, entertainment, comfort, power, or fame because so what he/she does is already rewarding. Because such persons experience flow, they are less dependent on the external rewards. They are more independent because they cannot be manipulated with threats or rewards. At the same time, they are more involved with everything around them (see [8] p. 119). This allows the person to be more creative, to be less dragged down by apathy or supposed need, and to have extra psychic energy to invest in matters that apparently do not produce immediate benefits.

One might think that an autotelic person could fall into a subjectivism isolated from reality, that is, once social identity has been transcended, there would be no things that would have more importance than her/himself and that would be beyond her/him. My identity should include to be oriented in moral space. Being a self should be inseparable from existing in a moral space of moral issues, being able to find one's standpoint in this space, being able to be a perspective in it [58]. And culture of self-realization could fall in an unconditioned subjectivism (see [51], p. 182). However, the autotelic being shows a greater interest in the world around her/him not only because this expresses the personal gratification obtained —which any activity generates— but also because, paradoxically, an excessive attachment to personal problems is more typical of biological and social identities. The interest of an autotelic person is not entirely contemplative. It also involves an attempt to understand. Her/his interest is disinterested, not entirely at the service of one's own agenda. If attention is free of personal goals, we have a chance of apprehending reality (see [8] pp. 127).

4 Universal identity

Once settled in autotelic consciousness, we find that activity can produce an additional benefit. Our actions, as a vehicle of joyful expression, can provide something useful to others. A sense of service arises based on my joy of doing. Universal identity thus proceeds from an enlargement of autotelic identity. As I progressively identify myself with the whole of existence, I seek both my own enjoyment and the good, help or service of others.

Now the individual is really integrated into the world. This settling in society is very different from that of social identity. The latter relied on the biological, and the universal one on the autotelic. True love of the other comes, as a natural extension, from love of self. In the West, love of neighbor is often associated with Christianity, but it is a universal experience. Being useful to others satisfies us when nothing is expected in return. Looking for reward is typical of the social identity, in which we always make a calculation of final benefits. The love that our character feels is always a consequence of what he receives or expects to receive. From the autotelic identity, love is discovered as something of its own, not something received. I never experience the love of others, I only experience my own. But we are biologically and socially designed to feel it when we receive something. To transcend this programming is to be more *me* and less the result of acquired conditioning.

At the affective level, this change implies a mastery of emotions, to stop being dominated by them. Otherwise, we fall back into biological or social programming or a discovery of myself that, however, contributes nothing to the world. Intellectually, it implies the assumption of the unity underlying diversity, the deep intuition of the unique reality behind the diversity of the world. That is what the word *universe* means. Although in a certain respect we are different things, in a deeper sense we are the same thing. And this not only with people, but with all beings. And not only life, but all that is.

The differentiation of objects responds to a pragmatic and, at least partly, subjective criterion that delimits things in order to name, conceptualize, define and manage them. It can be argued that there is a real separation of each physical object that would be determined by a stronger, continuous and prolonged interaction of its component elements than between them and the components outside the object. But this leads us to discover new units when the interactions between systems that are considered independent or separate come to light. In this way, every system is a subsystem of a larger unit and the person, in particular, is incorporated into other units that encompass and transcend it. While our representations need differentiated parts to find our bearings in the world, reality is a unit in which, although not everything interacts with everything, no element is completely isolated from the rest. Furthermore, considering the temporal dimension, there are causal chains that refer to common origins. Thus, the line that delimits where I end and the world begins is blurred.

Biological identity is prior rationality and thought and, therefore, prior the person. Thus, within a prior biological identity the person emerges and grows. It could be said that there is a pre-personal identity, which becomes personal and finally, if the subject ceases to identify with his character, transpersonal. The person would be an identity phase of our lives, a way of living in which we are educated —because society requires responsible persons for every action—, but which can be transcended.

Being a person requires adequate levels of rationality, consciousness, and identity. Identity, on the contrary, as I have defined it, requires an identification with something that is not me. This quality can be clearly seen in species capable of recognizing

themselves in the mirror, which is an identification with their image. Chimpanzees, orangutans, dolphins, and elephants can do this. An infant is not able to recognize itself until shortly before the age of two. In these examples, the levels of rationality and consciousness required to be considered persons are not reached.

On the other hand, in the great monotheist religions —Judaism, Christianity, and Islam— God manifests himself as a creative and intentional agent, speaks and indoctrinates his prophets, is conceived as a volitional being, with intentions, emotions such as anger, grief, jealousy, and other attributes characteristic of a person. Personal relationships with God are analogous to human relationships, such as paternal-filial in the case of Christianity or friendship in the case of Sufism.

However, in religions such as Buddhism, in which the self dissolves so that personal identity is an illusion, it is natural that the need to project personality onto a God, therefore dispensable, disappears. As an exponent of Catholic orthodoxy, Ratzinger (later Pope Benedict XVI) analyzed the difference between transcendental meditation and Christian meditation in terms of personal identity. For Ratzinger, transcendental meditation is depersonalizing and Christian meditation, meanwhile, is personalizing and opens to a profound union of love and not of the dissolution of the *I* [47]. However, although transpersonality is not accepted by the official doctrine of Christianity, we can read in the Gospel of St. John “I am the way, the truth, and the life” (Jn 14:6) and infer that Christ himself has attained a universal identity. For him, personal identity seems secondary, identifying himself with universal values.

Hans Küng, another of the great Christian theologians of the last decades and who polemicized with Ratzinger on several fronts, sees more parallels than differences between the figures of Jesus and Gautama (founder of Buddhism): Both do not use in their preaching a sacred language that is no longer understood (Sanskrit vs. Hebrew) but the usual language (Middle Indo-Aryan dialect vs. popular Aramaic language). They did not order consigning in writing their doctrine. Gautama and Jesus appeal to man’s reason, not with systematic considerations, but with aphorisms, small stories, parables, all easy to understand, taken directly from the real life that everyone knew, without linking their teaching to dogmas (see [27], pp. 204-205).

To conclude, let us arise the question whether universal identity is still a personal identity or whether we have already entered the realm of the transpersonal [61]. The answer can be related to the concept of agency. To the extent that I think I act, whether seeking the good of the other or not, I am an agent and therefore there is personhood. Fichte, for example, emphasizes the character of being the source of volitional activities in the concept of person [13]. In the four identities (biological, social, autotelic and universal) the person has always been motivated to act, whether for external or internal reasons.

5 Presential identity

Let us clarify that in the context of new technologies, the term *Presential Identity* has been used as opposed to *Digital Identity* adopted on the internet. This physical sense of presence is not directly related to the one I will use here.

In the previous identities, the person was motivated to act, whether for endogenous or exogenous reasons. But living settled in the universal identity, we discover that we are not the agents. It is the action that is produced in us. There are no agents that act, but elements that interact with each other following universal laws at all levels.

In the presential identity, the action seems to work because something hidden produces it. My body and mind act, but I am not them, having disidentified myself. The affirmations made about my achievements and failures now seem gratuitous, false beliefs to which I had got used. The universe simply works as it has to according to laws studied by all sciences. One comes to a transcendent consciousness that all existence is directed and mine in particular as well, and that I am a spectator of that game. When we discover that we simply witness the phenomena we do not feel being one of them, and we can live without attachments to the phenomenological [3,34].

I am neither the action nor the phenomenological, but I feel connected to what moves everything. I am not the agent, but I am all action: I witness it all. All action is caused by the same forces that govern my body and my mind. One consequence of identifying with everything is that I identify with nothing. I simply am. The whole spectacle of the phenomenological world is given in me and my ultimate identity is beyond all of it: it is an identity of subject, witness of everything.

It may seem a paradox: We have spent our life working hard, suffering and, finally, it was a lie. Existence just exists with its dynamic interactions. I was not an active part, and I did not carry the weight of my existence on my back. All this is discovered through the presential attitude: the body and mind are observed while I simply am present, transcending the phenomenological world [3].

Believers, at this point, feel that they are directed by something superior. When the believer who attains this identity writes her/his work, it will not be human but divinely inspired. The one who recognizes her/himself as a presence will not fall into inaction, but will contemplate her/his doing without doing, as the *wu wei* in Taoism says, as if pushed by an unexplained something. The belief in avatars in which a God is reincarnated, typical of Hinduism and other religions, can be seen as presential identity that bursts abruptly into personal identity.

But in order to reach this presential identity, we must first feel us as agents at all levels in the previous identities. We must have mobilized all our resources in them, those that at each level we felt as our own: from the capacity to cry as a claim to the mother to the surrender to others, curiously closing a circle. If we do not mobilize everything we do not get to see everything, we do not place ourselves beyond everything. Transcending something requires having previously made it the subject of our subjectivity and of our agency. Our nature is a continuous self-transcending, objectifying what we thought we were in order to purify the subject, to become a pure subject. This separation between agency and identity is only possible when the agent and its hidden motivations becomes translucent, visible in its fullness, without foreshortenings or perspectives.

Thus, presential identity implies seeing things as they are. The most efficient way to perceive the world is being more receptive than active, determined by what is perceived and not by the perceiver, in a detached, Taoist, passive, non-interfering awareness of all aspects of the concrete, as in the aesthetic and the mystic experiences (see [34], p. 58).

There are many traditions in the East and West of practices that serve to reinforce the presential identity. The best known takes the form of meditation and are associated with Buddhism [1], but one can find the most varied examples: In the Old Testament we read “Be still, and know that I am God” (Psalm 46:10a). Over the centuries, Christians have also explored practices that encourage a silent, listening posture before God referred to as “contemplation”, and Jesus himself periodically engaged in solitary contemplation. Dances such as tango have been suggested to enhance the ability to be present [44] and cultural practices of certain tribes also facilitate being here and now [12].

These traditions have been secularly reformulated in recent decades in the practice known as *mindfulness* [26]. Its intervention in educational and healthcare contexts has

provided reliable results. Randomized controlled trials provide evidence that mindfulness can improve mental and physical health, cognitive and affective factors, and interpersonal outcomes. Mindfulness improves the management of pain, reduce depression, and improve substance abuse outcomes [7, 22, 26, 69]. Moreover, its practice transforms the structure and function of neural networks in our brain. In particular, the structures responsible for the ruminative thinking, which supports narrative identity, are weakened compared to those that perform specific tasks associated with the here-and-now [2, 20, 57]. Mindfulness diminishes frontal gamma activity related to narrative self-reference and default mode network activity [2]. Its long-term practice contributes to the preservation of the integrity of white matter, diminishing age-related degeneration [29, 46].

Could the presential be our authentic identity beyond the biological and other identities? Undoubtedly, the human genome represents, in biochemical terms, the essence of our species, whose differentiating characteristics constitute an inescapable part of my identity. And, although we belong to a specific species that took a concrete evolutionary line, we could well have arrived here by other paths. We are the result of our ontogeny, but we are not our ontogeny. What differentiates us from the rest of creation is the freedom to build our identity.

Discussion

The whole process of identity evolution originated in the *destitution* of the human being [28, 45]. In this context, I could not defend myself from the identifications I received from the outside. Then my way of thinking and my life took directions that were a direct consequence of these limiting ideas of myself. And the corresponding feeling of dissatisfaction made me project a character who could be more or less successful, but who acted according to the plot of her/his story.

My character never stopped striving for achievements, and, to the extent that she/he did or did not achieve them, she/he was happy, elated, discouraged or irritated. It was all triggered by ideas induced by adults, who in turn received them from others. And if I found a way out, it was because I realized the taken-for-granted identifications and called them into question. Here, disidentification is the necessary path to the discovery of more authentic identities. This allows to overcome the feeling of fidelity to the narrative plot in the case of social identity.

When we reach the universal and presential phases, we feel that our identity, as it is usually lived, undergoes a radical transformation. And this happens because when our presential identity transcends the phenomenological world, we feel that we do not depend on it. To identify ourselves with everything or with nothing is a consequence of having been reduced to a mere subject without agency, that is, of the absence of identifications. This is what meditation techniques in the East and West seek: to radically transform our identity. Transpersonal psychology studies this transformation when it goes beyond the personal. Thus, for example, the absence of personal identity is one of the key points of Buddhism, where the objective is to live as a pure subject.

But in this labyrinth of identities, is it really possible to determine which are true and which are false? Does an authentic self emerge as the character disappears? Each identity can be seen as more authentic than the previous one. This would explain why we feel a greater liberation as we pass successively from one to the other, which is reflected in a greater relaxation of the mind and the body. However, it can also be argued that we are all of them at all times, although at each stage there is a greater

identification with one which indicates the stage where we are. To explain the different individual trajectories that occur in practice, it is probably necessary to combine two ideas: a) that the five proposed identities are different dimensions of a broadly understood identity and b) that there is a hierarchy or order in identity development. This would offer a more realistic and integrative view of the identity process.

Another option is that we are not really any of them, that their nature is subjective. Nevertheless, we could define an authentic identity as what we always are, what never ceases to accompany us. Thus, it seems difficult to renounce the presential identity as the lowest common denominator of any possible identity and conscious experience. Even when we come to experience pure consciousness, in which experience is reduced to the minimum from the phenomenological point of view and no trace remains of the other identities, we do not cease to be subject [39].

In any case, the human being as a social animal has a natural tendency to extend their identity to the other, and the way of living themselves will mark this extension. In this way, biological identity becomes social and autotelic identity becomes universal.

Identity is very much a question that never ends to be answered. Each answer is an identification, from which immediately arises a new question about who is the one being identified. The question and its answers are never exhausted, even if along the way we shed false identities. Maybe the identities have died... laughing upon hearing one of them say that it was the only identity.

Perhaps those who know the most about personal identity are those who are engaged in changing it, those who guide people who are dissatisfied with their current identity. Personal identity thus becomes a working tool for improving people's lives. A provisional solution is to make a better narration [54], but the more radical solution is to stop narrating ourselves or at least to stop believing the narration. In a spiritual context, teachers or gurus have been the most effective conjuror of identity. What for us is a pilgrimage of identities for them can be reduced, for example, to a laying on of hands in which we are convinced that we are children of God. As if to give them a taste of their own medicine, the crucifixion of Christ would be a mere reminder, like any physical torture, of their biological identity. To this He responds with "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing", which in the jargon of identity would be "for they do not know who they are".

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