

DO ADOLESCENTS HAVE IDENTITY? A CONCEPTUAL CRITIQUE

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Abstract: *There is an abundance of research literature on the psychology of adolescent identity in various contexts ranging from juvenile delinquency to acculturation of immigrant adolescents. Yet, despite the widespread usage of the phrase “adolescent identity”, there is a dearth of conceptual clarification of the notion. The concept came into prominence through the pioneering work of Erik Erikson. The purpose of this paper is to delve into the content of the very concept of adolescent identity as conceptualized in Erikson’s works and thereby to proffer a philosophical critique of his conception of adolescent identity.*

Keywords: *adolescence, identity, adolescent identity, erikson, history of personal identity.*

Emergence of Adolescent Identity

Erik Erikson’s works, especially his *Childhood and Society* and “The Problem of Ego Identity”, are, in one commentator’s appraisal, some of the “most important contributions of Erikson on identity formation and adolescence”. (Browning, p. xiii) Indeed, Erikson’s innovative theoretical framework for identity formation during adolescence has been elevated to the honorific status of the *Ego Identity Status Paradigm*. (Adams, p. 3) In the foreword to the first edition of *Childhood and Society*, Erikson describes his reflections on these issues and the subsequent formulation of an explanatory structure for them as “a *conceptual itinerary*.” (1963, p. 17, original emphasis) Correspondingly, what we would like to do in this essay is to trace Erikson’s conceptual itinerary in the course of his

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ruminations over the notion of adolescent identity through the prism of a conceptual critique. Inevitably, there will not be any *empirical* discussion of Erikson's ideas, whether sympathetically through the investigations of, for example, James Marcia (1966, 1976 & 1980) or critically through the studies of, for instance, David Hershenson (1967), Cote & Levine (1988), and Waterman (1988). On the basis of this conceptual perspective, the paper is consequently divided into the following three sections:

- (1) Concept of Adolescence/Adolescent;
- (2) Concept of Identity; and, finally,
- (3) Erikson's Concept of Adolescent Identity.

Concept of Adolescence/Adolescent

Patently, in the analysis of the compound concept of adolescent identity, the first port of call is to look at the notion of adolescence. Interestingly enough, in *Childhood and Society*, Erikson offers no single definitive statement as to the connotation of "adolescence" or "adolescent", and the closest that he comes to an explication of the concept is the description of an adolescent mind in terms of "a psychological stage between childhood and adulthood". (1963, p. 263) In a later work, *Identity: Youth and Crisis*, his account slightly shifts by describing adolescence as "the last stage of childhood." (p. 155) Nonetheless, against the backdrop of his overall thesis that societies provide particular processes and mechanisms which, when adopted by their constituent members, allow these individuals to cope successfully with the problems and tasks presented by each successive stage of maturational development, Erikson enunciates that the principal task of the adolescent period is the formation of an identity. (1968, pp. 235 ff.)

However, the absence of an unequivocal and independent definition of the "adolescent" component of "adolescent identity" in the preceding demarcation might invite a charge of *explanatory circularity* on the part of Erikson as well as induces suspicion about the legitimacy and propriety of the very notion of adolescence itself. Specifically, Erikson's treatment of the concept of adolescence bears the following three characteristics where each one is open to significant challenges and criticisms:

- (a) a *relational* as opposed to *sui generis* status of adolescence,
- (b) a *functional* as opposed to *definitional* characterization of adolescence, and
- (c) a *realist* as opposed to *constructivist* approach to the process of adolescence.

Starting with Erikson's realist approach to adolescence, Philippe Ariès argues that from a historical point of view the notion of adolescence is conceptually "empty".¹ (1962, p. 22) In fact, according to him, "the idea was a long time taking shape", and the concept should be properly recognized as one of the social constructs of modern industrial society. (p. 29) "In the Middle Ages," Ariès writes, at the beginning of modern times, and for a long time after that in the lower classes, children were mixed with adults as soon as they were considered capable of doing without their mothers and nannies, not long after a tardy weaning (in other words, at about the age of seven). They immediately went straight into the great community of men, sharing in the work and play of their companions, old and young alike. (p. 411)

Thus, historically speaking, Ariès claims that there was no period specifically designated by adolescence that could rightfully claim an identity of its own.

Ariès' assault on adolescence, however, has not gone unscathed. Barbara Hanawalt, for example, complains about Ariès' "simplistic and inaccurate pronouncement that adolescence did not exist in the Middle Ages." (p. 20)² She insists that the medieval era did recognize a distinct period of adolescence, and, furthermore, even if the term was not prominently present in the medieval discourse, medieval communities similarly "did not have a word for family and yet had nuclear, extended, and stem families". (p. 21) However, she goes on to admit that culture plays "a large role in shaping the adolescent experience". (p. 21) But, given the indubitable fact about the variation and mutability of cultures, she appears to commit herself unwittingly to the drastic variability and thereby possible absence of the very concept of adolescence in some cultures. Also, whether or not there is clear and sufficient historical evidence to verify the recognition of adolescence by medieval societies, one is still none-the-wiser about what constitutes adolescence.

Now, other than the questionable realist stance of Erikson about adolescence, there are two other problems that may prompt one to cast a shadow of disbelief on the notion of adolescence. First, there is a classificatory conflict between his relational and functional characterizations of adolescence. Erikson delimits adolescence relationally

¹ "Until the eighteenth century," Ariès remarks later, "adolescence was confused with childhood." (p. 25)

² The article was first published in *Journal of Family History*, 17, 1992, pp. 341-351.

in terms of a transitional phase between childhood and adulthood instead of having a *sui generis* definition and status. Yet, his functional characterization of adolescence can only work if it is grounded in some *sui generis* status of adolescence. In other words, a functional definition requires a *sui generis* as opposed to relational status, and if the function of adolescence is the formation of identity, then adolescence cannot be treated relationally as a transitional phase between childhood and adulthood. Secondly, Erikson's functional rather than definitional characterization of adolescence in terms of identity formation runs the risk of creating a *vicious circle* if one subsequently attempts to explain the notion of identity itself in terms of what is supposed to be achieved during adolescence. Indeed, in recognition of the difficulties in demarcating adolescence, Deborah Browning, as a fervent follower of Erikson herself, concedes that adolescence and adolescent are terms that are "only vaguely and ambiguously definable". (p. xi)

Concept of Identity

In the opening remark of the prologue to *Youth: Identity and Crisis*, Erikson suggests that to 'review the concept of identity means to sketch its history.' (p. 15) But, somewhat disconcertingly, he is doubly sidetracked by the concept of "identity crisis" instead of identity and confining his attention to the three decades subsequent to the World War II instead of the prolonged and chequered track record of identity in history. To remedy the remiss, the purpose of this portion of the essay is to place identity in its proper historical progression.

The issue of identity has been a perennial problem in philosophy in particular, and intellectual debates and discussions in general, since antiquity. Most people have come across the familiar epigram attributed to the enigmatic fifth century BC Greek philosopher Heraclitus that "one cannot step twice into the same river". (Plato, p. 439) The aphorism captures our recurrent encounter with nature that it is in constant flux, and the challenge set by Heraclitus is to explain how things could *change* yet, in some significant sense, continue to be the *same*.³

To highlight the paradoxical nature of identity from another perspective, Ludwig Wittgenstein once remarked: "Roughly speaking, to say of *two* things that they are identical is nonsense, and to say of *one* thing

³ In terms of his intellectual character, Heraclitus had even earned the nickname of 'The Riddler' in antiquity. (Guthrie, p. 43).

that is identical with itself is to say nothing at all.” (p. 105, original emphasis) The paradox alluded to by Wittgenstein appears to emerge from the following underlying assumption: a statement of identity asserts a *relation*. But, if that is the case, then the assumption must assert either that this relation holds between one thing and something else, or that it holds between a thing and itself. If it is the former, what it asserts must be necessarily false since nothing can be the same thing as something other than it. If it is the latter, it must be necessarily true and the most trivial of all tautologies. Yet, there are identity statements that are either false but only contingently so or true but neither trivially nor tautologically. Thus, one is left with the task of finding a way of reconciling these features of identity statements together.

Yet, to continue following the historical progression of the problem of identity, almost two millennia after Heraclitus, Thomas Hobbes reintroduced the problem in the form of an ancient puzzle about the ship of Theseus. In Plutarch’s *Parallel Lives*, it is related that the ship by which Theseus, the semi-mythical hero of ancient Athens, accomplished his rescue mission of a number of kidnapped Greek adolescents was put on public display in the central square of Athens, and as the need arose, new planks, boards, sails, ropes, etc. replaced the old, until one day none of the original parts of the ship remained. This obviously gave rise to the question: Is this *repaired* ship still the *same* ship?⁴ (Plutarch, p. 49) Hobbes, however, added a new twist to the puzzle by inviting his readers to imagine that all the old parts were preserved and eventually reassembled into a ship, like the original one. Then, the question arose: Is this *restored* ship still the *same* ship?⁵ (Hobbes, Vol. I, p. 136) The moral of the story was that if the answer to both questions were positive, in Hobbes’ words, “there would have been two ships numerically the same, which is absurd.” (Vol. I, p. 136) But, on what reasonable grounds can the answer to either question be negative?

⁴ The original text reads as follows: “The ship on which Theseus sailed with the youths and returned in safety, the thirty-oared galley, was preserved by the Athenians down to the time of Demetrius Phalereus. They took away the old timbers from time to time, and put new and sound ones in their places, so that the vessel became a standing illustration for the philosophers in the mooted question of growth, some declaring that it remained the same, others that it was not the same vessel.”

⁵ Hobbes does not make any reference to Plutarch, but, as David Wiggins notes, he no doubt found the idea in Plutarch’s work. (Wiggins, p. 92) Nonetheless, it should be said that the added twist in Hobbes’ version is not in the original text.

Before pursuing this question any further, there is an issue of conceptual clarification that needs to be addressed first as it will have an important ramification for Erikson's concept of identity. The clarification concerns the fact that there are various types of identity other than the *numerical* one to which Hobbes is making a reference in the passage. In order to forestall any possible confusion, one should first distinguish *quantitative* from *qualitative* identity: that is, *numerical* as opposed to *similarity* identity. If *X* and *Y* are numerically identical, then they are one and the same thing; while, if *X* and *Y* are qualitatively identical, then they are alike in their intrinsic properties and qualities, but it does not follow that they are numerically identical. To give an example, Charles Dodgson and Lewis Carroll⁶ are numerically identical, whereas Lewis Carroll and Euclid are qualitatively identical in virtue of each of them being a mathematician.

Numerical identity itself admits of another dichotomy: namely, *synchronic* in contrast to *diachronic* identity. If *X* and *Y* are synchronically identical, then they are numerically identical (*i.e.* one and the same thing) at any given time *t*; whereas, if *X* and *Y* are diachronically identical, then the relation of numerical identity obtains between them over time: that is, they are *stages* or *time-slices* of the same temporally-enduring object. For example, on the first day of January 1950 Eric Blair was synchronically identical with George Orwell, while Eric Blair as a toddler is diachronically identical with Eric Blair as an adolescent.

In the seventeenth century, however, John Locke added a new dimension to the question by applying the notion of identity to *individual human beings* and thereby seeking an account of what constitutes the *sameness of a self over time*: that is, quantitative or numerical diachronic identity of a self. What Locke articulated for the *first time* as the problem of *personal identity* and his own pioneering effort to elucidate the notion of personal identity have exercised remarkable influence on later students of the subject. (Bk. II, Chap. XXVII, Sect. 7) In dealing with the issue of personal identity, Locke initially canvassed two possible general sources of explication: namely, *substance* and *property*. In terms of substance, Locke suggested that one might explain the notion of personal identity either in terms of the *physical* substance of the body or the *non-physical* (immaterial)

⁶ Lewis Carroll, the author of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and *Through the Looking Glass* (1871), was the penname of Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, the Oxford don and priest.

substance of the soul. However, he rejected using the body as a criterion of personal identity on the same Heraclitean grounds that physical bodies are in constant flux and there is an inherent transience in the substance of bodies that prevents them from being the locus of sameness over time. (Bk. II, Chap. XXVII, Sect. 3-5) Similarly he dismissed souls as the bearers of personal identity on the basis that even if souls exist as non-physical entities, the possibility of their transmigration from one body to another renders the sameness of the self intractable, if not nonsensical. (Bk. II, Chap. XXVII, Sect. 6 & 15)

Thus, by a process of elimination, Locke arrives at the alternative of explicating the notion of personal identity in terms of property. Yet, Locke notes that properties can be divided into two broad categories: *physical* and *psychological*. The physical features range over body and bodily organs and the psychological ones cover mind and mental characteristics. But, again, Locke argues against physical properties as the bases for personal identity because of their ephemeral and influx nature as perceptively pointed out by Heraclitus millennia earlier. (Bk. II, Chap. XXVII, Sect. 3-5) What, therefore, remain in the Lockean eliminative process of reasoning are psychological properties. Locke himself ultimately opts for a psychological explanation of personal identity in terms of *conscious memory* as the only unique feature that belongs solely to a single individual. (Bk. II, Chap. XXVII, Sect. 9 & 17)

To conclude this section on the historical *vicissitudes* and *varieties* of identity, two caveats need to be entered. First, it should be noted that both physical and psychological theories of personal identity are *reductionist* in the sense that they attempt to reduce the notion of identity to some other notions, whether physical or psychological. But, there are dissenters like Richard Swinburne who advocate a *non-reductionist* account of personal identity. (1986) However, it has been argued, for example by Derek Parfit, that non-reductionism in personal identity seems ultimately to be ontologically committed to the existence of problematic entities like immaterial souls or *Cartesian egos*⁷ as, indeed, is the case with Swinburne's theory. (Parfit, 1987) Yet, the conceptual connections in this debate are too much of a labyrinth that can easily and straightforwardly be decided on the first approach.⁸

⁷ Referring to René Descartes' "incorporeal" thinking things as argued for in the second of his six *Meditations on First Philosophy*.

⁸ See, for example, Baillie (1993).

Secondly, in line with his realist approach to adolescence, Erikson's treatment of adolescent identity is predicated on the following fundamental assumption: namely, *realism about personal identity over time*. That is, an individual can possess adolescent identity only if the personal identity of that individual can persist over time not as a matter of convention but as a genuine occurrence in the real external world. In other words, one cannot take the concept of personal identity, and *a fortiori* adolescent identity, seriously unless one rejects an anti-realist or conventionalist attitude towards personal identity. If one questions the real persistence of a person over time as does, for example, Peter Unger, among others⁹, thereby claiming that any plausible approach to issues of personal identity over time should "treat questions of our existence and identity as being, in large measure, conventional matters,"¹⁰ then the concept of adolescent identity loses its poignancy and pertinence as presumed, for example, by Eriksonian psychologists.

Erikson's Concept of Adolescent Identity

Unlike the concept of adolescence or adolescent, Erikson adopts a more direct approach towards an explicit definition of identity. In 'The Problem of Ego Identity', he states that the term identity expresses "a mutual relation in that it connotes both a persistent sameness within oneself (selfsameness) and a persistent sharing of some kind of essential character with others." (2008, p. 224)¹¹ Less formally, when we look at personal identity we are looking at the "identity of something in the

⁹ Bruce Aune, *Metaphysics: The Elements* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985); Stephen E. Braude, *First Person Plural: Multiple Personality and the Philosophy of Mind* (London: Routledge, 1991); Bernard Gert, 'Personal Identity and the Body,' *Dialogue*, 10: 458-78, 1971; Eli Hirsch, *The Concept of Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982); Mark Johnston, 'Relativism and the Self,' in Michael Krauz (ed.), *Relativism: Interpretation and Confrontation* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989); John L. Mackie, *Problems from Locke* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976); Adam Morton, 'Why There is no Concept of a Person,' in Christopher Gill (ed.), *The Person and the Human Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990); Robert Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981); Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987); Godfrey Vesey, *Personal Identity* (London: Macmillan, 1974); and, Eddy M. Zemach, 'The Unity and Divisibility of the Self,' *International Philosophical Quarterly*, 10: 542-55, 1970.

¹⁰ Peter Unger, *Identity, Consciousness, and Value* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 66.

¹¹ The article was first published in *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, 4, 1956, pp. 56-121.

individual's core with an essential aspect of a group's inner coherence". (2008, p. 223) Thus, drawing on David Hershenson's succinct summary, Erikson's concept of identity may be characterized as the synthesis of "the attainment of (a) stability, (b) integration, and (c) recognisability (both to oneself and to others) of one's selfhood." (p. 319) On the basis of these cardinal components of identity, Erikson describes the acquisition of personal identity by adolescents thus:

[Adolescents are] primarily concerned with what they appear to be in the eyes of others as compared with what they feel they are ... The sense of ego identity, then, is the accrued confidence that the inner sameness and continuity prepared in the past are matched by the sameness and continuity of one's meaning for others ... (1963, p. 261)

Now, in terms of the classifications discussed in the previous section concerning the varieties of identity, one may categorize Erikson's concept of adolescent identity as a *psychological reductionist* theory of personal identity. It is *reductionist* since Erikson attempts to *reduce* personal identity to a number of constituents including stability, integration, and recognisability, thus ruling out a non-reductionist approach according to which personal identity is a simple, basic and unanalyzable concept. It is *psychological* because the foregoing constituents chosen by Erikson all range over psychological properties and mental attitudes that an adolescent exhibits towards his or her place in and reception by the society. Thence, by proposing a psychological reduction of personal identity, Erikson offers an account that resembles Locke's theory of personal identity, except that for Locke the constituents of personal identity consist of conscious memories.

However, one of the earliest critics of Locke in the eighteenth century, Joseph Butler, complains that Locke's account does not accord with the meanings of the terms identity and personal identity. Butler points out that identity means *sameness* and personal identity means *sameness of self over time*, but psychological theories like Locke's cannot fit the bill since such properties change and do not remain constant. As Butler puts it, "identity ... cannot subsist with diversity". (p. 330) In cases where properties can diversify, we can only talk about *similarity* but not sameness of the entities in question. Against this background, Butler then argues that there are *two* senses of identity: identity in a 'loose or popular' sense and identity in a 'strict or philosophical' sense. But, what Locke does, according to Butler, is to offer a loose or popular account of personal identity in terms of similarity instead of the required strict or

philosophical explanation of how a person can remain the same over time.

Now, it seems that Erikson's account of adolescent identity similarly falls foul of Butler's observation on the connotation of identity. Butler's objection becomes poignant when it is set against Erikson's statements such as "identity formation ... is a life-long development" and "the process of identity formation emerges as an evolving *configuration*". (2008, pp. 226 & 228, original emphasis) That is, there is actually nothing constant and same in the process of identity formation and what transpires in this endeavour is only a series of similitude. In Butler's words, Erikson is only concerned with personal identity in the loose or popular sense of that term, rather than with the strict one. Ultimately, what Erikson's account of identity formation entails is that there is no genuine continuation of sameness, and, yet paradoxically, Erikson himself insists on "a persistent sameness within oneself" as an important part of what personal identity is.

The second and more devastating criticism that Butler levels against psychological explications of personal identity like Locke's and Erikson's is that such accounts are guilty of *explanatory circularity*. The gist of his argument is thus: if personal identity is explained in terms of some psychological properties, one should bear in mind that such properties are always properties of *some person*. That is, psychological properties are not freestanding entities on shelves that can be picked up by some individual or other. Psychological properties are properties in virtue of belonging to some person or a person being conscious of them. In that case, the notion of a psychological property *assumes* or is *dependent upon* the concept of person in the first place, and as such any explanation of personal identity in terms of psychological properties begs the question of what personal identity is. A psychological property or its consciousness, in Butler's words, "is inseparable from the idea of a person". (p. 329)

In view of these conceptual difficulties, and on behalf of Erikson, one might attempt to defend his account of identity formation by drawing a distinction between *evidence* and *criterion* for personal identity. It may be argued that psychological properties are evidence for personal identity but not criteria for it. To give a metaphorical example, though a man's shadow on a garden wall is, under normal circumstances, evidence of someone standing by the garden wall, it does not mean that the shadow gives any insight into the identity of the man. The shadow obviously is not identical with the person. Similarly, although psychological properties can offer convenient means of identification for an individual, they do not

constitute the identity of the person in question. The maneuver seems to be promising, but it still leaves one in dark as to what exactly personal identity is and renders the concept, in the manner of a non-reductionist approach, somewhat inexplicable.

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