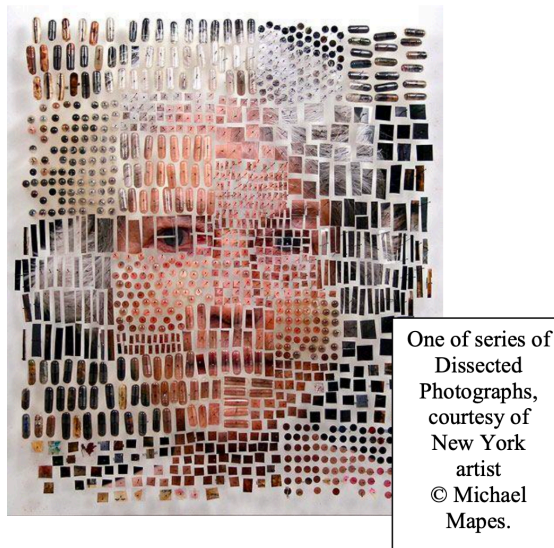


Being Assessed as a Whole Person: A Critique of Identity Politics

Penelope Corfield



Dear all, I want to be taken seriously as a whole person, assessed in the round. It's positively good to feel part of a universalist personhood. Something that is experienced in common with all fellow humans. But how is that attitude to be encouraged, whilst simultaneously acknowledging the benefits that separatist identity politics can bring?

Social groups who have been marginalised – victims of an oppressive history – obviously gain a great deal by asserting their claims to general appreciation. Black Lives Matter. Of

course they do: unequivocally and absolutely. It's a proposition that draws strength from its utter truth.

One among the many challenges of identity politics, however, is the question of definition. Who decides who is or is not aligned with which particular identity? What happens when others persistently allocate you (for example, because of your looks) with a group with whom you personally feel little or no affinity? People of mixed ethnic heritage sometimes feel doubly excluded: their skins perhaps not dark enough for a 'real' Black identity, but not pale enough for a 'real' White one. Or perhaps children of mixed marriages may physically resemble one parent, whilst emotionally identifying with the other. What chance do such individuals have of asserting their inner sense of identity, when society instantly classifies them with the parent they physically resemble?

That point highlights another related problem of definition. An individual may have – indeed most do have – many overlapping identities. In my case, I could be described (variously) as a white, middle-class, heterosexual, childless woman, living in a stable partnership; as well as a Yorkshire-born Londoner, with English, British and/or European affiliations; as well as: an older person; as tolerably well-off; as a home-owner with a pension; as a coeliac (with a chronic gluten-allergy); as a person with short sight; as a professor; as an academic historian; as a bibliophile; as a left-winger; as an agnostic, reared in a cultural tradition of secularised Protestant Dissent; as a keen swimmer; as a music fan; as an amateur gardener; as a cat-lover; as someone with a sense of humour;...as an optimist . . .

Any of those characteristics might be used to ascribe to me a cultural identity. Some of them I would warmly endorse. Others would leave me cold, as being true (childlessness) but not being at all central to my self-definition. And yet another of those terminologies would fill me with horror. I am (or so the calendar tells me) an old woman; but I emphatically don't self-identify as such.

There are clearly differences between what one might term 'objective' personal identifiers and 'subjective' ones. There are also different experiences in a person's lifetime when some affiliations might assume more importance than others. For example, a sense of patriotic resistance is likely to be strongly aroused if one's own country suddenly comes under unprovoked attack from a hostile foreign tyranny. And a sense of internationalism is conversely likely to be strengthened if one's own country is engaged in aggressive and bloody militarism against a harmless and defenceless overseas people, whose sole act of provocation lies in their happening to inhabit strategically important or resource-rich territory.

It's also important to acknowledge that people don't develop identities in a cultural void. They may be constrained by a given social role, which comes with associated character expectations which can be hard to flout. And more particularly some cultures encourage communal

solidarity by stressing conformity. They therefore discourage personal idiosyncrasies, often making it stressful for individuals to stand out from the crowds. Nonetheless, even in the most conformist cultures, people are not all the same. The differentials of age, backgrounds, wealth, health, intelligence, aptitudes, beliefs, marital histories, work experiences, and personalities (etc) leave different traces.

In other words, many people frequently develop and enjoy a range of many overlapping identities.¹ Some of these are more important at some points in a lifetime than are others. And, indeed, some identities might seem to clash with others. For example, it is sometimes assumed that all people with capital assets should always strive to gain the maximum from their investments and to pay as little tax as possible. (Tax advisers often assert that explicitly).

Yet it can equally be argued that property-owners with a civic conscience – and also acting out of enlightened self-interest – should want to pay more taxes in order to reduce inequalities, relieve poverty, reduce environmental degradation, and promote a more harmonious and just society. These are matters of judgment, clearly. Not simply a reflex response to owning property. (One complaint about so-called ‘identity politics’ is that the concept may encourage electors to vote purely for their own immediate personal benefit rather than for wider civic considerations.² But, in practice, voters have a multitude of concerns in play at any given point).

Identities are actually so intricate and simultaneously so personal that any cultural politics based upon stereotypical assumptions is offensive to the individuals involved. It’s annoying to be told what one is likely to think ‘as a woman’. It’s equally infuriating to be told that one is intrinsically and automatically a racist oppressor because of one’s light skin colour. That assertion leaves no scope for moral growth and change. White people in many societies may, for example, be initially unaware of their ethnic privileges and may share inherited prejudices about their fellow humans. Yet such views can be overturned, sometimes dramatically, sometimes gradually. To take one celebrated case: the former slave-trader-turned-abolitionist John Newton wrote movingly from personal experience, in *Amazing Grace* (1779), that he once: ‘was blind, but now I see...’³

¹The first draft of this Letter referred to ‘multiple identities’. Yet that phrase risks being confused with psychiatric disorders arising from split or ‘multiple personalities’ – a condition which can be very distressing and destructive: see e.g. R.B. Oxnam, *A Fractured Mind: My Life with Multiple Personality Disorder*, London, Fusion, 2006. Hence my preferred usage has been changed to ‘overlapping identities’.

²M. Lilla, *The Once and Future Liberal: After Identity Politics*, London, Hurst & Co., 2018; A. Stoker, *Taking Back Control: Restoring Universalism in the Age of Identity Politics*, Sydney, NSW, Centre for Independent Studies, 2019; T.B. Dyrberg, *Radical Identity Politics: Beyond Right and Left*, Newcastle upon Tyne, Cambridge Scholars, 2020.

³Words from the hymn *Amazing Grace* (written 1772; published 1779) by John Newton (1725-1807), reflecting

Furthermore, before getting back to the universalist concept of personhood, let's also acknowledge that identity politics are not just invoked these days for the purpose of warm, affirmative rectifications of historic injustice. Separating people by group classification may well provoke a serious backlash. Black Lives Matter is currently opposed by a number of far-right white supremacist groups. Interestingly (on the theme of complex identities), the all-male Proud Boys in the USA include members of mixed heritage, including the current leader who identifies as Afro-Cuban, while their collective ethos is one of aggressive pro-Western, anti-feminist and anti-socialist masculinity.⁴

Underlying these divisions, however, there remains the universalist concept of common personhood. There are communal human characteristics and communal interests. It is thus not always relevant to enquire about the detailed lifestyle and circumstances of each individual. Being a person is enough.

Such a view was expressed with clarion force in 1849 by the young author Charlotte Brontë. She first published as Currer Bell, deliberately choosing a name which concealed her gender identity. Writing to her male publisher, she urged him to forget the conventional courtesies between the sexes.⁵ Those niceties too often implied condescension from the 'superior' male to an 'inferior' female. She wanted to be judged on fair terms. So Brontë urged upon him that:

to you, I am neither Man nor Woman – I come before you as an Author only – it is the sole standard by which you have a right to judge me – the sole ground on which I accept your judgment.

It was a spirited invention from a budding novelist to an established figure in the world of publishing. Charlotte Brontë's claim thus falls within the history of personhood, and within the history of meritocracy too. And these are themes of great relevance and topicality today. Interest in individual personhood (or self) is coming up on the ropes, alongside the huge publishing boom in studies of 'identity'. Evidence can be found in debates within phi-

the personal experience of this former slave-trader turned evangelical Christian clergyman and abolitionist.

⁴https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Proud_Boys.

⁵C. Brontë, Letter dated 16 August 1849, in M. Smith (ed.), *The Letters of Charlotte Brontë, Vol. 2: 1848-51*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 235.

losophy,⁶ ethics,⁷ animal rights,⁸ theology,⁹ politics,¹⁰ psychology,¹¹ law,¹² anthropology,¹³ social welfare,¹⁴ economics,¹⁵ electoral history,¹⁶ literary studies,¹⁷ art;¹⁸ – and, by no means to be forgotten, contemporary poetry.¹⁹

Becoming vividly aware of past and present injustices – and the need for systematic redress – is certainly a necessary stage in today’s identity politics. It’s understandable that people who are stigmatised for their gender; sexuality; religion; nationality; ethnic identity; language; class position; personal disability; physical appearance; or any other quality need to express solidarity with others in like circumstances – and to get respect and contrition from the wider society. There are also hierarchies of oppression; and rival oppressions within oppression.²⁰ All those issues need to be seriously addressed. It’s also true that a countervailing mantle of universalism can be used as a smoke screen to mask sectional interests. Vigilance is always

⁶D. Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, Oxford, Clarendon, 1984; E. Sprague, *Persons and their Minds: A Philosophical Investigation*, London, Routledge, 2018.

⁷G. Stanghellini and R. Rosfort, *Emotions and Personhood: Exploring Fragility – Making Sense of Vulnerability*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013.

⁸C. Hutton, *Integrationism and the Self: Reflections on the Legal Personhood of Animals*, Hong Kong, Routledge, 2019.

⁹E.L. Graham, *Making the Difference: Gender, Personhood and Theology*, London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2016.

¹⁰F. Brugère, *La politique de l’individu*, Paris, La République des Idées, Seuil, 2013; A. Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*, Cambridge, Polity, 1991.

¹¹R. Jones, *Personhood and Social Robotics: A Psychological Consideration*, London, Routledge, 2015.

¹²J. Richardson, *Freedom, Autonomy and Privacy: Legal Personhood*, London, Routledge, 2015; W.A.J. Kurki, *A Theory of Legal Personhood*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2019; L.M. Kingston, *Fully Human: Personhood, Citizenship and Rights*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2019.

¹³L.P. Appell-Warren, *Personhood: An Examination of the History and Use of an Anthropological Concept*, Lewiston, Edwin Mellen Press, 2014.

¹⁴P. Higgs and C. Gilleard, *Personhood, Identity and Care in Advanced Old Age*, Cambridge, Polity, 2016.

¹⁵N. Makovicky, *Neoliberalism, Personhood and Postsocialism: Enterprising Selves in Changing Economies*, Farnham, Ashgate, 2014; reissued London, Routledge, 2016.

¹⁶M. Lodge and C.B. Taber, *The Rationalising Voter*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2013; L. Mechtенberg and J-R. Tyran, *Voter Motivation and the Quality of Democratic Choice*, London, Centre for Economic Policy Research, 2015.

¹⁷J.L. Gittinger, *Personhood in Science Fiction: Religious and Philosophical Considerations*, Cham, Switzerland, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.

¹⁸See review essay by M. Gafford, ‘Personhood and Art’ (August 2016) in: megangafford.com/essays/2016/8/22/personhood-and-art.

¹⁹Z. Olszewska, *The Pearl of Dari: Poetry and Personhood among Young Afghans in Iran*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2015.

²⁰Intersecting and sometimes colliding forms of oppression are these days debated under the label of intersectionality: see e.g. O. Hankivsky and J.S. Jordan-Zachery (eds), *The Palgrave Handbook of Intersectionality in Public Policy* (Basingstoke, 2019).

required.

Nevertheless it is to be hoped that, in the long run, a celebration of truly shared and egalitarian human personhood will prevail. It's possible to experience and indeed to play with a variety of overlapping identities.²¹ Yet these multiple strands fuse together to make complex individuals in the round.²²

People learn from the distillation of their many experiences (whether enjoyable or otherwise).²³ They are living histories.²⁴ Therefore, dear readers, please judge this letter as coming not from someone representing any one of the separate descriptive categories listed in paragraph four (above); but from a whole person.

²¹Richard Cobb (1917-96), the British-born fluent French speaker who became an expert historian of France, enjoyed feeling that he was a man of two cultures: see R. Cobb, *A Second Identity: Essays on France and French History* (1969).

²²Many systems of healthcare, education, therapy and spiritual counselling rightly stress the need to address the 'whole person': see e.g. T. Griffiths, *Time, Conversations and Consultations: Complexity Theory and the Whole Person* (2004); B. Taylor, *Learning for Tomorrow: Whole Person Learning for the Planetary Citizen* (Boston Spa, 2007); and J. Lynch, *A Whole Person Approach to Wellbeing: Building Sense of Safety* (2020).

²³For factors which help to consolidate a sense of personhood, see J. Martin and M.H. Bickhard (eds), *The Psychology of Personhood: Philosophical, Historical, Social- Developmental and Narrative Perspectives* (Cambridge, 2013).

²⁴For that theme (on which the author hopes to write more), see P.J. Corfield, 'All People are Living Histories: Which is Why History Matters' (2007. 2019), Pdf1 within website: <https://www.penelopejcorfield.com/history-making/why-history-matters/6.1.1>.