

EDITORIAL

Identity in Contemporary Society

JOLANTA SALDUKAITYTĖ

Department of Philosophy and Cultural Studies, Faculty of Creative Industries, Vilnius Gediminas Technical University,
Trakų St. 1, LT-01132 Vilnius
E-mail jolanta.saldukaiyte@vgtu.lt

In the first part of this essay the author indicates some of the problems of contemporary society related to how fragmentation of the social order affects and transforms self-identity. Today identity is chosen rather than given as it was in the past. Such freedom to choose who, how and where to be not only opens the possibility of unrestrained creativity but requires that the subject face new ethical and political issues.

In the second part the author introduces these themes and questions as they have been discussed by others. The problem of identity is put in the framework of space and time and approached as well with questions regarding the theory of names. Social problems of contemporary society are also discussed by using the approach proposed by Kantian philosophy. In the final essay of the present issue the question of how technology re-shapes and effects our everyday life is raised.

Keywords: identity, contemporary society, social problems, ethics

Fragmentation of the stable social order in contemporary society inevitably affects self-identity. As never was possible in the past, at least for the generality of people, we have the luxury to choose the place where to live, how to live, and with whom to live. Not only we can modify our everyday life style in these ways, as well as others, we can even choose our gender. Today a person can become somebody else. We are no longer limited to the defined roles but we can create new ones, or as Anthony Giddens expresses this: “What to do? How to act? Who to be? These are focal questions for everyone living in circumstances of late modernity – and ones which, on some level or another, all of us answer, either discursively or through day-to-day social behavior” (Giddens 1991: 70). No doubt, the possibility to go beyond given circumstances, to expand oneself into chosen possibilities, might be considered a positive opportunity: now we do not have to be artists in the narrow sense to be profoundly creative.

New possibilities, even imperatives seem to have arisen: Do not be the same, do not be boring, be creative, be different! Thinkers of the 20th century underlined and illuminated the very principle of difference, otherness, strangeness in various fields such as philosophy, ethics, politics and art by underlining different meanings and different consequences of difference. We are not going into these details here. However, it is important to notice that this new appreciation for difference not only has positive but also has rather controversial aspects as well. Emmanuel Levinas, for example, has pointed out that newness, novelty, as “modern is constituted by the consciousness of a certain definitively acquired freedom” (Levinas 2005: 124). But such freedom, he warns, permits everything, is capable of everything, not just for

better, but for worse as well. Unbounded novelty not only enables an exposure of some illusions of consciousness, as per the so-called Masters of Suspicion (Nietzsche, Freud, Marx), but as well by opening the possibility of all possibilities reveals the relativity of all values. Thus Levinas would have us consider the ethical and political impact of such thinkers as Nietzsche and Heidegger, and of some of the momentous but horrible and murderous events of the 20th century. For Levinas these already reveal a crisis of human freedom and cognition, and the doubled edged character of technology, which at first seemed so liberating. If we are enchanted by everything that is new just because it is new, we lose our sensitivity to the more important, indeed overriding differences between good and evil. Levinas, as Kant earlier, raises fundamental questions of ethics and responsibility in relation to our newfound freedom to choose.

Zygmunt Bauman also addresses many issues of contemporary society. By indicating that we live in a *light* and *liquid* modernity, Bauman is in some way – with a more flamboyant vocabulary perhaps – echoing Levinas to indicate that in contemporary society “individualization consists of transforming human ‘identity’ from a ‘given’ into a ‘task’ and charging the actors with the *responsibility* for performing that task and for the consequences (also the side-effects) of their performance” (Bauman 2000: 32–33).

So identity in contemporary society, insofar as it is no longer a given, is achieved, on one hand, by creating oneself aesthetically, chasing for something new and newer, and/or it is constructed by facing various challenges of our contemporary world by taking moral responsibility.

Addressing ethical issues and trajectories arising from creativity, questioning, and personal identity in society was already discussed in previous issues of *Filosofija, Sociologija* (2015 No. 1). In the current issue, especially under the heading *Person and Society*, such discussions continue, engaging questions of the practical, in particular, the practical in Kantian, philosophy.

The present issue begins by addressing some fundamental problems of philosophy. Under its first heading, *Metaphysical Inquiries*, one finds discussions of identity and simultaneity, the theory of names, and the metaphysics of presence. The question of identity is raised by various philosophers in the long history of philosophy, from Plato to Heidegger and up to more recent scholars. In most cases it is asked: what is identity, what is identical in identity? What is the source of identity? In the current issue, in contrast, the question of identity is approached from a different perspective: raising the question *when* and *where* is it identical? Here differences in environmental spatial and temporal characteristics are most important. Objects are considered as events, and their identity is viewed as belonging to one of four types: time and space, time, space, neither time nor space. The author in this article argues that only the latter, negative identity, can be considered as “real” identity even though *prima facie* it looks like that the first, self-identity with time and space in a positive sense, is the strictest characteristic of the real. The author invokes the example of Frege’s Morning star and Evening star as the perfect instance of real identity.

Frege appears again in the following article in this subsection. He serves as one of the most important thinkers of modern approaches in the analysis of a theory of names. Theories of names are discussed here from the approach of the analytic philosophy of language. Frege is presented as the opponent of Mill’s theory of names. He argues, against Mill, that proper names must have sense, while for Mill – so the author claims – names are names of things rather than merely of our ideas of things. The article shows that Mill’s view is taken to

be a standard one, despite the fact that the scholastic tradition has already made a strict distinction between the metaphorical and the analogical use of names. One of the main concerns of the author, then, is to discover why in the contemporary analytic philosophy of language the achievements of the scholastic philosophy of language are basically ignored.

Rather different aspects of contemporary philosophy are discussed in the last essay in this first subsection. Its author looks closely at the problem of the “metaphysics of presence” and tries to show what are similarities and differences between hermeneutics and deconstruction. The author challenges Derrida’s inclination to see Gadamer’s hermeneutics as being dependent on the epoch of the metaphysics of presence, and argues the very opposite. By showing that Gadamer’s hermeneutics is based on the “good will” to understand, and how this is closely connected with the problem of dogmatism versus the relativism of meaning, the author defends Gadamer and the position based on Husserl’s phenomenology. Because of the latter, the meaning of the understood object cannot be dissolved into relativistic interpretations. The phenomenological approach also prevents reducing the meaning to the dogmatically objective meaning and in that way also reducing it to the metaphysics of presence.

Under the subsection *Person and Society*, as has been indicated, questions of the practical philosophy are discussed. The first article proposes a fundamental frame by bringing up a certain controversy regarding Kant’s practical philosophy. The author wants to show that in his political philosophy Kant favoured evolution while in his moral philosophy was supporting a revolutionary stance. To be sure, moral revolution is described as an ideal theory of cultural progress. Moral progress, the author shows, even if it cannot come exclusively from natural or pragmatic forces, plays a significant role in human life such that nature and reason are brought closer to one another through culture. Thus the author argues that from Kant’s view cultural development should be led by moral reason. Social life, however, disturbs reason such that it is necessary to strive for ethical community.

The second article in this subsection continues discussing some ideas of Kant’s practical philosophy and applies them to an analysis of contemporary society. The authors take into consideration Kant’s a priori principles of freedom, equality, and independence. These serve as a ground for the analysis of social problems in contemporary society, with a special interest in the region of Central Europe. The authors’ main concern is rising capitalism and consumerism. The latter transforms social lives. And in the context of neoliberal capitalism the question of human dignity and human right is raised anew. The authors argue that contemporary social problems indicate that Kant’s humanistic request to see others as ends but not as means has not yet been achieved.

Technological aspects of contemporary society are discussed in the last essay of the present issue. The author looks into central aspects of everyday life and tries to understand how such life is affected by the natural sciences and technology. He makes an interesting point that although everyday life and daily routine problems cannot be ignored by scientists, nonetheless scientific discoveries in most cases have almost no effect upon everyday life. We could add here that scientific discoveries may simply not be reaching us immediately but at some later point may well indeed penetrate and significantly change our lives. Travelling by airplane, internet access, smart phones, internet shopping, antibiotics – all these, made possible by scientific discoveries and technological inventiveness, have enormously changed our everyday lives although most of us would not be able to describe the process of discovery, the technological details or the theoretical scientific underpinning. The author argues that techno-science transforms everyday life only quantitatively but not qualitatively. In view of

this, everyday life remains banal, superficial, inaccurate, without deeper reflection. Daily life is seen as an autonomous communication space, stable social-linguistic reality, retaining its identity independent of scientific and technological innovations. Techno-science expands daily knowledge and practices but the reality picture presented by techno-sciences is not an integral part of our daily worldview. And, more important, techno-sciences do not seek to educate society and transform superficial knowledge of everyday life but rather are utilized to exploit it for economic profit.

References

1. Bauman, Z. 2000. *Liquid Modernity*. Malden, MA; Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, Blackwell.
2. Giddens, A. 1991. *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
3. Levinas, E. (1947/87) 2005. *Time and the Other*. Translated by R. A. Cohen. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press.

JOLANTA SALDUKAITYTĖ

Tapatybė šiuolaikinėje visuomenėje

Santrauka

Pirmojoje *Sudarytojo žodžio* dalyje atkreipiamas dėmesys į tai, kaip socialinės tvarkos fragmentacija keičia asmens tapatybės sampratą. Tapatybė šiandien yra veikiausiai pasirinkta, o ne duotybė – kaip praeityje. Laisvė pasirinkti kuo, kaip ir kur būti atveria galimybę neribotam kūrybiškumui, taip pat kelia iššūkius naujų etinių ir politinių problemų akivaizdoje.

Antrojoje straipsnio dalyje trumpai pristatomi šiame leidinio numeryje publikuojami kitų autorių tekstai. Tapatybės problema kontekstualizuojama erdvėje ir laike, aptariama vardų teorija. Parodoma, kaip šiuolaikinės visuomenės socialinės problemos svarstomos iš I. Kanto filosofijos perspektyvos. Paskutiniame straipsnyje aptariama, kaip technologijos keičia ir transformuoja kasdienį gyvenimą.

Raktažodžiai: tapatybė, šiuolaikinė visuomenė, socialinės problemos, etika