Should Race, Gender, Culture, and Disability Define Human Identity?
By Jessica Mathis

The week before the Inauguration of then President-Elect Barrack Obama, I asked a fellow student how he felt about having the first African-American President. In his response, he posed another question regarding why people in the black community claim him, knowing that he comes from a racially diverse background.

To pose a still more general question: Why do people have to consider their race, culture, gender, and/or disability as an essential part of their identity?

One answer to this question regarding identity originates in the philosophical ideas of Plato. According to Plato’s Republic, personal identity is defined by the relationship of three parts within the soul. In his discussion of the relationship between the city and soul, Plato presents arguments that the soul is divided into three main parts: (1) the rational part, which is the part of the soul that is used to think, (2) the spirited part which is used to fight in times of war and (3) the appetitive part of the soul, which likes to indulge in the consumption of food and materials that bring pleasure and comfort.

According to Plato, a person’s identity would be determined by the part of the soul which tended to dominate the other two parts. Using this mode of categorizing, the need for the concepts of race, culture, gender, and disability (which are usually a basis for defining personal identity today) would be totally eliminated. Instead of using factors a person has no freedom in choosing (like what race or what physical gender one happen to be), one would be judged on what type of soul a person has chosen to be.

If one were to look at American society, one can see that the use of gender, race, culture, and disabilities as personal identity markers has caused a great deal of oppression and privilege in the society. In this context, “oppression” is defined as any grievance or discrimination suffered by a person or group of people due to differences beyond one’s control and not intentionally chosen. By the same token, a “privilege” is some advantage given based on differences which were not gained by personal merit or work or by any other factor chosen by the individual.

In thinking about identity, one needs to examine one’s life in the following ways. First, humans should ask the question: Have I suffered or dealt with any negative experiences due to differences I have not chosen? Secondly people ought to wonder: Have I profited from differences I never chose?

For example, a woman walks into a building while a man opens the door for her because society has made the act of opening a door an acceptable norm used to suggest that a man is polite. Naturally, today’s society allows women to open the door for themselves, but when some women see a man walking by, they will still expect the man to open the door for them. In this context, the act of having the door opened is a privilege based on a certain idea of identity given to women because they are women. On the other hand, if men open the door for women all the time, then this same act of politeness can be seen as a form of oppression because men come to assume women are in need of assistance and cannot open the door for themselves. In both cases, the concept of identity involved is not chosen by either the man or the woman, but rather given by culture and biology.

Once a person asks themselves these kinds of questions, they will begin to see that everyone within the human race has experienced both oppression and privilege in their lives. If society looks at it from this perspective, then it would lead one to ask -- Is there more to Plato’s idea of identity and sameness or is the whole concept of identity simply made up?

According to Plato’s theory of the three-part soul, everyone has these “same” three parts.
According to Plato, if two people are the “same”, it means they allow the same part of the soul (for example, the “appetitive” part) to dominate the other two parts (the rational and spirited parts in this case). Thus, we are all the same or alike based on which part of the soul people allow to dominate. For example, if an able-bodied person and a person with a disability have the rational part of their souls controlling the other two parts, then their differences would not matter with respect to personhood and personal identity.

These two people would be classified in the same group because they have the same intellectual and community goals in mind. But it is also dangerous to assume that all people are the same. If one assumes that all people are the same, then a person can not acknowledge differences. “Differences” are frequently used to identify what makes people unique. For example, if a child is born into a Spanish-speaking culture, is the Spanish identity that naturally comes by growing up in the Spanish language one that is chosen or forced by circumstance? This form of identity appears not to be chosen, yet the child will end up describing herself or himself by his origins in language and geography. In the United States this identity will to some degree determine how successful he or she is. But the term, “I” in this sense is being used to describe someone’s physical and cultural qualities.

According to modern identity theory, a person is defined by the mental, physical, and material events that make up a person’s environment. In this way, modern identity theory tends to define people by what they have acquired through experience and their physical characteristics inherited through nature instead of defining people by what they have learned internally in the soul.

Why do people consider race, gender, culture, and/or disability as a central defining element of a person’s identity? One reason presumably is because such features mark differences which we presuppose make us unique. Unfortunately it is those differences that also divide us as humans and limit the freedom to see our sameness. Identity becomes a problem when the human race uses those differences to make various groups of people feel that such unchosen differences are wrong in some way. When the human race can focus more on our sameness than our differences, then we will all be free.

**Other Thoughts on Identity**

The Beatles exist apart from my Self. I am not really Beatle George. Beatle George is like a suit or shirt that I once wore on occasion and until the end of my life people may see that shirt and mistake it for me.

–George Harrison

The only way we'll get freedom for ourselves is to identify ourselves with every oppressed people in the world. We are blood brothers to the people of Brazil, Venezuela, Haiti, Cuba – yes Cuba too.

–Malcolm X

Dear, dear! How queer everything is to-day! And yesterday things went on just as usual. I wonder if I've been changed in the night? Let me think: was I the same when I got up this morning? I almost think I can remember feeling a little different. But if I'm not the same, the next question is, Who in the world am I? Ah, that's the great puzzle!

–Lewis Caroll

Self depends on consciousness, not on substance. Self is that conscious thinking thing,--whatever substance made up of--which is sensible or conscious of pleasure and pain, capable of happiness or misery, and so is concerned for itself, as far as that consciousness extends...upon separation of this little finger, should this consciousness go along with the little finger, and leave the rest of the body, it is evident the little finger would be the person, the same person; and self then would have nothing to do with the rest of the body.  —John Locke

We are nothing but a bundle of, or a collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement.  —Hume

‘The doer’ is merely a fiction added to the deed– the deed is everything.

–Nietzsche

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