Identities and Reasons (Comment on T.M. Scanlon's 'Ideas of Identity and their Normative Status')

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Tim Scanlon's lecture discusses what kind of reasons one's 'identity' may give rise to. It also discusses the 'politics of identity' and its relation to matters of justice, as these currently appear in the United States. The topics are connected of course. I agree with what Scanlon says about the contemporary political issues, especially in the section on 'Identity Politics.' However in this comment I want to address the abstract philosophical question, about identity and reasons.

It seems to me that in virtue of his entirely understandable interest in the contemporary American political scene, Scanlon largely ignores what have, historically, been the most important identity-based reasons. The identity these involve is not that of falling under a socially perceived category – race, gender, immigrant status etc – which, for reasons stemming from collective injustice, has become a ground of solidarity. In those cases, the question is whether and how appeals to the relevant category-based identity go materially beyond appeals to injustice and the need for collective action to rectify it. We can ask whether appeals to *identity*, in those cases, are independently reason-giving, or whether the appeal to identity only serves to focus attention on the reasons of injustice that provide the real reasons for action. The latter view seems to me correct. True, a social category can become a subjectively experienced 'identity' and source of solidarity for those who fall under it, when they suffer similar mistreatment *because* they fall under it. In Marx's terms, a 'class in itself' becomes a 'class for itself.' But whether or not that happens, it is the mistreatment which should be remedied.

In contrast, the forms of identity I have in mind are the identity and consequent responsibilities conferred by a person's relationships to others, and the identity of belonging to a social whole, such as a lineage, tribe or nation, to which one is thought to have obligations. These forms of identity have been important in ethical life. They are the forms of identity that are traditionally prominent in communitarian ways of thinking. (Fichte and Hegel belong in this tradition; pivotal terms like 'identity', 'recognition', 'at-homeness in the other' come from them.) The reasons to which these forms of identity give rise, or are thought to give rise, stem from special relationships that one has to particular others, or from one's obligation to a social whole to which one belongs. Now especially in the second area, ethical ideas are presently contested and uncertain. The main reason for the uncertainty is that these putative reasons, that arise from belonging, are in conflict with various dominant forms of ethical individualism. We shall come back to this; but first I turn to Scanlon's discussion.

Accepting that identities can yield good reasons for action, Scanlon makes it his aim to 'investigate how and why this can be so, and in particular to investigate the variety of ways in which this can be so'. A suggestion that emerges in the discussion is that whether an identity gives one a reason for action depends on whether there is reason to accept that identity. Scanlon does not propose it in its full breadth, so to speak, but I think it is illuminating to consider it in that way. Call it the *prior reasons thesis.* If identity-based reasons are always dependent on prior reasons then (since the chain of justification is finite) they cannot be ultimate. Nothing about your identity can give you an *ultimate* reason. Insofar as an identity or role comes with associated expectations, those expectations will have normative force only if good grounds can be given for adopting the identity or role.

So, for example, the mere fact that I belong to a Mafia family in itself gives me no reason to follow the code of the Mafioso. The fact of birth alone does not force the Mafioso identity on me; it is open to me to ask whether there is good reason to adopt it. In contrast no

doubt, my Mafioso father may insist that I *have* been born to a Mafia family, with the code of honour of such families, and that my obligation to the family is to live up to that code, irrespective of my personal preferences. For him, my family identity is an ultimate reason. If that is what he says, he speaks for a powerful traditional view of family.

Now, without defending the Mafia, I want to put some pressure on the prior reasons thesis. The question is whether any form of identity which gives rise to reasons must be an identity which it is 'normatively open' to me to accept or reject, depending on my assessment of reasons to accept or reject it.

So, to start from a very stock example, suppose I have a choice between rescuing my mother from a shipwreck or a blaze, and rescuing another person. Is not the fact that I am *her son* in and of itself a specific reason to rescue her? Does this reason have to be derived from other reasons? On the face of it, it makes no sense even to ask about reasons to 'accept' or 'reject' the identity of *being her son*. However this is perhaps not obvious. Suppose, though I know that she is my biological mother, I also know that she abandoned me at birth, that as a result we hardly know each other etc. Doesn't it make sense, in those circumstances, to ask whether I should adopt the identity 'her son'? Couldn't I answer in the negative? 'I don't think of myself as her son,' I might say.

But another view finds this response evasive, or self-deluding. Even in the described circumstances the brute fact that I *am* her son gives me *a* reason – though one much weaker than the overall reason I would have if in fact she had spent time, feeling and effort bringing me up, as a result of which we were emotionally close. I cannot deny that there is force in this view. To take it is not, I think, to recommend 'bad faith' (Scanlon, p. 2, p. 5).

Next, suppose I am a successful asylum seeker, established in Britain having fled some oppressive regime. Out of the blue, the son of a cousin turns up on my doorstep seeking support. Of course there may be agent-neutral reasons to aid anyone in that situation

who requests aid. But should I regard the family relationship itself, which of course I did not choose, as a reason to provide help? Could I not say 'I'm sorry, but I no longer think of myself as a refugee, with an extended family in *** – I'm trying to lead a new life'. Someone from the same culture might answer 'I'm sorry, too, but how you think of yourself is not really the point. The fact is that you *are* a member of the family, and that itself gives you responsibilities'.

Again, suppose an activist involved in dissident action during the period of Polish military rule in the 1980s comes to Jerzy, a Pole and successful London banker, who was not born in Poland and has never lived there, and asks for financial help for his cause. Is it enough for Jerzy to say that he has never thought of himself as a Pole, has specific charitable interests in Africa, to which he in fact contributes a great deal, and that, though of course he wishes Polish dissidents well, the political fight in Poland is outside his sphere of interest? The dissident might say: whether or not you think of yourself as a Pole is not really the main issue. The point is that you *are* a Pole, with Polish ancestors on both sides going back generations. *Your* country, the land of *your* ancestors, now needs *your* help in its fight for freedom.

Such appeals can sound bullying, as in the familiar Kitchener poster from the Great War, in which Kitchener points a commanding finger over the slogan 'Your country needs you'. They are the stock-in-trade of family-and-nation conservatives, and there is a temptation to reply with a resounding 'So what?' But we should set rebellious feelings aside, and stick to the prior philosophical question. The question is whether the sheer fact of identity – being her son, belonging to this family, being a Pole – can ever, in and of itself, constitute an ultimate (underived) reason. If it can, then appeal to it against someone's reluctance to get involved is appropriate. It is not necessarily bullying.

With these points in mind, I turn to Scanlon's example on p. 20. 'I am in an airport in a foreign country and some problem arises because, say, our fight has been cancelled'. I could help another of the stranded passengers, and the question is whether the fact that I share an identity with one of them could give me a specific reason to help that one.

The identities Scanlon considers are those of being black, a woman, and an American. There may be, as he indicates, specific reasons to help someone falling under any of these categories, reasons turning on the fact that they fall under it. However, the reasons Scanlon mentions do not arise from the fact I and the other *share* the identity. *That* fact, Scanlon suggests, is not a specific reason, in and of itself, to aid the other. He adds that he is unsure about these cases, and in general unsure 'what is the range of identities, X, such that the fact that someone is, like me, an X, gives me a special reason to help that person?' (p.21).

I agree that in Scanlon's example the category-based identities of being black, or a woman or American, do not satisfy X. This does not show, of course, that they do not do so in other cases. But given the generality of the question, we should also consider other forms of identity. Consider the identity of relationship. 'Being her son' is an example. I take it that if your mother is one of the passengers there is indeed specific reason to help her, as against a random other. In the asylum-seeker example above, the appeal my cousin's son makes to me is also an appeal to the identity constituted by relationship.

Could we say the same about being an American? Is this actually a relationship-identity as against a category-identity? In other words, is Americans' relationship to other Americans, *as* fellow-Americans, an ethically significant relationship that gives each American reason to help another American? It would take substantial discussion to give anything like a general answer to this question. Still, cases come to mind in which the relationship-based identity may seem to give specific reason to help. Suppose two natural disasters occur in one of which, but not the other, Americans are injured. Is there not a case

for Americans to devote greater efforts of rescue to the disaster in which Americans are involved? Even more generally, is there not a case for Americans to devote specific resources, through taxes, specifically to the support of Americans who are suffering from poor health? Reasons for support in these cases would presumably arise not from a merely category-based identity but from an identity of relationship expressed, for example, in the phrase 'fellow American.'

Category-based identity and relationship-based identity are not in practice sharply distinct: we noted that a 'class-in-itself' can become a 'class-for-itself.' One purpose of 'identity politics' may be to encourage that to happen – to convert a merely common category to self-conscious identity of relationship. And we must take into account a form of identity that is neither identity through category nor identity through relationship – identity through membership of a social whole. Just as a common category can shift towards identity of relationship, so identity of relationship can shift towards 'holistic identity', the identity involved in belonging to a whole.

Consider patriotism. It is not, at least directly, about obligations to your fellow nationals. Directly, it is about obligations to your nation ('Your country needs you'). It would be peculiar to say that Scanlon has a specific *patriotic* duty to help fellow Americans stranded at the airport. Yet it is, at least, not so peculiar to say that helping to ensure security for all one's fellow citizens (or fellow nationals, where state does not correspond to nation) is a patriotic duty. The dissident's appeal to Jerzy is clearly a patriotic appeal: not to a duty that Jerzy has to some particular group of dissidents, but to an alleged duty he has as a Pole to Poland. As with the young Mafioso and his family, it is an appeal to something, in this case a fact of belonging, that Jerzy never chose and does not seek.

A holistic ethics takes it that certain social wholes constitute normatively ultimate ends to their members – 'ethical substances' in Hegel's term,[1] to which they have ultimate obligations, whether or not they choose to have them: the family, the nation. In saying this it infringes the individualist conviction that ultimate ends and rights reside exclusively in individuals. Another kind of individualism holds that if a relationship, whether to other individuals, or as a member to a whole, is ethically significant, in that it generates reasons, then whether to accept or adopt it must be the individual's choice. Since many of us share these individualist convictions we find it hard to engage with holism (or with identities that are based on relationships that are just given). But holism has not gone away. The son of a Mafioso family may feel that, just because of that unchosen identity, he has an obligation to try to reform his family rather than going off to be a lawyer in Milan. Jerzy the Polish banker may feel that there is a reason to help the dissidents in their fight for a free Poland because he is, after all, a Pole. A Briton may feel an obligation to apologise for some of the things done by the British Empire, or more precisely, to campaign (as a Briton) for *Britain* to apologise. These are putative reasons that stem from unchosen belonging to a social whole. Whether or not they really are reasons is a substantive ethical debate, which has been important in public life in the past, and may become important again.

At one point, Scanlon makes a useful distinction –

> By a reason here, I mean not just a consideration that it would make sense for me to act on, but one that counts in favor of an action in a way that one would be mistaken simply to ignore. P. 20

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[1] *The Philosophy of Right*, §146. Compare 'Patriotism … is that disposition which, in the normal conditions and circumstances of life, habitually knows that the community is the substantial basis and end…' (§268, Remark).

The question at stake is whether reasons of relationship, and even more strikingly, reasons stemming from one's membership of a whole, are reasons 'that one would be mistaken simply to ignore' – whether or not one was inclined, as a matter of fact, to accept them. There is a temptation to say that it makes sense to act on them if one feels like it, and makes sense not to act on them if one does not feel like it. But that is an individualist gambit, which (for example) the Mafia father would treat with disdain. It makes these putative reasons matters of preference, and thus not, as such, *reasons*. This simply presupposes that individualism about reasons (the reasons it would be mistaken to ignore) is correct.

Following Tim's example, I should say that I am not sure what to think about these questions. Perhaps one good thing about bringing notions of identity to bear on questions about what constitutes a reason for action is the uncertainty it reveals (which I suspect is widespread). It make one think about reasons in a way that tests the boundaries of a too taken for granted individualism. In doing this I have been very much helped by Scanlon's customary lucidity and penetration. I am most grateful to him.