

**identity and populism *begone!***  
**the role of philosophy in healing a shattered and divided world**

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**abstract**

Populism and tribalism are increasingly prevalent characteristics of so-called democratic societies. In this paper, I shall explore some of the reasons for this trend, including conceptual confusions about the nature of identity and the collectivist/individualist dichotomy; the decline of legitimate media outlets and their replacement by social media and their attendant narratives which have little regard for truth telling, consistency or moral norms; and the failure of voters to uphold their responsibilities as democratic citizens. I shall argue that while populism presupposes a formal democratic framework, it is actually incompatible with and, accordingly, a genuine threat to, democracy. I shall propose an epistemological and ethical framework based on the unifying concept of *personhood* which overrides the various tribes, groups, collectives and associations with which we *identify*, and which are, mistakenly, taken to constitute our actual *identities*. I shall also juxtapose notions of *narrative* and *dialogue* to suggest ways in which tribalism and polarization can be challenged. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the most effective form of challenge is prevention, which underscores the importance of teaching children, from a young age, to be *powerful thinkers*. Powerful thinking is not merely an important educational tool; it is key to *becoming persons* who are self-aware, aware of others like them, and mutually aware of the world itself. Our identities as persons may be regarded as preconditions for asking and responding to what I call “the Big Questions” (including “How should I live?” “What are my responsibilities and obligations to others?”, and “How can I contribute to making the world a better place?”). It is here that philosophy for children and the community of inquiry have important roles to play.

**keywords:** populism, identity, democracy, person, narrative, dialogue, powerful thinking.

**identidade e populismo, *fora!***  
**o papel da filosofia na restauração de um mundo fragmentado e dividido**

**resumo**

Populismo e tribalismo são, cada vez mais, características predominantes das assim chamadas sociedades democráticas. Neste artigo, pretendo explorar algumas das razões deste aumento, incluindo confusões conceituais acerca da natureza da identidade e a dicotomia coletivista/individualista; o declínio dos canais midiáticos legítimos e sua substituição pelas mídias sociais e suas narrativas pouco preocupadas com uma consistência, com normas morais ou com a afirmação da verdade; e o fracasso dos eleitores em sustentar suas responsabilidades como cidadãos de uma democracia. Pretendo demonstrar que enquanto o populismo pressupõe uma estrutura democrática formal, na verdade ele é incompatível com – e na verdade representa uma genuína ameaça para – a democracia. Pretendo propor uma estrutura ética e epistemológica

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baseada na unificação do conceito de *personalidade*, que substitua as variadas tribos, grupos, coletivos e associações com as quais nós nos *identificamos*, e que são, erroneamente, tomadas como constituintes de nossas *identidades*. Pretendo ainda justapor as noções de *narrativa* e de *diálogo* para propor caminhos em que tribalismo e polarização possam ser contestados. Talvez não surpreendentemente, a melhor forma de fazer essa contestação seja a prevenção, ressaltando a importância de ensinar as crianças, desde cedo, a serem *potentes pensadoras*. Um pensamento potente não é meramente uma importante ferramenta educacional; é a chave para *tornarem-se pessoas* que são autoconscientes, conscientes sobre os outros como elas e mutuamente conscientes do próprio mundo. Nossas identidades como pessoas podem ser consideradas as condições prévias para que possamos perguntar e responder o que chamo de "as Grandes Questões" (incluindo "Como devo viver?", "Quais são minhas responsabilidades e obrigações para com os outros?" e "Como posso contribuir para fazer do mundo um lugar melhor?"). E é aí que a filosofia para crianças e a comunidade de investigação têm papéis importantes a desempenhar.

**palavras-chave:** populismo, identidade, democracia, pessoa, narrativa, diálogo, pensamento potente.

### **¡identidad y populismo, fuera! el papel de la filosofía en restaurar un mundo destrozado y dividido**

#### **resumen**

El populismo y el tribalismo son características cada vez más prevalecientes de las llamadas sociedades democráticas. En este artículo, exploraré algunas de las razones de esta tendencia, incluidas las confusiones conceptuales sobre la naturaleza de la identidad y la dicotomía colectivista/individualista; el declive de los medios de comunicación legítimos y su reemplazo por las redes sociales y sus narrativas concomitantes que tienen poco respeto por la verdad, la coherencia o las normas morales; y el fracaso de los votantes para defender sus responsabilidades como ciudadanos democráticos. Argumentaré que si bien el populismo presupone un marco democrático formal, en realidad es incompatible con y, en consecuencia, una amenaza genuina para la democracia. Propondré un marco epistemológico y ético basado en el concepto unificador de *personalidad* que prevalece sobre las diversas tribos, grupos, colectivos y asociaciones con los que nos *identificamos* y que, erróneamente, se considera que constituyen nuestras *identidades*. También voy a yuxtaponer las nociones de *narrativa* y *diálogo* para sugerir formas en que se puede desafiar el tribalismo y la polarización. Tal vez no sea sorprendente que la forma más efectiva de desafío sea la prevención, que subraya la importancia de enseñar a los niños, desde una edad temprana, a ser *potentes pensadores*. El pensamiento poderoso no es meramente una herramienta educativa importante; es clave para *tornarse personas* conscientes de sí mismas, conscientes de otras personas y mutuamente conscientes del propio mundo. Nuestras identidades como personas pueden ser consideradas como condiciones previas para preguntar y responder a lo que yo llamo "las Grandes Preguntas" (incluyendo "¿Cómo debo vivir?", "¿cuáles son mis responsabilidades y obligaciones para con los demás?", Y "¿cómo puedo contribuir para hacer del mundo un lugar mejor?"). Es aquí donde la filosofía para los niños y la comunidad de investigación tienen roles importantes que desempeñar.

**palabras clave:** populismo; identidad; democracia; persona; narrativa; diálogo; pensamiento poderoso.

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*introduction: problems with populism and democracy*

Many social and media commentators are agreed that we are living in a time of social, political and cultural discord and division whose impact is being felt in different ways. In recent years we have witnessed the rise of right-wing extremism, as one fragment of a more pervasive populism that has challenged the political *status quo*. Examples are the USA and a number of countries in Western Europe. And if we extend our frame of reference beyond the Western democratic paradigm, we find a growing number of countries now being run by populist governments – more precisely, by government leaders who are, themselves, demagogues. Moreover, this is not just a Right-wing phenomenon: China and Russia are also governed by demagogues although it is more difficult to know what is going on there precisely because the lack of a democratic framework, with a relatively free press makes reliable communication impossible.

In democratic countries, a common populist thread is widespread voter dissatisfaction with the government of the day. Many who voted for Donald Trump in 2016, and elsewhere before and since, declared that they simply wanted a change and they believed that certain individuals (who happen to be very effective communicators at large rallies and through social media) would bring about such change. They believed what these individuals were telling them, not just because it matched their own life-stories, but because of their visceral hatred for the “other side” which represented the forces of globalism and “big business”. Populism runs on strong feelings rather than actual knowledge.

Rather than offer a strict definition of “populism”, I propose the following ingredients as more-or-less necessary and jointly sufficient:

- A voting system (however flawed) in which the most “popular” candidate wins; populism does not exist in dictatorships or one-party systems, because the voices of the populace carry little political weight there;

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- The suppression of deliberative thought by appeal to emotion rather than established norms of truthfulness and logic. This helps to explain such puzzling phenomena as people voting against their own interests or for a candidate whose declared views are judged according to their subjective appeal (“We like what he/she is promising to do, and don’t care if what he/she is saying is untrue or wildly unrealistic”);
- Symbols ( a person, nation, totem) on which to focus in a positive sense (e.g. a populist leader, a flag, a swastika) or a negative sense (the government, taxes, existing politicians, the educated “elite”, minority groups);
- A focus, by populist candidates and their supporters, on a range of issues in regard to which they see themselves as victims and specified others as perpetrators (thereby maintaining a powerful “us and them” mentality).

Taken together, these ingredients may be viewed in *narrative* terms, where the appeal of the narrative in question is both largely symbolic, yet deeply emotive and personal, i.e. the narrative speaks directly to and involves *real people* and their concerns. Like most literary narratives, *truth* and *truthfulness* are less important than *connection* and *meaning* when it comes to what many find appealing. The power of the narrative is amplified when it is reinforced by the individuals involved – they constitute an “echo chamber” for their own views – as well as by powerful media outlets (including corporate and social media).<sup>2</sup>

The first ingredient listed above has both historical and contemporary resonance – the “democratic” election of Adolph Hitler and his Nazi party in 1933 stands as a classic example – but the remaining ingredients – most particularly the second – confirm that democracy and populism are actually *incompatible* because, in return for giving people the right to vote, democracy requires from prospective voters both the capacity and the willingness to *think for themselves and to accept norms of rationality and respect*. Succumbing to the alluring power of populist narrative reflects the negation of one or both of these. Here, in short, is the major

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<sup>2</sup> The “echo-chamber” phenomenon characterizes the critics, as well as the followers, of populist ideologies. Most people associate and identify with those of like mind – or like feeling – when it comes to political and social issues.

shortcoming of populism in the political arena: it masks as a form of democracy but is actually deeply undemocratic.

The strong emotions associated with populism reinforce a *tribalism* whereby individuals define themselves in terms of specific group memberships (whether based on geography, class, ethnicity, religion, race, gender, sexuality or culture), and see those outside these groups as not just *other*, but as *the enemy*, indeed – often as a result of manipulation by populist leaders – as *non-persons* (or, as some commentators have suggested, as persons who do not deserve to be treated as persons; see Schechtman 2014, Chapter 5). Within the tribe, empathetic bonds are strong, but they stop at the tribal boundaries. In the contemporary context of right-wing populism, the dominant narrative – e.g. that the causal origins of the middle-class poverty experienced by many citizens are migration, anti-white discrimination and government interference, rather than a corporate culture which puts profits ahead of people – is not easily displaced.

There is no simple causal explanation behind the rise of populism in our time. Relevant factors include: the growing “wealth gap” in many countries, the decline of organised religion and concurrent fears about moral relativism, media concentration, the growing influence of social media which encourages superficiality at the cost of deep thought and the expression of diverse viewpoints, and the dominance of managerial and commercial interests in education which distract students and teachers from their proper mission. Unsurprisingly, populist and extremist leaders have little interest in ensuring that *all* citizens receive a *good* education.

Populism involves various kinds of tribalism or group-think which often reinforce one another through both social and corporate media. In the USA and much of Europe, there is considerable overlap among those who support a particular political ideology and those who follow one particular religious, ethnic, sexual or racial brand – hence, the stereotype of the white, Christian, heterosexual male who occupies center stage in many populist contexts. My first response to this trend is to invoke what I call “The Principle of Personal Worth” (“PPW”), which asserts that *persons – of which you, I and numerous others are examples – are*

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*more important, valuable and worthy, morally speaking, than non-persons.* PPW compels us to re-examine or recalibrate some basic ideas in the moral and social domains. We need to regard ourselves, first and foremost, as *persons* who live *among other persons* in the world. We need to free ourselves from the confused idea that our identities and moral framework emanate from our membership of such collectives as nations, religions, ethnicities and cultures. But what, precisely, is the distinction between persons and non-persons assumed by PPW and why should we accept PPW?

### *the principle of personal worth (ppw)*

I am assuming that all those (who are capable of) reading this are persons; in particular, they are *human* persons (there may be non-human persons). As for non-persons, these are all around us, e.g. most non-human creatures (and perhaps some human ones as well), along with mountains and rivers, bottles and smart phones. However, my concern here is with those constructs which are, in some sense, constituted by, but “larger than” persons. Think, again, of nations, religions, ethnicities and races, gender and sexuality groups, tribes, clans, cults, cultures, gangs, and other associations, collectives and institutions. PPW rejects the idea that these collective entities possess a moral status that is superior to that of the persons which constitute them. According to this popular but mistaken idea, nation states are morally superior to individual citizens, and tribes, gangs and even cultures are morally superior to their individual members.<sup>3</sup> Such a “collectivist” mentality is often held up against a strongly “individualist” or “neo-liberal” one whereby each person regards his/her own interests and well-being as morally superior to those of everyone else. Fortunately, these two extremes are not the only possibilities, as we shall see.

PPW offers clear guidance on several contentious issues. In Australia, same-sex marriage legislation was passed in 2017, but the issue of religious *versus*

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<sup>3</sup> The following comment illustrates this point: “In some ways, terrorism is an outgrowth of collectivism taken to its extreme. For collectivist-oriented individuals, the group (e.g. family, nation, religion) takes precedence over the individual... the terrorist becomes fused with the group he represents, so much so that he is willing to sacrifice his own life to advance the group’s agenda and purposes.” (Schwartz, 2005, p. 304).

individual freedom remains a political football. PPW exposes such concepts as *religious freedom* when its defenders are more concerned with safe-guarding institutional “rights” over the rights of individuals, especially when those individuals are relatively powerless (e.g. children and members of sexual/gender minorities). The same point holds with respect to such socio-historical entities as cultures and traditions in general. The child who asks why he or she must conform to a particular practice or tradition should not be satisfied with being told that “This is what we do; it’s part of our culture”. This factual response does not serve to *justify* why individuals must continue to conform. While this looks like the distinction between past and future practice (what was *versus* what will be), it more accurately reflects the distinction between what *is*, factually speaking, and what *should be*, morally speaking, made famous by David Hume some 300 years ago.

PPW helps us to respond to recent incarnations of the so-called “culture wars” or “clash of civilizations”. The writer Douglas Murray, in his book *The Strange Death of Europe: Immigration, Identity, Islam*, laments what he sees as the loss (“death”) of European culture due to the recent surge of refugees and asylum seekers from the Middle East and North Africa, many of whom happen to be Muslims. There is little doubt that large-scale immigration changes the cultural environment of the host society; indeed, the US and Australia (among other countries), with their history of migration from many parts of the world, are living testaments to such change, as well as to the many mutual benefits it has wrought. It is quite legitimate for a government, on behalf of its citizens, to insist on certain legal requirements for those who wish to live there, but the law, like morality, should be directed primarily at individuals and their behaviour, not at (all members of) specific cultures, religions, races or ethnicities. In responding to Murray’s concerns about the death of European culture, it is morally dubious to suggest that preserving a culture is more important than saving individual lives.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The cultural oppression of individuals crosses party and political lines, as indicated by the following comment, referring to repressive rules and regulations in urban areas: “What Republicans want to do with I.C.E. and border walls, wealthy progressive Democrats are doing with zoning and Nimbyism. Preserving ‘local character,’ maintaining ‘local control,’ keeping housing scarce and inaccessible – the goals of both sides are really the same: to keep people out.”

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In any case, what constitutes *preservation* of a culture, as opposed to merely *changing* it? As we explore such issues, we begin to realize that collectivist concepts such as *culture* are not at all well-defined, and that attempts to characterise ourselves (persons) as essentially *culturally embedded* can lead to an overly fragile and impoverished understanding of *who* we really are.

One further example of a violation of PPW, which has exacerbated much of the current political climate in the USA, is the passing, by the Supreme Court in 2010, of the “Citizens United vs Federal Election Commission” law which states that “Political spending is a form of protected speech under the First Amendment, and the government may not keep corporations or unions from spending money to support or denounce individual candidates in elections.” In short, corporations are persons for the purpose of making contributions to political parties. However, this makes a mockery of the very concept of a person and has given a few wealthy and partisan donors enormous power when it comes to supporting particular parties.

These examples illustrate a widespread tendency to *inflate* the moral significance of such collectives and institutions in relation to those individuals who constitute them. The Principle of Personal Worth serves as a reminder that moral norms and judgments are, first and foremost, about the well-being of actual persons.

Why should we accept PPW? It is difficult to deny when comparing persons with such objects as rocks and insects (which is why we refer to the latter as “objects” in the first place). But how do we compare the moral value or worth of persons with that of the groups and institutions to which they belong? To understand the special status of persons, we need to identify those characteristics or *qualities* which are unique to them. When it comes to *human* persons, science tells us that human brains have evolved to be larger and more complex than the brains of non-humans (including, at least so far, computers). The difficulty, as many philosophers have pointed out, is that it remains unclear how such scientific facts bear on morality. How does the possession of bigger brains yield the

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(Manjoo, 2019) In response, many readers lay the blame at the feet of the ultra-wealthy, regardless of their political leanings.



conclusion that persons are morally more valuable than non-persons? One clue here is that we human persons have the ability to ask and deliberate on such moral questions as “Why should I do this?” or even “Are persons more valuable than non-persons?” In short, we possess such qualities as *reflectivity*, *rationality* and *agency*. As the philosopher Charles Taylor puts it, “...rationality imposes obligations on us. Because we have this status which is incomparably higher than anything else in nature, we have the obligation to live up to it.” (1989, p. 365) and, we might add, the moral rights associated with it. This ability, in turn, is linked to several others which may or may not be distinctively human but are, I contend, distinctive of persons: most notably, our linguistic abilities and our capacity for self-awareness. In short, we bestow a moral value on beings with these characteristics that is above and beyond that attached to those which lack them.<sup>5</sup>

Implicit in the discussion so far is the idea that persons are those beings which possess rationality, self-awareness, agency, language and moral sensibility. This idea resonates with both our ordinary beliefs about persons and (most) mainstream philosophical conceptions of personhood. Moreover, these qualities apply, first and foremost, to *individual* persons and, only derivatively (if at all), to such artefacts and constructs as nations, religions, corporations and cultures. But as signalled earlier, the following question arises: Does rejecting the idea that individuals are morally subservient to, or dependent on, collectives and cultures, compel us to retreat to a libertarian or “free-market” view of persons as *self-serving individuals* (in the tradition of Ayn Rand, Milton Friedman and others)? Not at all, for a viable third option is available, based on the idea that *personhood* is a *relational* concept: the qualities that each of us possesses as persons, while readily applicable to individuals – myself and others – make sense only when they are conceived in relational terms. Once we accept the intuitive assumption that each of us has self-

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<sup>5</sup> I make this point somewhat warily, bearing in mind the ongoing struggle of those with disabilities – including intellectual and emotional ones – to be regarded, and treated, with *respect*, that is, as complete persons. Marya Schechtman has appealed to such examples – specifically, individuals with dementia or living in a permanent vegetative state – to defend a conception of persons in terms of having “a characteristic kind of life” which connects our own lives with the lives of others, not necessarily in symmetric terms. Accordingly, grandpa, who may no longer function as a rational agent, is still a person because he remains connected to other persons through the love, affection and memories they have of him (Schechtman, 2014).

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awareness, for example, it can be argued that underpinning this assumption is a conceptual framework in which I am also aware of other persons (and they are aware of me) and of objects in the world.<sup>6</sup> Such radically anti-Cartesian thinking has been particularly prominent in analytic philosophy, but it also resonates with writers from other traditions, including pragmatism, post-modernism and feminist philosophy. On the other hand, I contend that writers in these other traditions – as in the social sciences generally – have failed to grasp what analytic philosophy has established in relation to the concept of *identity*, and this failure has serious implications for how we define personhood and the role that persons play in the world.

### *getting to the heart of the problem: what is identity?*

In the normal course of our lives, we are embedded in, and move in and out of, various groups, collectives and institutions, some of which are voluntary and some not. This unsurprising claim has led to the idea that our very existence or *identity* is, somehow, associated with these larger entities. To examine this idea, we need to look more closely at the concept of identity, for it turns out to be a major culprit when it comes to thinking about our associations with such entities. As we shall see, there is an important ambiguity or equivocation in this concept which requires clarification.

In the social sciences and media, it is generally accepted that our identities are determined by those collectives and institutions with which we *identify* – specifically, our nation, our religion, our culture and, for some, our tribe, clan or gang, etc. The concept of identity involved here is one of sameness in the sense of *similarity*. You and I are similar in so far as we have the *same* nationality, religion, etc. Identity for individuals is regarded as a by-product of the identity of such groups (see, for example, Isin and Wood, 1999, p. 19; Hall, 1992, p. 277; Weedon, 2004, p. 1; Appiah, 2005, p. 65). Notice that there is no single or overriding sense of sameness here; it depends on which group, or groups, we find most salient. For

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<sup>6</sup> The triangular framework of self-awareness, awareness of others like me, and awareness of objects in the world has been proposed by Donald Davidson (e.g. Davidson 2001). For a detailed articulation and defence of this and related ideas, see Splitter, L. (2015). *Identity and Personhood: Confusions and Clarifications across Disciplines*. Singapore: Springer.

this reason, some writers have defended the idea that we each have *multiple* or *plural* identities, and that by specifying more and more of these identifications, we get closer to specifying our complete *identities* (Sen 2006, 20). However, there is good reason for thinking that defining strict or literal identity in this way is completely wrong-headed. When I identify with others on the basis of nationality, ethnicity, skin colour, religion, culture, etc. – what we call “qualitative identification” because it brings together distinct individuals who share common properties or *qualities* – I highlight ways in which I am *similar* to them. However, my actual identity – intuitively, what makes me *me* as opposed to someone else, and answers the question “Who am I?” – is not a matter of similarity but of *difference* or *uniqueness*. Here, surely, we are interested in what *distinguishes* me from others and, in particular, from other persons/human beings. Where similarity yields *qualitative* identity, uniqueness and distinctiveness yield *quantitative* or strict identity, a concept that borrows from logic and mathematics, and has been virtually ignored in the social sciences. Moreover, qualitative identity and difference *depend upon* quantitative identity, because qualitative change and sameness depend upon the continued existence – read *quantitative* identity – of objects, including persons, over *time*. Some examples will help make this important point clear.

I show you an old (very old!) photo of my grade 3 primary school class and invite you to identify *me*. Even though you will inevitably utilize qualitative features to do so – no simple task given the many changes that have taken place in the interim (slim to chubby, wavy hair to almost none...) – the actual identification in question is *not* qualitative (to what group do I belong) but quantitative (where am I in the photo). The task is not to identify someone who is *similar to* or *like* me, but to identify someone who *is* (strictly identical to) me. If this seems unnecessarily abstruse or pedantic, consider that when we intuitively say that we have changed over time, or that I am no longer the same person that I was (qualitatively speaking), the very coherence of such claims depends upon the *persistence of a single individual which undergoes change*. After all, if the child in the

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photo is not actually me, what is the relevance of picking *him* out? This illustrates the point that qualitative change *depends upon* quantitative identity.

Two more examples are especially pertinent. Over the last several years, more people have been forced from their homes and even their countries than at any time since the aftermath of World War II. Whatever the reasons and wherever the blame, it is difficult for most of us to imagine the upheaval and anguish that refugees and asylum seekers experience. Many perish in transit or are herded into detention camps or countries at least as repressive as those from which they fled in the first place; some manage to establish new lives for themselves and their families, often at great cost, both financially and emotionally. Doubtless everyone who does survive such a transition has a *story* (or narrative) to tell, a story in which they and those close to them are the chief characters. These stories may speak of enormous *qualitative* change and upheaval, but the stories and the changes make sense only because the individuals concerned retain their own *quantitative* identities. They are the very same people who left one environment and now find themselves in another. No amount of qualitative difference can alter this fact.

A very different kind of example is that of gender reassignment. Once again, it is difficult to imagine a more drastic qualitative change than that of gender; yet, as before, those who undergo such procedures could, if they so choose, tell their own stories which may well extend back in time to their very earliest years. And those stories will chiefly be about *them* – males who became female or *vice versa*. In a recent podcast from the USA, a transgender woman reported having to assure her mother that her son – as he originally was – did not die. “It’s still *me*, mom”. Indeed, it is!<sup>7</sup>

One thorny topic in this context, which connects back to tribalism and populism, is the phenomenon of *identity politics*, whereby individuals favour those groups, collectives and associations with which they particularly identify. I do not question the desire, perhaps even the need, to identify in this way, although we do well to remember that identification with one group imposes a barrier between

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<sup>7</sup> National Public Radio podcast: “Fresh air weekend”, March 1, 2018.

that group and others. More importantly, I have tried to demonstrate that identifying in this way is *not* an assertion of one's *actual identity*, which is quantitative, not qualitative. Quantitative identity is guaranteed to each and every individual object from the moment it comes into existence until the moment it ceases to exist. Combining this point with the PPW moves me to conclude that in social, cultural and political contexts, it is time to relegate nationhood, religion, ethnicity, culture and so on, to the sidelines, thereby bringing to centre-stage what we have in common with others, namely our being persons.

The consequences of assuming – as everyone outside the domains of logic and analytic philosophy seems to do – that our actual identities are purely qualitative, are serious and far-reaching. After all, if our very identities are given by those collectives and institutions with which we identify, then we are affected by – indeed, infected with – all the fragmentation, impermanence, conflict and brittleness (terms taken directly from the social sciences literature) that are part and parcel of our shifting and unstable relationships with those collectives (Varghese *et al* 2009; Becker *et al* 2017; Hall 1992) . We cannot think of ourselves as unified subjects of knowledge and experience; indeed, it is but a short step to concluding – as many postmodernists have done – that there is *no self* to support the common-sense idea that we have self-awareness, awareness of other persons, and awareness of a world that we share. Worse still, the key idea that we persons can have genuine knowledge of the world and can justifiably distinguish truth from falsehood collapses. Such an alarming and repugnant conclusion is, of course, very much in evidence today, with some populist leaders warning their followers about the dangers of “fake news” even as they both generate it themselves and reject the legitimate findings of scientific experts. These conclusions are the inevitable consequence of assuming that our identities as knowing subjects are given by our qualitative connections with those groups and associations that are, on all accounts, impermanent, brittle, conflictual and unstable.

### *a brief dip into the philosophy of language*

Confusing qualitative and quantitative identity is the result of a logical error to do with the conceptual relationship between the subject of experience (i.e. each person), which has its own unique quantitative identity, and the experiences themselves, which are expressed in qualitative or predicative terms. I have offered several illustrations of this relationship, notably, when we say, quite legitimately and unambiguously, that an individual person can undergo significant qualitative change *while remaining the same person*. There is nothing strange or counter-intuitive about this situation, *unless* you persist with the idea that our identities are purely qualitative, in which case the person and his/her identity remain mysterious, elusive and obscure.

Underpinning the intuitive idea that persons – as well as non-persons – remain numerically identical over time is the semantic notion of an identity *criterion*. In practice, we use a variety of qualitative features to re-identify others, but *that* there is something which persists through time points to some kind of criterion, or semantic marker, which makes such persistence possible. In our own case, philosophers have long disagreed on the question of just what kind of criterion is appropriate (one based on our physical bodies, or our minds or memories, the lives that persons characteristically lead? etc.). I am attracted to the idea that as *human* persons, the identity criterion which supports our continuing identities from birth (if not before) until death (if not later) is grounded in our *physical* constitutions, although just what concept most accurately fits here – *human being? animal? living creature or organism?* – is a matter of contention. Further, if we are prepared to countenance the possibility of *non-human* persons – perhaps some primates, aliens, computers, robots.... – then the identity criterion which best fits in such cases might be quite different. In short, while being a person – and, thereby, being *one among others* – is central to all aspects of my awareness and moral sense, it does not pinpoint the *kind* of entity that I am, where “kind” in this context supports an appropriate criterion of identity.

It could be pointed out that the specification of a term – called a “sortal”, following John Locke who was one of the first to appreciate the idea that as persons we have numerical or strict identities – which yields an appropriate

identity criterion for persons is, itself, *qualitative*. However, such a qualitative specification provides both less and more than those specifications typically of interest in the social sciences (nationality, religion, ethnicity, culture, etc.). *Less* because being identified as a human being, say – and not an artefact or rock – is taken for granted in the social sciences; it merely marks out the domain of those things in which we are interested. *More* because the term “human being” necessarily applies to an object throughout its existence; part of what we mean by asserting that this term is a sortal is our understanding that its ceasing to apply to an object entails that the object no longer exists.

Furthermore, while specifying an appropriate sortal is necessary when it comes to assertions of numerical identity – for example, “I am the same person as the child in the photo taken 50 years ago”, or “I am not the same person as XX” – it is not sufficient. After all, merely knowing that the individuals referred to in these two examples are human beings falls short of knowing *which* human beings they are. This knowledge is not strictly *qualitative* because it involves one or more *referential* acts which cannot be understood in purely qualitative or predicative terms. While in practice, we often use such terms to identify objects (“the person with blond hair, wearing a blue jacket and carrying an umbrella...”), the act of referring to something in the world requires us to *single it out* in relation to our own situation or position; as in “*this* or *that* person”, “the person *over there*”, or “*my* mother”, etc. In terms used by David Wiggins (2001), each individual we can refer to and describe is a *this-such*, where “*this*” connotes the act of reference (picking something out) and “*such*” the predicative or qualitative concept (sortal) which allows us to pick out an object of a particular kind.

The “*this-such*” conception of identity for spatio-temporal entities in our experience can be elaborated in various ways. In the case of persons, it is based on the idea that each person is and sees her/himself as *one among others*. In so far as we characterize personhood in narrative terms – where our own narratives are intertwined with those of others – these narratives reflect our relationships with other persons and objects in *both* referential or spatio-temporal terms, *and* qualitatively in terms of the *kind* of entity we have in mind. I am the eldest son of

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two specific individuals with their own identities, spatio-temporal pathways and relationships. The same may be said of other items in my life experience, including my various places of residence and employment, objects of sentimental value (motor cars, pets...) and, of course, other persons. Again, it is worth emphasising that the referential – also known as *deictic* – dimensions of each person's existence and identity are crucial components of our own narratives, because they confirm that we are grounded in the real world and not merely figments of narrative imagination.

### *identity and "the big questions"*

Several philosophers – most notably, Charles Taylor (1989) and Alasdair MacIntyre (2007)– have written that searching for one's identity – i.e. for an answer to the question "Who am I?" – except in such anomalous cases as amnesia or schizophrenia, is fulfilling a quest to find one's moral compass or direction. More precisely, it is a quest or project designed to answer such questions as "What do I stand for?", "How should I live?" "What are my responsibilities and obligations to others?", and "How can I contribute to making the world a better place?". I call these "The Big Questions"; they are the very kinds of questions that philosophers – including children! – ask! They are also the kinds of questions that all members of society should explore if they are to lay claim to democratic citizenship. However, these writers, like most scholars and commentators writing about identity, appear to express this quest in purely qualitative terms, whereby the answers to the Big Questions reside in those groups, collections and institutions – nation, religion, ethnicity, culture... – that provide those associations which are important to us. This brings us full circle back to a distorted view of the importance of such groups and provides unwarranted support for various versions of *moral relativism* which allows political and religious leaders to "hide behind" their group "identities" in defence of views and policies which are questionable, to say the least. It also precludes the likelihood of cultivating real *dialogue* which requires those with quite different perspectives, beliefs and values to come together in an attempt to forge a common understanding and make some



progress toward a resolution of these differences. Genuine dialogue, like morality itself, is a relationship among *persons*, first and foremost.<sup>8</sup>

In summary, qualitative identity, while highlighting those associations and groups that are important to us, does not define *who* we are; quantitative or literal identity, on the other hand, does pinpoint each individual's unique existence, but provides nothing of any substance about what each of us stands for or holds dear. However, we should not construe our identities – whether quantitative or qualitative – as providing *answers* to the Big Questions; rather, we may take our identities (as persons) as *qualifying* us to address them. This is just another way of saying that as persons, we have both the capacity and the motivation to ask the Big Questions and to explore them *with others*. The last part of the preceding sentence is crucial: as persons, we are not bound in unthinking homage to groups and institutions, but neither are we mere individuals whose thoughts arise from within that mysterious mental entity called “the mind” and are purely self-serving. We are conjoined with other persons; each person is *one among others* – not just other persons, but other things in the world. I recently returned from a year as a visiting scholar in Japan, where I came to understand and appreciate the universal practice of *bowing*, not just to one another, but to objects such as blackboards (in the case of teachers) and swimming pools (in the case of competitive swimmers). Here is a simple, but eloquent, acknowledgement of our relationships with other persons and the world itself which are part and parcel of being a person in the first place. While we are all embedded in networks of such relationships, these networks are endlessly flexible and changeable, and do not impose the constraints and boundaries usually associated with such collectives and institutions as religions, cultures and the like. In this respect, seeing ourselves as persons is truly *liberating*.

### ***two final points: cosmopolitanism and becoming a person***

First, I am not espousing the kind of *cosmopolitan* view of the world which holds that we are all part of a single large collective: the world or cosmos. This

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<sup>8</sup> Both Taylor and MacIntyre extolled the virtues of dialogue, notwithstanding having held what I am claiming to be questionable views about the nature of identity.

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becomes just another form of “group-think” or collectivism in so far as it downplays the importance of the relationships each person has with others. By all means, we should reach out to and empathise with those who are very different from ourselves, whether geographically, culturally, or in socio-economic terms. However, empathy, care and compassion are relations among persons, and should not be abstracted to the general level of the collective. Granted, we cannot realistically reach out to *every* other person in the world; granted, also, we naturally form stronger emotional attachments to some people over others. Nevertheless, PPW proclaims that every person is valuable and worthy of respect and compassion, and that is the starting point for whatever theory of morality we find most satisfying.

Secondly, we humans are not born into the world as persons, because we lack the crucial characteristics of personhood, specifically: language, awareness of self and others, and a moral sense. Establishing the truth of this claim is beyond the reach of this paper, and I am well-aware that it is open to challenge on several counts. I will simply note here that the old “Cartesian” view of the self, in which knowledge of one’s own mind and mental states is prior to all other forms of knowledge has, itself, been challenged by philosophers, psychologists, linguists and neuro-scientists over the past several hundred years. The alternative to which I alluded earlier is that the conceptual apparatus which constitutes thought – including cognitive states such as belief, desire and intention – requires that each person is part of a network of communication with others, i.e. other persons. On this view, young children’s development of a sense of self, an awareness of the world, and an awareness of others who are more or less like them, are closely intertwined, both conceptually and in fact.

To reiterate an earlier point, our individual identities (i.e. our literal, quantitative identities) are in place from the first moment of our existence until the last – however these points in time are defined. Becoming a person is not about forming an identity, but it is about forming the realization that each of us is *one among others* and, in due course, must face up to the Big Questions. We undertake the process of “becoming persons” in our earliest relations with others – parents,

family, friends, and so on. However, few children can develop this process beyond a certain basic level without careful guidance, and in the company of – or, at least, with an *awareness* of – diverse others (i.e. others who are qualitatively different in many ways). Both cognitive (intellectual) and emotional factors are involved here, although I will, in this context, underscore the importance of teaching children to be “powerful thinkers”, which I take to be a key aim of P4C. Powerful thinkers ask powerful (insightful, probing) questions and regard what is conveyed to them with a healthy degree of scepticism; they engage in dialogue with others (which involves listening as well as talking), and they show themselves to be equally willing to express and reflect on their own views *and* to be persuaded by the views of others. Powerful thinkers are ideal citizens in a *democracy* because democracy imposes responsibilities as well as guaranteeing rights. Chief among these responsibilities is the disposition to *think for oneself*, which includes actively seeking out diverse and contrary views. This disposition needs to be in place early to accommodate the worst effects of tribalism and echo-chamber narratives.

Philosophy for children has long been portrayed as a form of democratic education, in terms of both its structure and its goals. But it is more accurate to highlight the pedagogic environment known as “community of inquiry”, which is woven into the fabric of philosophy for children, when it comes to identifying the key elements of a democratic education. This, in large part, is because the community of inquiry cultivates *powerful thinking* in those who are immersed in it. Powerful thinking is both necessary and sufficient for transforming mere narrative into dialogue. It is not that there is no place for constructing our lives in narrative terms, where the meaning-making that comes with the informal and anecdotal reporting of our life experiences – with or without a commitment to truth, logical consistency or even moral norms – is what matters; indeed, it is important for students to feel that their lives are *connected* with what is going on in the classroom. Still, there are times and situations when something more is required, when we are called to account for what we say and do, and when matters of *judgment* are at stake. Judgment and accountability call for powerful thinking which, as I have indicated, cannot be realistically expected if it has not been properly taught.

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Unlike narrative, dialogue is essentially *conflictual*, in that it relies upon a certain *tension* or sense of *puzzlement*. A good model of how narrative and dialogue can be combined to stimulate what I call “powerful thinking” may be found in the dialogical narratives written by Lipman and, more recently, many others. Where narrative invites readers to relate to (“identify with”) the contingent or causal circumstances and lives of the characters in the novel, dialogue – when it is woven into the narrative – provides the stimulus for *inquiry*, characterized by Lipman as *self-correcting practice*. It is worth asking, if somewhat rhetorically, how much of the damage wrought by populism, tribalism and demagoguery would be dissipated if people everywhere, and from a young age, accompanied their most vehemently-held beliefs and attitudes with the quiet realization that they might just be mistaken!

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