

A digression on identity

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Abstract

A differentiation is made between emotional identity, based on polysemic thought, and identity organised by the principle of identity and by that of non-contradiction. Here identity consists of recognising that "I am I" and "I am not the other person". The differentiation is then suggested between knowledge, typical of the unconscious mode of being, and recognition, which organises identity and the relation with the other person: recognising and being recognised.

Key words: identity; recognition; desire; polysemia

Emotional identity

The beginning of the Gospel according to St. John: «In principio erat Verbum, et Verbum erat apud Deum et Deus erat Verbum».

In the beginning¹ there was the word, the polysemic word.

'In principio', from *princeps*, which means taking the first (place), starting. But starting is the beginning, a time without time, like the seven days of the biblical creation. We are in an absence of time, therefore in a mode of thinking where there is no time, there is no negation, where necessity replaces the tempo of conscious thought. We are dealing with emotional continuity, which knows no spatial or temporal relations, and which tries not to differentiate but to make everything equal and indivisible.

The (polysemic) word was with God.

With as in contiguity (metonymy) or similarity (metaphor), with the power to emotionally fuse things that are nearby or similar, making the two things the same thing.

The word was with God and God was the word.

The polysemic word acquires totipotence and "becomes" God.

In the beginning there is knowledge: the word. Which word?

I².

I as emotional knowledge, totipotent and polysemic. I am. I can. I, I, I and....others, as Blasetti said in the title of one of his last films, in 1966.

I is polysemic, and therefore emotional, knowledge. In the logic of the unconscious system, I can be everything, it can be God. Divine totipotence allows every kind of transformation of I, up to the indivisible homogeneous infinite.

IO was a young maiden of Argus, loved by Zeus. A priestess of the Argivan Hera, she went to the shores of lake Lerna (known for the Lernaean Hydra, the many headed sea snake that Heracles

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¹ In Italian "in principio".

² In Italian "io".

killed in his second labor) as she had been ordered in a dream. There she coupled with Zeus who transformed her into a heifer so that she could escape from the revenge of Hera, wife of Zeus and the goddess to whom IO had sworn obedience. Hera, however, knew the metamorphosis and therefore entrusted IO, in the form of a heifer, to the custody of Argus, the giant with a hundred eyes. Hermes, sent by Zeus, freed IO by using a magic wand to make Argus fall asleep and also close his fifty ever vigilant eyes; Argus slept by closing only half his many eyes. But the persecution by Hera was not over. After being stung by a horsefly sent by Hera, IO in her animal form galloped over most of Europe and Asia, in the grip of a fury that condemned her to run without ever stopping. In her travels IO gave rise to many myths: her name was given to a sea in Magna Grecia, the Ionian sea; reflecting her passage, the name of Bosphorus was given to the strait separating (or joining?) Europe and Asia: Bosphorus in fact means the passage of the heifer. IO would stop in Egypt, where back in human form, she would give birth to the son conceived with Zeus: Epaphus, who then ruled Egypt and at his death, took on the form of the god Apis, an Egyptian divinity depicted in the form of a bull. IO was fought over by the divine couple, Zeus and Hera. For IO was with God. The legend of IO starts with a dream, which the young priestess “must” obey. Legend can be confused with dream: a totipotent event, a sort of *spazio anzi*³ in which categorical aspects are mixed up and offer their original ambiguity: IO is God, Zeus; she is mixed with God in a generative embrace. The mother Hera, excluded from the fusion between the maiden and the god, sends IO mad, in the form of a heifer, a sacred animal associated with fertility. Yet another madness, like that of Oedipus, like the endless other madneses that result from confusion. A madness that condemns her to a frantic race, to movement without an aim or destination. It is metamorphosis. And it is the metamorphosis of IO into an uncontrollable animal that grounds this senseless show of “animalish” strength, wild and pointless, a sort of unrestrained frenzy resulting from the mixing of IO with God. But as Galasso (1988) says, we are still in the time of reversible metamorphosis, like that of Prometheus liberated by Heracles. IO “awakens” from the dream in Egypt, where she gives birth to a baby.

Here we are dealing with the confused omnipotent identity that fuses with God, who can do all in a sort of fusion between childlike state, sexuality, generativity, madness, persecution, without space and without time. It is the continuity expressed by the heifer’s mad race through all known lands, in a wandering that recalls that of Europe, but also of Heracles and many heroes of mythology. Senseless, aimless movement represents very well the homogeneous and indivisible mode of being that Matte Blanco talks about, where there is no possibility of establishing relations, where all differences are absorbed in a process of homogenisation, of deconstructing every relationship and therefore every identity that stands for difference.

This component of identity is important because it motivates the exploration of the world. This exploration would not be possible in a mind capable only of relating, of measuring, of highlighting conveniences and inconveniences. But the unconscious mode alone would not allow life, it would not be able to plan attempts to adapt to the contextual reality. For the mind’s unconscious mode of being the context does not exist, reality is assimilated to the totipotent dream, everything is possible because there are no events, because every act is equated to its opposite, annulling itself. We are dealing with an emotional dynamic, which lays the foundation for identity, but at the same time, disorganises it in polysemic indivisibility.

Identity as recognition

The principle of identity, along with that of non contradiction, grounds the logic of asymmetrical thought, which is dividing and heterogenic; the identity principle says that A is A. For the principle of non contradiction, A is different from B.

I am I.

I am not the “other”.

In the *Gospel* according to St John, instead: I am God, I am all, because the other does not exist insofar as it is the same as I, therefore it is I. In totipotence there is no relation because the relationship calls for a limit and a discontinuity: the limit that is recognised when one distinguishes

³ It is defined by Carli as a transition space of confusion within the emotional categorization [reviser’s note].

oneself from the other. If we look at the mind's unconscious mode of being, emotional identity concerns only "I".

By contrast, the identity we are talking about entails thinking about "I", therefore a recognition of "I". Recognition of it as "I".

Identity emerges from recognising myself as myself.

Identity as in recognition, as in thinking about cognition. But identity also entails the recognition of the other, according to the principle of non contradiction. If I am I, I am not the other. Recognising means established relations between the self and the other person: emotional relations.

It is important to differentiate recognition, I am I and I am not the other, from the tautology so dear to the critical barbs of Roland Barthes. Racine is Racine: marvellous certainty of nothing. Tautology always refers to the angry break between our intelligence and the object outside us: Rome is Rome, Berlusconi is Berlusconi, for the supporters of the Northern League, Bossi is Bossi, to indicate a profound unquestionable faith. Recognising refers to the act of reflecting on ourselves. The difference between knowing and recognising is fundamental in order to grasp the sense of identity as recognition.

Recognising

This is the act of reflecting on knowledge. It is the act underlying intellectual knowledge.

Let us look at the linguistic derivatives of 'recognise': recognising and recognition, recognise oneself, recognisable, recogniser, recognised.

Affective symbolisation gives intention to things, it makes them emotionally present in the mind.

The mind's unconscious mode of being has a fundamental importance in each of our lives: it enables us to emotionally symbolise every aspect of reality, from one's own body to the "objects" that we meet in the context we live in, giving each aspect of reality an emotional coloring grounding knowledge and capable of guiding its action. Without this mode of knowing, which differs from the knowledge of categories that orients our thinking, there would not even be thinking and the social construction that thinking makes possible.

Without the emotional knowledge of the totipotent I, there would be no recognition of I as I.

Between emotional knowledge, based on the unconscious mode, and knowledge based on categorical thinking, there is therefore a close connection. Emotional symbolisations can undergo a twofold elaboration: they can be thought, in other words recognised, or performed. Every emotional symbolisation "pushes" to be elaborated, insofar as it puts the psychic system in a state of alarm: think for instance of the confused experience of danger deriving from the negative symbolisation of any aspect of reality: when faced with the symbolic enemy one can act, through attack-flight, or one can recognise the reason that led to such a symbolisation.

Affectively symbolising an aspect of reality, moreover, means emotionally categorising it in emotional classes with a strong affective charge: if living together is symbolised (in business contexts, in the traffic, at school, among friendships, at university) as an occasion of rivalry and conflict with others, felt to be competitors in dynamics of the *mors tua, vita mea* type or *mors mea, vita tua*, this emotional knowledge, for example in the traffic, makes driving a car dangerous, transforms every overtaking car into a question of life or death; it transforms living together into a struggle between gladiators, in the arena of competitiveness. Acting out this fantasy means eliminating all thought, all recognition of emotion, it means reifying the context of living together as a competitiveness without limits. When symbolic emotion is acted out, above all if this acting out finds a collusive response from the other interlocutors (collusions acted out or presumed, in a symbolically competitive transformation of any act by the other person, experienced as a part of oneself because in emotional knowledge there is only I), all thought is made impossible, in the sense of recognition of one's own and others' emotions. The acting out of affective symbolisations eliminates thought. At the same time, it can drag the other into relational dynamics heralded by the symbolisation, therefore within limits that, while lacking any constructivity based on thought, reassure us about the unknown elements of the relationship. Acting out, very frequent in living together, follows the scripts of taken-for-granted emotionality based on primitive dynamics: the friend-foe relation, the one guided by the dichotomy of belonging – extraneousness, that based on the asymmetry of power without competence, in all its many forms. One could go on at length

evoking relational models organised by acted out emotionality. What it is important to highlight is that if emotional symbolisation is acted out, it precludes the recognition of the meaning of the symbolisations, and therefore prevents the elaboration of sense or knowledge of what is known through the symbolisation itself. Acting out emotion prevents the work of translating the emotion, of recognising the emotions and the emotional object, which have the power to ground thought on the components of reality that are symbolised.

In the course of this rapid digression on acted out emotions, we have repeatedly seen that emotional symbolisation grounds relations with parts of the self projected into things. This is an important aspect of the mind's unconscious mode of being which is often not understood by those studying psychoanalysis. When this aspect of reality is symbolised emotionally, it is at the same time personified, and animated with intentionality and identity. If the child (but many adults feel the same emotion) is afraid of the dark, this happens because the dark is personified, populated – for example – by threatening persecutors, insofar as the absence of a possibility of seeing is transformed into the “seen” presence of a definite danger. Just as affective symbolisation transforms an absence into an emotionally meaningful presence, in the same way every aspect of reality, however seemingly distant and neutral it may be, is transformed by symbolisation into an emotionally significant figure. If in the dark the child feels the presence of threatening figures that frighten him, this happens because the threats are inside himself, originating for instance in the fantasy of necessary repercussions for his aggressive fantasies or his fantasies of provocation. Remember that the mind's unconscious mode of being, homogeneous and indivisible, indicates a “state” of mind, unchangeable and absorbing every aspect of reality in emotional symbolisation. Remember too that one of the features of the unconscious mind, the most important in our opinion, is that based on the replacement of external reality with internal reality, in other words with one's own emotional symbolic dynamic. The threatening darkness is not an element of external reality, but a product of external reality depending on the state of “not seeing” in order to transform the dark into an experience of threat. The dark is the external “fact”, while the “experience” of threat and fear is internal. The distinction between experience and facts is the fundamental condition for not establishing relations of cause and effect between experiences and facts, nor for attributing to reality that which belongs to facts or to the internal world that which belongs to experiences.

Through affective symbolisation, and therefore thanks to the unconscious mind, man achieves in a primitive way his relation with the outside world, with reality. This “reality” originates in his internal world and is animated by emotionally intentioned objects. It is a “reality” constructed emotionally by means of the fantasies of his inner world, thanks to the possibility of resting them on some external aspects used for this purpose and therefore deeply transformed through the process of substitution that we have just mentioned. In this perspective, knowledge is emotional symbolic knowledge and derives as we said from using some aspects of reality as supports for emotionally marked fantasies originating in the inner world.

It is only later, thanks to perceptual and relational experience, thanks to the dynamics of knowing, that man can use thought based on the comparison between emotion and past experience. Think, for instance, of the relationship of a child with its mother during its earliest experiences of life. It has been seen that the absence of the mother is transformed by the child into a “hallucinatory” presence of a persecutor insofar as for the child, needing everything, it is impossible to bear the frustration caused by the absence of the thing that is the source of food and care. The mother, who can “make up for” the persecutory fantasies expressed by the child with his angry crying, reassures him on the experiential fact of a return of the gratifying object when the baby needs it. When it is learnt that the mother has the definite power to return and make up for the anguish, then absence as a persecutory presence is transformed into the hope for her return: the baby learns, from repeated experience, that he *is capable* of making the real mother reappear at the moment of need. If this happens, the baby “frees” mental space for the exploration of other aspects of the surrounding world, which are not regulated only by the mother's alternating presence-absence. In the child's mind, an “idea of mother” as Bion says, is structured, taking the place of the absent mother and allowing him to stop “hallucinating” a persecutory presence, but a gratifying presence that can anticipate the return of the real mother. This sequence of learning in timing and modes

also depends on the mother's capacity to develop with the child an ironic reparatory competence⁴, that is not anguishing. This learning is based on the interaction between emotional symbolisations and feedback from the factual reality. The child emotionally symbolises the mother's absence as a persecutory part of himself; as a result he cries and by doing so interacts with the real mother, who, "recalled" by the child, changes the fantasised persecutory presence into a real, gratifying presence. The repetition of this experience enables the child to change his emotional response to absence, transforming the absence itself into anticipation of a gratifying mother. This is a process that clearly shows that thought grounded on reality originates from a gratifying experience, in corrective interaction with the persecutory emotional symbolisation of the mother's absence. This means that emotional symbolisation is liable to change *according to the experience of reality*.

Knowledge is typical of the mind's unconscious mode of being. It is a knowledge that responds to the five characteristics of the mind's unconscious mode of being: absence of time, absence of mutual contradiction, condensation, displacement, substitution of external reality by psychic reality. These features lead to emotional knowledge, the kind mentioned by the Gospel according to St John. But also that of dreams, of emotional symbolisations that substitute external reality with inner reality. In this knowledge there can be no identity. And there can be no identity because there is no other person, so there is no relating. In emotional knowledge, the other is the idiosyncratic product of the fantasies of the Ego, attributed to every aspect of reality insofar as it is animated by intentionality typical of the primitive dynamics of emotional symbolisation: friend-foe etc. (Carli & Panizza, 2003). A person caught up in his own emotional symbolisations and living an existence consisting of acting out fantasies evoked by reality used as a pretext to trigger acting out, is not aware of himself, he is at the mercy of his own emotionality which can find expression in acting out, and which is often incomprehensible. This is psychosis, often camouflaged by the social role, concealed by family protection, desperately integrated in a supposed professionalism. The "diagnosis" of this situation is easy to make if one looks at the impossibility, in such cases, to establish the relation between experiences and facts. When all this happens, identity is replaced by the identification with parts of the self, commonly projected onto the "other" as a pretext for one's acting out, whether the "other" is a person, an organisation, or a context.

Identity is based on the relation with the other person.

Identity is recorded in time: the idea of identity, grounded on the awareness that "I am I; I am not the other person", involves a contextualisation of recognition. I am I now, in a different way from yesterday or in a different context: hence, for example, the notion of role and the different competence related to the multiplicity of roles we assume in the experience with "different others". The difference of identity involves negation, and therefore non contradiction: I am I when I perform a specific social function, within a specific relationship with shared rules of the game; I am also I when I experience an intense affective relationship; I am I when I teach, when I am politically committed, when I listen to Miles Davis. This means that identity has a component of *continuity* and a component based on *discontinuity*. The two components are closely interrelated. The component of continuity is based on the emotional dynamic organising the identity starting from the symbolisations that have characterised our experience. There is continuity of identity if we consider the symbolisations that run through the life of each of us, from birth through to adult life. It is a continuity that originates in the emotional symbolisations of one's origin (such as being "Veronese" or "Venetian", having lost those playmates, having played a specific role during

⁴ On this, remember the excellent pages by Franco Fornari who says to the mother, capable of ironic depression in order to make up for the anguish of her child, made desperate by his mother's absence: «What a bad mother you have! A mother that makes you cry! But now let's see if we can give you what you need!» And in doing this the mother, who is ironically depressed, feeds the child if he is hungry, cleans him up if he is dirty or wet, cuddles him and calms him down. Is this the "secure base" mother indicated by the theory of attachment? We think instead that it is the mother capable of irony, able to look critically at herself without desperation, to make fun of herself in front of the desperate child. We think it is a cultural competence rather than an invariant trait of the personality. Such cultural competence can fail at some points in life, and it can be facilitated by relations with the context, the family context above all, and by the cultural stimuli coming from a specific historical phase, especially from the culture related to the mother's role.

schooldays, having sought relations and experiences unlike those that conform to expected orthodoxy, and so on), which continues in the emotional symbolisation of one's way of being in the world, of valorising culture or social power, of getting actively involved in party politics or of giving a political value to one's experience of work and living together, down to the emotional symbolisation of one's social status and affective relationships, of the values underpinning one's life and one's way of living together. The component of continuity of identity is that which enables us to perceive, to live our lives in coherence with the common thread characterising our experiences, symbolic dynamics, and style of being in the world.

The component of discontinuity is organised around the different ways we participate in the different contexts of experience, and is dictated by our different competences in these contexts. When one of the two components of identity fails, there can be very serious problems of adaptation. Think for instance of those who are unable to elaborate the component of continuity of the identity: a sort of Zelig who conforms closely to the requirements of the context without any self awareness; or a person who for his self-esteem depends totally on the feedback provided by others to his actions, his suggestions, his performances. Those on the other hand, who possess only the component of continuity, with no competence in discontinuous adaptation, offer a style of life that is rigid and often violent, based on the desire for power. Such power would enable their continuity, incapable of adapting, to take the upper hand over changes in context.

The integration of continuity and discontinuity of the identity, in short, shows the necessary interaction between emotional symbolisation and thought based on the recognition of emotions. Once again, it is irony, as the competence of laughing at oneself and one's limitations, that sanctions this important process of integration.

Identity as being recognised

Identity, as we have said, is grounded on recognising our selves. But also on being recognised by others. This reciprocal act of recognition is the basis for the relation of exchange: I recognise myself, I recognise the other person, just as the other person recognises me and recognises himself.

To be recognised we need an identity card. I need a document that proves my social identity, that proves the fact that somebody has recognised me. *In primis* myself and my recognition of myself.

Being recognised: by one's parents, by the police, by friends and acquaintances, by foes and rivals. It is a difficult task, which requires continuous effort. It is not enough to recognise ourselves, it is also necessary for others to recognise us. Without the act of being recognised by others, identity as in recognising oneself (and no more) is a pointless act without a social value.

But what does recognising oneself and being recognised by the other person mean? What does it lead to? To exchange, and therefore to a third thing. Identity is the milestone, the departure point for the production, by means of exchange, of a third thing.

On the plane of social relations, it is through belonging and the competence to evoke affective acceptance, through the dynamics of power and the competence to get others to accept one's opinions and one's influence, it is through the reciprocity of these dynamics of affiliation and power that the social identity is structured. But this social identity makes sense only if it is used in relational systems oriented to producing and developing a third thing. Otherwise it gets used up in symbolic games of seduction and power without competence.

The third thing is the necessary aim of interaction grounded on identity. Without the third thing, relations become interactions between parts of the self reciprocally projected onto the other person. In this case they are relations where the other is used as a tool in order to represent an unwanted part of one's self, because it is destructively attacked or idealised (the two faces of the same coin); a part of the self with which to interact without seeing the other person. The reciprocity of these instrumental relations end up being sterile interactions, pointlessly conflictual, repetitive, tiring and purposeless.

If on the other hand, the relation is based on the development of a third thing, namely an aspect of reality clearly separate from the interlocutors that are relating, then synergy can develop between the emotional symbolisations of the third thing and the competence of the interlocutors. In this case there may also be conflict, interactions may become bitter, but they are always oriented to the dimensions of reality that are being worked towards and that are being discussed. The latter

situation, of discussion of the third thing, is made possible by the solidity of the identities that the different interlocutors have developed.

Recognition

Feeling recognition is an emotion based on recognising the identity of the other person. It is recognising the “debt” one has with the other. This debt is part of the process of exchange. Recognition is the meeting of two identities, exchanging. If there is no exchange, the identity of the other may be indifferent or hostile. We do not recognise the other, but perceive him in the stereotype marking the common conformist attitude, so we bring him into our repetitive, idiosyncratic fantasies of the self. Recognising ourselves and feeling recognition towards the other, means establishing a relationship of exchange. Exchange is impossible unless we recognise the other person, unless we recognise that the other person gives us emotion, just as we give emotion to him, just by relating, and unless we recognise the reciprocal debt entailed in exchange.

Desire

Desire (from the Latin *de sidera*, that is: *road of the stars*), means to stop contemplating and staring at the stars. Why do we take our gaze off the stars? Linguists make various hypotheses: because the stars don't give us the augers we expect; or to ward off the effect of a contrary star. In fact, we take our gaze off the stars *due to our need for a person*, a need that is not satisfied by magic. Desiring therefore involves getting down to reality, and forgetting about magic expectations. Desiring involves identity, relating with the other person, planning and carrying out a strategy of intervention. Desire is the driving force of the relation which pursues a third thing. Desire involves *melancholy*, insofar as it entails accepting one's limits, compared to the magical expectation of being like god. It is the most widely accepted interpretation of Dürer's engraving (*Melencolia I*), where the main figure turns to earthly things and sadly takes its gaze off the divine star and unreachable perfection. To desire, one has to accept the limit to omnipotence that is based on one's own identity.

Those who have no identity, who keep looking at the stars, cannot desire. They can only think of life as a celebration of their own narcissism, where others are the mirror of the ideality of the word.

Concluding comments

Identity originates in the emotional symbolisation of reality, but transforms emotional symbolisation of the self and of the other person by means of a recognising thought. We and others exist insofar as we are recognisable, recognised, recognising, insofar as we recognise ourselves. Identity is the recognition that I am I, therefore the recognition of the limit of being oneself, with one's own characteristics and one's own history. This limit, if it is based on recognising, is a resource which enables us to recognise the other as different from the self.

I am thinking of the recent history of psychologists in Italy. And it is clear to me that the psychologists' problem lies in the lack, or even worse, the poverty of identity.

For too long psychologists' “bad masters” have pursued, with their students, identification instead of identity. They have often claimed that identification is the important premise for the construction of identity.

No, it is not. It is identity that enables us to make sense *also* of processes of identification, without getting lost in the omnipotence/impotence that identification can produce in those who have not recognised their own identity. This is true of individuals as well as for organised groups in the psychology field.

Psychologists too often seem to be able to recognise themselves only in domains that no longer belong to psychology. Psychologists seem to pursue their identity by becoming something else. It is no longer – the psychologist is the psychologist; the psychologist is different from those who are not psychologists. And on the other hand, the psychologist is equated to something else, the identity of the psychologist lies in not being a psychologist. It is obviously a perverse process.

Travelling with another person is very different from travelling alone, especially abroad. In Prague as in Copenhagen, in Chennai as in Paris, in Oslo as in Edinburgh. One can know, or rather recognise the other, the different, only if one does so by starting from one's own identity. Abroad is the thing that is outside. When one goes abroad one is an outsider. The outsider is not a wildman; he is one who has traversed the wilds to reach the destination of his journey. He has a culture of his own, an identity of his own. The different identities are separated by the wilderness, a hard place that is difficult to cross; it is an effort necessary in order to know the other. Only with my identity as an Italian can I recognise the European, North American, Middle Eastern, African, and Far Eastern cultures. If identity is used for exchange, the identity broadens one's knowledge. When identity is the pretext for artificially constructing an idealised system of belonging, believed to be better than any other reality, than every otherness, symbolised as the foe, one's sense of irony is lost and one falls irretrievably into the ridiculous.

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