

Interaction and the Genealogy of Identity, Professor Shahid Rahman

The question about the nature of the notion of identity is an old and venerable one and, in the western tradition the history of its written sources takes us from Parmenides' famous poem and its challenge by Heraclitus, to the discussions of Plato and Aristotle, up to the puzzles of Frege and Wittgenstein,¹ and the introduction of the notation “ = “ for it by Robert Recorde in 1557.

*And to avoide the tedious repetition of these woordes : is equalle to : I will sette as I doe often in woorkes use, a paire of paralleles, or Gemowe lines of one lengthe, thus : =, bicause noe 2 thynges, can be moare equalle.*²

From the very start different pairs of concepts were linked to identity and puzzled the finest minds, such as numerical (or extensional) identity – qualitative identity (or intensional), ontological principle – logical principle, real-definition – nominal definition and on top of these pairs the relation between sign and object. The following puzzling lines of Plato's *Parmenides* contain already the core of many of the discussions that took place long after him:

*If the one exists, the one cannot be many, can it? No, of course not [...]. Then in both cases the one would be many, not one.” “True.” “Yet it must be not many, but one.” “Yes.” (Plato, *Parmenides*, 137c-d)*

Hegel takes the tension between the one and many mentioned by Plato as constitutive of the notion of identity. Moreover, Hegel defends the idea that the concept of identity, conceived as the fundamental law of thought, if it should express more than a tautology, must be understood as a principle that comprehends both the idea of identical (that expresses reflexive cases of the principle) and the idea of different (that expresses non-reflexive cases). Hegel points out that expressions such as $A = A$ have a “static” character empty of meaning – presumably in contrast to expressions such as $A = B$:

*In its positive formulation [as the **first law of thought**], $A = A$, this proposition is at first no more than the expression of empty tautology. It is rightly said, therefore, that this law of thought is without content and that it leads nowhere. It is thus to an empty identity that they cling, those who take it to be something true, insisting that identity is not difference but that the two are different. They do not see that in saying, “Identity is different from difference,” they have thereby already said that identity is something different. And since this must also be conceded as the nature of identity, the implication is that to be different belongs to identity not externally, but within it, in its nature. – But, further, inasmuch as these same individuals hold firm to their unmoved identity, of which the opposite is difference, they do not see that they have thereby reduced it to a one-sided determinateness which, as such, has no truth. They are conceding that the principle of identity only expresses a one-sided determinateness, that it only contains formal truth, truth abstract and incomplete. – Immediately implied in this correct judgment, however, is that the truth is complete only in the unity of identity and difference, and, consequently, that it only consists in this unity. (Hegel (2010), 1813, Book 2, Vol. 2, II.258, 2nd remark, p. 358).³*

¹ Quite often [Plato's dialogue Theaetetus](#) (185a) is mentioned as one of the earliest explicit uses of the principle.

² Recorde (1577). There are no page numbers in this work, but the quoted passage stands under the heading “The rule of equation, commonly called Algebers Rule” which occurs about three quarters into the work. The quote has been overtaken from Granström (2011), p. 33.

³ *Der Satz der Identität [als das erste Denkgesetz] in seinem positiven Ausdrücke $A=A$, ist zunächst nichts weiter, als der Ausdruck der leeren Tautologie. Es ist daher richtig bemerkt worden, daß dieses Denkgesetz ohne Inhalt sey und nicht weiter führe. So ist die leere Identität, an welcher diejenigen festhängen bleiben, welche sie als solche für etwas Wahres nehmen und immer vorzubringen pflegen, die Identität sey nicht*

What Hegel is going after, is that the clue for grasping a conceptually non-empty notion of identity lies in the understanding the links of the reflexive with the non-reflexive form and vice-versa.

In fact, the main claim of the present paper is that both the ontological and the propositional level of identity can be seen as rooted in a specific form of dialogical interaction ruled by what in the literature on game-theoretical approaches to meaning has been called the *formal rule* or *copy-cat* strategy or (more recently) *Socratic rule*. To put it bluntly: according to our view, expressions of identity make explicit the argumentative interaction that grounds the ontological and the propositional levels.

die Verschiedenheit, sondern die Identität und die Verschiedenheit seyen verschieden. Sie sehen nicht, daß sie schon hierin selbst sagen, daß die Identität ein Verschiedenes ist; denn sie sagen, die Identität sey verschieden von der Verschiedenheit; indem dieß zugleich als die Natur der Identität zugegeben werden muß, so liegt darin, daß die Identität nicht äußerlich, sondern an ihr selbst, in ihrer Natur dieß sey, verschieden zu seyn. - Ferner aber indem sie an dieser unbewegten Identität festhalten, welche ihren Gegensatz an der Verschiedenheit hat, so sehen sie nicht, daß sie hiermit dieselbe zu einer einseitigen Bestimmtheit machen, die als solche keine Wahrheit hat. Es wird zugegeben, daß der Satz der Identität nur eine einseitige Bestimmtheit ausdrücke, daß er nur die formelle eine abstrakte, unvollständige Wahrheit enthalte. - In diesem richtigen Urtheil liegt aber unmittelbar, daß die Wahrheit nur in der Einheit der Identität mit der Verschiedenheit vollständig ist, und somit nur in dieser Einheit bestehe. (Hegel (1999), 1813, Teil 2, Buch II; II.258, pp. 29-30).