

Issues of personal identity and conformity



Numerous theories have been put forth regarding personal identity. From the early views of Descartes who believed that mind and body were separate, to more recent views such as Jung's model of the psyche and Hume's theory that identity is composed of many related but constantly changing elements. (Sproule, 330). However just as we obtain a personal identity, can we also lose it when trying to conform to society's views and beliefs? Do political theories and beliefs help form out identity?

Or do they simply strip us of it in order to benefit society as a whole? Personal identity has numerous definitions and theories. Scottish philosopher David Hume most known for his philosophical empiricism and skepticism had his own view on personal identity. He believed that the self was an illusion. Rather, personal identity is formed from " sensory impressions of things of the moment. And human beings simply connect these individual sensory impressions and conclude that they are conscious of a continuing self. "

Therefore Hume was a bundle theorist who believed that personal identity was nothing but a bundle of experiences rather than one continuing self. Carl Jung, a psychodynamic theorist who held a Neo-Freudian view had a different view of personal identity. He placed an emphasis on social factors and agreed with Freud that that the unconscious exerts a powerful influence. However, Jung believed that not only do we possess a personal unconscious; we also have something that he called a " collective unconscious" which is a " common reservoir of images derived from our species' universal experiences". Myers, 601). Jung also believed that personal identity is made up of aspects called archetypes such as " the god", " the goddess", " the hero" etc... He believed that we possess these archetypes and that patterns

of these archetypes is what forms our personal identity. Therefore Hume believed that our idea of self must ultimately be derived from our impressions, as are all of our ideas. So it can be said that he would argue that it is not possible to lose one's personal identity because it is the experiences perceptions that shape who we are.

Carl Jung could also argue that it is not possible to lose one's personal identity because his theory cannot be linked to any social structure but rather is fashioned out of part of the collective psyche. (Sofia University). Just as we gain and form an identity through our lifespan, is it possible to lose it when conforming to society? Or is it still personal identity however influenced by certain social and political beliefs?

Conformity is " adjusting one's behaviour or thinking to coincide with a group's standard. " (Myers, 732). Therefore conformity occurs through normative social influence (" influence resulting from a person's desire to gain approval or avoid disapproval") as well as informational social influence (" influence resulting from one's willingness to accept others' opinions about reality"). In order to answer the aforementioned there must be an established definition of personal identity.

For this purpose, personal identity can be defined as thoughts, beliefs and behaviours completely unique to an individual. Therefore by examining social and political theories, the question " to what extent can one lose their personal identity" can be addressed. There are two main political philosophers that can aid in answering this question, John Locke and Thomas Hobbes. Thomas Hobbes is most famous for establishing most of the

foundation for Western political philosophy from the perspective of the social contract theory.

The social contract theory arguments that individuals have consented, either to surrender some of their freedoms and submit to the authority of the ruler (or to the decision of a majority), in exchange for protection of their remaining rights. (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy). His book, *Leviathan*, written during the English Civil War sets forth the doctrine for foundation of states and governments. Hobbes believed that people needed a strong central government because they were evil and would constantly compete and quarrel for scarce resources. (Sproule, 449).

Therefore, a life without government, something he called “state of nature” would be chaotic because every person would believe they were entitled to everything in the world and society would be in a state of constant war. (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy). Hobbes believed that people should be regulated and influenced by a strong central government and he would argue that losing some of your identity was a small price to pay in order to live in a civil society. John Locke built his political theory to be centered around the social contract theory as well as Hobbes.

Unlike Hobbes however, Locke believed that people were tolerant and reasonable. But nevertheless they required an authoritative power to regulate civil conflicts and protect the rights to “life, liberty and possessions”. Locke’s definition of the “self” was that the mind was a *tabula rasa*, or a blank slate and therefore people formed an identity based upon their experiences. (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy). However, when their experiences were influenced by authoritative powers, the thoughts,

beliefs and behaviours, as defined, are not completely theirs therefore they are not completely unique to an individual.

By agreeing to submit certain natural rights to their ruler, people lose a part of their identity that makes them unique individuals. After examining theories of personal identity as well as political and social theories, I have come to the conclusion that you cannot completely lose your personal identity even when conforming to society's influences. Your personal identity is based on your thoughts, values and actions. Therefore as long as you are still able to think and feel, you remain to be a unique individual.

There are no two people that are identical, and their personal identity is what makes them unique. Even when influenced by other people, and governments whether it's in order to obtain approval or because of one's willingness to accept others' opinions, individuals still form thoughts that cannot be completely identical. I believe that even in forms of severe central authority such as dictatorships, when people are forced to obey authority, they cannot completely lose their personal identity.

Personal identity is what every individual retains for his or her whole life and every experience and every influence further shapes that identity. Therefore, every individual is unique regardless whether they share thoughts and opinions and are influenced by the same things. Personal identity cannot be lost or regained, it is a fluid, flexible property which is one of the main attributes that makes someone an individual in any society regardless of the state of being of that society.