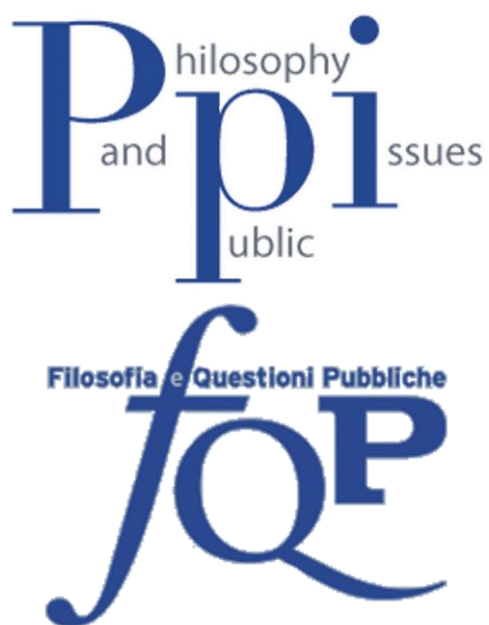


IDENTITY AND LIBERAL POLITICS



PERSONAL IDENTITY AND ITS PROPERTIES

BY

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Personal Identity and Its Properties*

Eldar Sarajlic

Introduction

I hadn't known that I was a Muslim until I turned fourteen. That year, a war erupted in my home country and I was forced to flee my hometown, together with my family and thousands of other Muslims.

Before the war, I lived a tranquil life of a child in socialist Yugoslavia, blissfully unaware of things that will turn my life upside down just a few years later. I was raised in a secular family that was inspired by the modernist ideas of progress, never paying too much attention to religion or ethnicity. But, our ethnic identity was etched in our bodies, independently of our volition and awareness. Our names, surnames, and family histories unmistakably revealed our cultural background, and one day identified us as a target of what became known as 'ethnic cleansing.'

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You can probably imagine my confusion, when as a budding teenager I discovered that I was actually considered a Muslim.¹ Being targeted as such, I embraced the label and made it a part of my personal identity. For me, becoming a Muslim was a way to resist the injustice of ethnic cleansing and fight for my own place under the sun. However, as it often happens with reactive attitudes, once the initial cause ceases to exist, the pressure to continue reacting ceases as well. I spent the next decade searching for my authentic self. By the time I reached mature years, I changed significantly, sometimes even beyond recognition.

My early experience with personal identity and identification gave me a somber introduction to what literature in philosophy and sociology will teach me years later: that personal identities are never truly personal. Being shared, they always exist in a certain political context, which partly determines their meaning and social worth; identities are both subjective and objective. However, this dual character also generates problems for our conceptualization of personal identity, which in turn affects our recognition practices. One of such problems is what I will call ‘the identification problem’ of personal identity, according to which two scenarios are possible:

1. A person can self-identify as *A* while not being socially recognized as an *A*
2. A person can be socially recognized as an *A* while not self-identifying as *A*

¹ For most Bosnians like me, the label ‘Muslim’ did not possess exclusively religious connotations. It was both ethnic *and* religious. To be fully a member of the ethnic group, a person was expected to embrace the religion, at least formally.

This is a serious problem for our understanding of personal identity. Various transitional identities, such as transgender, testify to its existence.² A person could be recognized (and socially categorized) as a man while self-identifying as a woman (or as both, or as neither). This problem suggests that we should posit the existence of two kinds of basic properties of personal identity: ontological and political. In scenario 1, the person is ontologically (but not politically) an \mathcal{A} ; in scenario 2, she is politically (but not ontologically) an \mathcal{A} .

In this paper, I will argue that proper understanding of personal identity requires clear delineation of these two properties and their standards of evaluation. Moreover, I will suggest that justified recognition practices depend on proper conceptualization of the relation between these properties.

In what follows, I will propose a way to understand the relation between ontological and political properties of personal identity. I'll start by defining the problem more clearly in Section I.

I

Defining the Problem

The ontological branch of the identification problem reflects a difficulty of understanding what does it really mean to *be* something, like a man, woman, or a Muslim. Obviously, personal identity is not simply a matter of social classification. If it was, there would be no discrepancies between individuals' social classification and their self-knowledge. It is also not a simple matter of

² I need to make a clarification and say that identification here is ontological (identifying as an \mathcal{A}) rather than emphatic (identifying with an \mathcal{A}). See Hale 2009, 43-66.

psychology or individual preference. Had it been, then people would have chosen their personal identities at will. But, clearly, this is not how personal identities work.

Being an elusive discipline of inquiry, ontology needs an appropriate proxy onto which it can project its claims with an acceptable degree of precision and clarity. I can't think of any other discipline more appropriate for this task than logic. Ontological claims require a fair amount of confidence that things we talk about actually exist. Given that logic could provide us with the greatest possible amount of confidence about the truth of our claims, using logic as a proxy for ontology seems (to me, at least) a reasonable strategy.

If I am right, then one way to tackle the ontological problem of personal identity would be to try formalizing it through an appropriate logical structure. I shall attempt to do that in Section II. If we achieve some clarity about the best logical foundation of our concept of personal identity, then we could perhaps make some progress in understanding its ontology.

However, one could question the relevance of an ontological discussion of personal identity. Given that personal identification always happens in the social and political sphere, why discuss ontology? I wish we could get rid of ontological issues and only discuss the politics of personal identity. That would make things much easier, both for philosophers and the general public. But, unfortunately, that is not possible. Personal identities are often challenged, denied, and falsely asserted. Relying on politics alone cannot help us to adjudicate situations when identity claims clash. We need something to fall back on, and ontology, no matter how elusive, seems the only plausible candidate.

The political branch of the identification problem pertains to the social aspect of personal identification, but more narrowly to

practices of recognition, classification, and distribution. The problem here is to determine the basis of justice for our recognition practices, which could help us evaluate particular identity claims and apportion remedies to individuals whose legitimate claims for recognition have been denied. I shall attempt to do that in Section III. I will argue that the proper recognition practices must reflect a proper logical formulation of personal identity claims.

In practice, ontological and political properties of personal identity are intertwined. Identification is usually considered a social act (proclaiming one's *A*-ness is never isolated from the social context). However, I will argue for the conceptual independence of the two. I believe that thinking about ontology and politics of personal identity as separate will help us gain more clarity in understanding the concept and creating more appropriate liberal practices of social recognition.

I. 1. *Usage of terms*

Since I will be using logical (and mathematical) vocabulary to a degree, I wish to clarify the usage of certain terms, so to avoid possible confusion.

First, I will follow the standards of propositional logic and use capital letters, such as *A*, *B*, *C* to express well-formed propositions. So, for example, *A* could stand for any sentence that is a proposition, conveying a clear and unambiguous information. It could mean "Today is Wednesday" or "I have a cat."

However, since this is a paper about personal identities, I'll often be dealing with propositions containing identity assertions. So, in many instances, *A* will be taken to mean something like "I am a woman" or "Mary is Jamaican." When using propositions

containing identity assertions (which will be defined more clearly in the next section) sometimes I'll take them as proxies for the expressed identities themselves. So, if \mathcal{A} is a variable for an identity assertion, I will sometimes refer to \mathcal{A} as the identity itself, not just the proposition that asserts it. So, when I write that a person is an \mathcal{A} , I mean that some person is predicated by the quality otherwise expressed through proposition \mathcal{A} .

To make a distinction between propositions expressing identity content and propositions expressing some other kind of content, I will use lowercase letters, such as a , b , or c to express the latter. So, when I want to express a proposition such as "I was born in Bosnia," symbolically, I may use b to do so. To distinguish these kinds of propositions from variables representing persons, I will reserve the last three letters of the alphabet (x , y , and z) for denoting individuals. So, when I write x is an \mathcal{A} or $x = \mathcal{A}$, x is a variable that stands for some person (or a group of persons) predicated by \mathcal{A} .

Finally, I will follow the standards of probability theory to express the probability that some proposition \mathcal{A} is true as $P(\mathcal{A})$. When I assign values to these probabilities, I will use a quantitative, rather than the qualitative method. So, I will use real numbers instead of fractions. So, if a person x is on the fence about the truth of \mathcal{A} , then for x , $P(\mathcal{A}) = 0.50$.

II

Logics of Personal Identity

Writing about identity requires adopting a precise meaning of the subject in focus because the term 'personal identity' can be used to refer to more than one thing. For example, it can refer to my unique numerical identity as a certain individual, a child of two

other specific individuals, born on a particular point in space-time. This is John Locke's (1996) and Derek Parfit's (1984) approach to identity.

However, personal identity can also refer to my qualitative identity as a member of a certain group of people, defined by some unique feature that separates this group from others. Unlike numerical identity, the qualitative conception focuses not on what separates me from others, but on what unites me with a specific group of other individuals. It focuses on features some humans have in common with one another.³

In this paper, I will focus exclusively on the qualitative conception of identity. I am primarily interested in the logical conceptualization of *shared* personal identities.

There are two possible ways to conceptualize anything within a logical structure. The first way is to determine a set of atomic propositions that will, together with some rules of inference, serve as the basis of further statements. In the context of identity, this would mean specifying some kinds of atomic propositions and take them either as statements of personal identity themselves, or as some other kinds of statements from which identity claims could follow. The second way is to lay out axioms and then try to derive further rules and conclusions from these axioms. In the context of personal identity, this would mean specifying some axioms of personal identification and then deriving particular identity statements from them. In this section, I will consider both approaches.

³ See comparable approaches in Appiah (2018), Schechtman (2014), Hildemann (2014), Olson (2007), Varga (2015, 2011).

II. 1. *Identity as Predication*

The initial challenge of conceptualizing qualitative personal identity in terms of some logical structure is to distinguish the discourse from ordinary understanding of identity in logic. Namely, the term ‘identity’ is usually used to refer to the numerical conception. As Nicholas Smith argues:

In our sense, to be *identical* to something is to be the very same thing as that thing. You are identical to yourself and to no one else, I am identical to myself and to no one else, and so on for every object: each object is identical to itself and to nothing else. So, *two* objects are never identical to one another (in the sense of ‘identity’ used in logic) because they are different things, not one and the same thing (Smith 2012, 299).

Since the focus of this paper is on the qualitative conception of identity, the best possible way to meet this challenge is to conceptualize personal identity in terms of predication rather than logical ‘identity.’ A personal identity statement could then be expressed as an atomic proposition of the following form:

$$x = A \tag{1}$$

Let us call this an assertion of personal identity, or *identity assertion* for short. As an expression of the logical structure for identity statements, this proposition could be interpreted to mean any of the following:

- John is a man.
- Mary is Greek.

- Mohammad is a Muslim.
- I am a lesbian.
- You are a philosopher.

In all of these cases, x is a variable denoting a person and A is a variable denoting a quality associated with that person. The perspective from which the proposition can be uttered does not change its logical structure; in all cases, the verb 'to be' is an expression of predication.

While simplicity of (1) seems a desirable quality to represent personal identity as predication, it is unfortunately insufficient to convey the full meaning of the concept. Namely, since personal identities of this kind are shared, there must exist some rules (or quantifiers) that determine the scope of the predicate. We want to be able to know who counts as an A and who doesn't. Given this crucial requirement, no identity assertion could assume the form of an atomic proposition.

Perhaps a better way to express the shared nature of personal identities is to use first-order predicates and express the logical form of shared personal identity like this:

$$\forall x A(x) \tag{2}$$

In this case, the identity assertions are outcomes of a propositional function, which could be interpreted to mean any of the following:

- All inhabitants of Japan are Japanese.

- Anybody born with a penis is a man.
- All Americans with brown skin are Black.
- Whoever desires same sex partners is gay.
- Every computer hacker is a geek.

This expression is slightly more complex, but the advantage is that it allows us to say that all x s are predicated by \mathcal{A} . Unlike (1), in (2) x is not a designator of a single individual, but of a whole group of people who share features described by the predicate \mathcal{A} . If we follow this reasoning further, we could say that the relation between all the members of the set of x and \mathcal{A} is a relation between a token and a type. If x_i is a member of the set x , then x_i is a token of the type \mathcal{A} .

The expression (2) is logically equivalent to other kinds of expressions that establish a predicative relationship between x and \mathcal{A} , such as the conditional that if something is x then it is an \mathcal{A} :

$$x \rightarrow \mathcal{A} \tag{3}$$

The practical value of the expressions (2) and (3) for conceptualizing personal identity is that they provide us with a valid rule of inference for any particular x . If they hold true, then we can safely conclude that any x is an instance of \mathcal{A} . If $\forall x \mathcal{A}(x)$ or $x \rightarrow \mathcal{A}$ are true, then any x that exists would be an \mathcal{A} .

While this option is capable of representing the shared nature of personal identities, some problems still remain. Most notably, the main issue (deciding who qualifies as an x) is not resolved but just moved one step forward. Moreover, the expressions

themselves do not provide (or reveal) plausible normative ground for including any particular x_i into the set predicated by A , and thus do not work as axioms from which the truth of any particular $x_i = A$ could be derived. This is evident from the identification problem mentioned earlier. There are numerous exceptions to this kind of axiomatic understanding of identity predications that make this route hard to follow. Consider this instance, for example:

Anybody born with a penis is a man.

It is obvious that this predicate function cannot work as an axiom of personal identification. There's too many practical exceptions to it (not all persons born with penises are men). Unfortunately, in the logic of personal identification, we cannot derive the truth of $x_i = A$ from $\forall x A(x)$.

It seems to me that the problem lies in trying to conceptualize personal identity in terms of deductive logic. Within the deductive approach, neither atomic nor axiomatic approach seem good enough to give us a plausible logical framework for understanding identity. Any practical instance of the $\forall x A(x)$ axiom will not be universally true, while any possible atomic proposition will be practically useless for conceptualizing the shared nature of personal identification.

However, this doesn't mean that we should give up trying to conceptualize personal identity according to some logical structure. After all, the intuition that personal identification follows a certain set of rules is universally shared and plausible (we can't change our personal identities at will, and we do share some of our identities with others). Given that intuition, it is worth trying to do come up with a plausible formal framework. In the next section, I will

develop an alternative logical framework that could help us conceptualize personal identity in a different way.

II. 2. *Probabilistic Conception of Identity*

An important step in formalizing the concept of personal identity is to determine the context of identity statements. In what kind of discursive circumstances we assert our personal identity?

If identity assertions cannot function as atomic propositions or universally quantified statements, then they could perhaps be understood as inferences from some other (atomic or elementary) propositions. When I say that I a man, for example, this identity assertion functions as a conclusion to an argument, not as an independent statement. Even when the identity assertion is given on its own (in some social context), the premises are always implied. In other words, when I assert my identity as a man, I do so because I have reasons for doing so. There are some other propositions from which I infer my identity statement.

The inferential nature of identity assertions means that the ground of personal identities is to be found in the relation between different propositions, and not in the propositions themselves. When I say that $x = M$ (for example, “I am a man”), I assert not a simple atomic proposition, but a set of two or more propositions in such a way that my identity assertion is the outcome of an inferential chain that began in some atomic proposition p . For example, let p mean “I was born with a penis.” My identity assertion is then an inference from p to $x = M$.

We’ve already seen in the previous section that universally quantified propositions cannot serve as axioms for derivation of all instances of x because they will not always be true. If the relation cannot be conceptualized deductively, then perhaps a probabilistic

approach could be more appropriate. We could say that every identity assertion contains a degree of uncertainty. “I am a man” could be relatively, instead of absolutely, true. It would depend on the strength of the given inferential relation (as well as on the soundness of the premises).

Although it may sound a bit exaggerated to those certain about their own personal identity, this idea is not far-fetched. We are intuitively aware that personal identities are not fixed and that they evolve through time, as our self-knowledge changes. We may sometimes be mistaken about who we are. Knowledge of our personal identities is

sensitive to reasons, which means that it is subject to normative assessment (it is veridical). Persons could make mistakes in making assertions about themselves. An inference is part of a reasoning process, and making judgments about oneself is subject to the same errors one is subject to in making judgments about the external world (Sarajlic, 2019, 50).

If we accept this relation as probabilistic, then we could use some insights from the theory of probability to develop this idea further. For example, we could use Keynes’ idea of the degree of rational belief, conceptualized as follows:

Let our premises consist of any set of propositions b , and our conclusion consist of any set of premises a , then if a knowledge of b justifies a rational belief in a of degree a we say that there is a *probability-relation* of degree a between a and b (Keynes 2013, 4).

If we apply this idea to the concept of personal identity, then we could say that for any identity assertion A there is a set of propositions a that justifies the belief in A to the degree a .

II. 2. 1. *Axioms of Probabilistic Personal Identity*

There are two important things that need to be clarified before a full probabilistic conception of personal identity can be outlined. The first clarification to make is to establish the proper interpretation of probability that satisfies conceptual needs of the task at hand in this paper.

Namely, the theory of probability admits of several foundational views about the nature of probability. The most popular interpretations are logicism, frequentism, and subjectivism (there are a few others, but I'm keeping the discussion limited).⁴ Logicism views probability as an instance of partial entailment of the conclusion from the premises. It seeks to validate the probabilistic outcome through a method taken over from deductive logic. Frequentism views probability as a mathematical science aimed at discovering the relative frequencies of certain attributes that exist in nature prior to (and independently of) human observation. In stark contrast to logicism and frequentism, both of which assume existence of objective probabilities, subjectivism defines probability as the degree of belief a in a proposition A by some particular individual x . According to this theory, two different individuals could assign different degrees of belief, a and β , to the same proposition A .

One does not need a more detailed description of different theories of probability to reach the conclusion that some type of

⁴ See Gillies (2000) for more.

subjectivism seems to provide the best conceptual framework for addressing personal identity. The main reason for this claim is the fact that the access to propositions that serve as premises to conclusions in identity assertions is often partially or wholly limited to the individuals asserting their identity. I am much better positioned to know some things about my self (or some of its parts) than anybody else. In rare instances, truths about a person will be better known by others, or will be better known through an interaction between individuals, validating some form of inter-subjectivism that takes the subjective position as primary but allows for cases that transcend individual perspectives.

The second clarification to make is to establish more precisely how the main principles of probability will combine with the notion of personal identity in this discussion. I wish to propose the following axioms for probabilistic understanding of personal identity:

- i. $0 < P(A) < 1$ for any identity claim A . The probability that a person is an A can take any real number value in an open interval between 0 and 1. This means that there is a non-zero probability that a person will have any personal identity. For this purpose, we could use Rawls' idea of the 'original position' to describe a situation in which a person could be born in any social position, anywhere in the world, and develop any possible personal identity (Rawls 1999). The scope of possible identifications is theoretically infinite, while the scope of possible social positions is determined by the facts on the ground (one can't be born into a social position that doesn't exist). Similarly, no personal identity A will have a value of 1, though the sum of component identities can converge on 1 (see axiom ii). This means that no personal identity will be absolutely certain.

- ii. A person could have multiple personal identifications (‘component identities’) that will uniquely define that person. I will call this the principle of non-exclusivity of personal identity. For example, I could plausibly and non-exclusively be a Bosnian, a philosopher, and a sexually straight man. None of these component identities necessarily contradict each other and can uniquely define who I am as an individual (both numerically and qualitatively). However, since the human capacity for knowledge and action is finite, there is a limited number of component identities a single individual can have. Component identities ‘push’ each other out in a zero-sum game: the more of one means the less of the other. My compound personal identity A could consist of any number of components A_i , whose prominence in defining me uniquely can vary from time to time, or from context to context. It might be tempting to understand the component identities as binary (one could argue that if I am an American, then I cannot be a Bosnian, or that if I am a man, I can’t be a woman), but I’ll resist the temptation and argue that none of the component identities are ontologically (if not legally) exclusive. A person could plausibly be both a man and a woman, Bosnian and non-Bosnian, straight and gay, and any other combination of component identities, organized in a consistent manner and converging on the sum value of 1 (or on the certainty that the given person exists and has an identity). The exclusivity of identification is a matter of social organization, not of ontology.
- iii. The sample space ω from which premises (events) for identity assertions are drawn contains a countable infinity of possible events that can occur in a person’s life. Anything allowed by laws of physics is possible to happen to any person, and could serve as a basis of their identity claim.
- iv. The probability that an identity assertion C is true is always a conditional probability, and it is sensitive to the change in

information (true atomic propositions) the person comes to know. So, for any atomic proposition g and any identity proposition C , the probability that C is true on the condition that g is true – expressed as $P(C|g)$ – is given by the Bayesian ratio of the likelihood that g is true given that C is true, multiplied by the probability that C is true, and the probability that g is true. Furthermore, the probability that g alone is true could be further expressed as the sum of $P(g \cap C)$ and $P(g \cap \neg C)$, or the sum of the probability that both g and C are true *and* the probability that g is true and C is not true. In essence, there are no unconditional personal identities.

II. 2. 2. *Identity Genesis*

The stage for a more detailed conception of personal identity is now set. If the preceding qualifications and axioms are sound, then the following description could provide a plausible conception of personal identity. I'll start from the beginning: how does a person acquire a personal identity?

There are two possible ways to interpret the question of identity genesis. One way is to adopt a Lockean perspective and argue that, upon birth, every child is a *tabula rasa*, an empty plate waiting to be filled with identity content. While this is an attractive view, especially for those who wish to argue for a non-deterministic nature of personal identities, there are some challenges of this view. For example, the birth of a child is a material event that occurs within well-defined spacetime confines that instantly provide a certain kind of content to be included in the child's personal identity. Every child is born of some parents, in some part of the world, within some social structure. All of these are 'written' on the child's identity by way of providing the initial position from which the child's identity further evolves. The only way Lockean

perspective could work would be to assume that *tabula rasa* is an identity disposition prior to the conception of each child. More precisely, it would have to assume that each child has an equal probability of being born by any existing parents in any existing social and cultural structure. However, this view is still untenable given that there is no equal prior distribution of possible parents from different social and cultural structures in the world. Some structures are more populous than others. There is a greater probability that the next child will be born by middle class Chinese than by upper class Icelandic parents.

The alternative is to adopt a probabilistic perspective from the outset and tackle these conceptual difficulties head on. According to this view, there are *initial*, *prior*, and *posterior* probabilities of any personal identity. The initial probability is given by the elementary structure of the world's social and cultural default at the time of the child's birth. There is a non-zero probability of a child being born in a culture C_i , given by the axiom i . The value of the initial probability $P(C_i)$ is determined by the ratio of the population size and the natality rate of that cultural group and the sum of the populations and natality rates of all other cultures existing at the time of the child's birth.

The initial probability is relevant for understanding that the ontology of any personal identity is fundamentally probabilistic. We could have been born as anybody else, there is nothing predetermined about who we are as individuals. However, beyond this point, the initial probability has no other practical value. Once the child is born, the event is materialized and the initial probability turns into a determined reality expressible through an atomic proposition. For example, once a child is born in, say, Denmark, by middle class Danish speaking parents, in 2012 (which had the initial probability of some value a), this becomes a set of atomic

propositions d that can play a role of premises in the child's identity claim D further down the road.

As the child grows, her identity evolves against the background of true atomic propositions that describe her factual context. Once the child is mature enough to start asserting a personal identity, her identity assertion D has a prior probability of some value β , expressed as $P(D)$. As the child grows, new information about her identity is 'collected' through observation, both internal (self-knowledge) and external (knowledge of the external world), which will lead to conditional probability (the probability that D is true given that some proposition n is true). In this way, the person's knowledge gets constantly updated with the new information. To see this in context, consider how a person's identity develops. As we grow, we learn about ourselves and enrich our identities through the interaction with others. If a person with a certain prior probability of being an artist (say, coming from parents who are artists already, and with an initial talent for art) experiences some transformative events through which she realizes that being a banker is more desirable to her than being an artist, her identity will go through change. Similarly, if a child coming from Christian parents who are believers, with a prior probability of being a Christian believer herself, becomes an atheist after reading Bertrand Russell's *Why I'm not a Christian*, her personal identity has gone through change.

In a fundamental way, all identity assertions are prior probabilities that can, in principle, undergo change as the new information is observed. The posterior probability of x 's personal identity that is not a prior probability at some stage, or the probability that is determined once all events in the x 's life are taken into account is, in principle, possible only at or upon x 's death. Only once x has stopped existing, it is possible, in theory, to determine the final posterior probability value of x 's personal

identity. This posterior probability plays a very limited role because it is practically impossible: once x is dead, there is nobody who could experience the end of all experiences and by doing so be able to determine the posterior probability of x 's identity with full authority.

II. 2. 3. *Intersubjectivity of Identity*

As already mentioned, the probabilistic approach to personal identity in this paper allows for inter-subjective agreement on the value of certain probabilistic identity assertions. Although some true atomic propositions are instances of self-knowledge available only to individuals making the identity assertion, there is a proxy indicator: the person's behavior.

To develop this idea further, it is important first to understand identity's teleology, or the role personal identity plays in a person's life. Namely, there are two possible roles identity could play. First, it could play an *intrinsic* role and function as an end towards which individuals strive. For example, I could orient my actions in life in accordance with my own sense of who I am (or who I want to be). My personal identity could serve as a programmatic goal and require conscious effort to 'achieve' it. Second, personal identity could play an *instrumental* role and function as a tool for satisfaction of other aims. For example, my personal identity would be a utility mechanism for achieving happiness and well-being, and not an end in itself.

I believe that the instrumental conception of identity's teleology is a more plausible one. Although I am sure some people see their personal identity as a normative ideal, I think that the intrinsic conception is partial, either in the sense that only a minority of people understand themselves normatively or that only some parts of their identities are normative. In the first case, even

if there are individuals whose entire sense of self is a projection of their will, those individuals might lack authenticity and would not be good examples of proper personal identification. The second case is not controversial nor implausible (we all have aspirations to improve or change some parts of ourselves), but it only pertains to a portion of our personhood and can be plausibly explained by the instrumental conception. According to this view, our personal identity is a tool through which we achieve instances of well-being and long-term happiness. Personal identity is the life form we take in order to be able to satisfy a certain set of our pre-existing desires. The range of life forms we can take is equivalent to the range of available options (both physical and social), specific for each actual individual. I will adopt the gender identity of a man if living as one is more likely to provide me with the maximum happiness and well-being I could derive, as well as if I have access to the option of living as a man. In case I would be more likely to derive more happiness if I identified as a woman, and I had the option as identifying as one, then I would adopt that as my gender identity.

Since personal identity is tied to the idea of well-being in this way, we could use it to achieve some inter-subjective consensus on the value of probabilistic identity assertions. This idea relies on Frank Ramsey's conception of measurement of a person's degrees of belief in a proposition \mathcal{A} . Since we act in ways we think will most likely realize the objects of our desires, our actions could be taken as *bets* we make on the probability that a proposition \mathcal{A} is true. Here's Ramsey's explanation of this by way of an example:

Let us give an instance of the sort of case which might occur. I am at a cross-roads and do not know the way; but I rather think one of the two ways is right. I propose therefore to go that way but keep my eyes open for someone to ask; of now I see someone half a mile away over the fields, whether I turn aside to ask him

will depend on the relative inconvenience of going out of my way to cross the fields or of continuing on the wrong road if it is the wrong road. But it will also depend on how confident I am that I am right; and clearly the more confident I am of this the less distance I should be willing to go from the road to check my opinion. I propose therefore to use the distance I would be prepared to go to ask as a measure of the confidence of my opinion (Ramsey 1931, 174-175).

Let the cross-roads in Ramsey's example be represented by two identity assertions, M and W . Let M stand for "I am a man" and let W stand for "I am a woman." A person x at the crossroads is someone who does not know initially which identity assertion will be more likely to realize the object of his or her desires (think of a child who has no pre-social conception of gender identity). Given some evidence (or life experience), expressed through an atomic proposition b , the person x takes W to be likely true to the degree a . The strength of x belief in W is expressed through the willingness of x to act as if W was true. A person who identifies as a woman will act as if her identity were true to the degree a . The stronger her belief in W , the more of her actions will reflect that confidence.

X 's personal identity can be determined inter-subjectively by looking at her long-term actions and behavior. It is, in practice, impossible to know with certainty whether x truly takes W to be true to a degree a . But, it is not necessary to know this with certainty (even x 's knowledge of W will be probabilistic anyway). It is sufficient if x 's actions are consistent with the degree of her confidence in W over a specific time interval.

II. 2. 4. *Ethical Neutrality*

Ramsey's approach to probability is useful for conceptualizing identity in another aspect. Namely, we could say that all identity propositions should be taken as ethically neutral. An identity proposition A is ethically neutral if a person x takes all possible worlds differing only with regard to the truth of A as equal in value. For example, let's say that x is confident that the identity assertion A , based on the atomic proposition b , is true to the degree a . Let's also say that there can be different identity assertions, B , C and D that could also be made from b to the same degree. Then, A is ethically neutral if and only if x has no preference between A , B , C , and D .

In practice, this means that we should be initially indifferent to what our personal identity turns out to be. Provided compliance with minimal moral standards, we should not assign values to any personal identification we arrive at from the true atomic propositions we come to know. For example, I should be indifferent to what my gender identity is, as long as the inference from a true atomic proposition p and my gender identity M has an appropriate probabilistic value.

II. 2. 5. *Identity and Change*

From an ontological perspective, identity assertions are outcomes of inferential reasoning. Identity claims are truth apt: they could be right or wrong. They are probabilistic inferences from a set of propositions with an appropriate degree of belief in their truth. Given the fluid nature of existence, in which people learn new truths about themselves and the world, probabilities of certain identity assertions can change. A person y can assign a probability of 0.70 to their identity assertion C given the truth of some atomic proposition c . Y 's degree of belief in C could change

to 0.30 if y learns the truth of another atomic proposition d that would, for example, counter (or contradict, or change the relevance of) the content of c .

This framework for thinking about personal identity could perhaps be useful in explaining the ontology of non-standard identities, such as trans identities. The phenomenology of trans identity is complex and defies easy classification, but for the purposes of this paper, I'll take into account three different kinds of identity transitions, as outlined by Rogers Brubaker:

The *trans of migration* (exemplified most clearly by those who surgically and hormonally transform their bodies and formally change their legal identities) involves unidirectional movement from one established sex-gender category to another. The *trans of between* (exemplified by androgyny) involves a positioning of oneself with reference to the two established categories, without belonging entirely or unambiguously to either one and without moving definitively from one to the other. The *trans of beyond* (exemplified by a self-definition as simply trans rather than cis) involves positioning oneself in a space that is not defined with reference to established categories. It involves the claim to transcend existing categories or to transcend categorization altogether (Brubaker, 2012, 72-3).

In the *trans of migration*, the person acts in accordance with the change in the prior probability distribution between the truth of two identity statements, A and B . If x 's prior probability assigns the value of 0.80 to A and 0.20 to B (causing x to act as if A were true) and then upon acquisition of a true atomic proposition b , x changes the probability distribution to 0.30 for A and 0.70 to B , then x has gone through the migration from one identity category (A) to another (B). In the *trans of between*, x 's probability distribution

between A and B is equal (the value of 0.50 is assigned to both of them). In such a case, x personal identity includes both, and x is both A and B at the same time (in accordance with the axiom ii). In the *trans of beyond*, x 's probability values for both A and B are comparatively low, giving x little reason to act as if any of them were true. In that case, x either has a higher value assignment for another probabilistic identity statement C , or is still undecided due to the lack of relevant true atomic propositions from which she could infer a probable identity claim.

III

Politics of Personal Identity

The discussion in Section II focused on conceptualizing identity independently of politics, describing only how identity's ontological properties should be understood. The practical reality of personal identities is, however, always political. How do we see ourselves and others is almost never independent of some social and political context. In this section, I will outline political properties of personal identity. I will focus on two aspects of these properties. First, I will look into how politics serves as an 'input' for generating a personal identity. Second, I will lay out normative benchmarks for how politics should serve as 'output' in identity conceptualization, or how it should regulate recognition and distribution among different identity claims. Finally, I will touch upon some contemporary debates around recognition of transitional identities to indicate how the theory I am proposing in this paper can help us resolve practical problems.

III. 1. *Politics as Input*

Acquisition of any personal identity always happens in a certain political context. Political configurations can become part of personal identities in two ways. First, if identity assertions are probabilistic outcomes of an inferential process in which some atomic propositions serve the role of premises, then politics affects these outcomes by regulating what kinds of propositions can serve as premises in this process. Access to knowledge (of atomic or elementary propositions) is itself subject to political regulation. For example, some societies actively discourage types of knowledge that would, in an ordinary inferential process, lead to personal identities they deem unworthy. The reason why I learned about my Muslim background only when I turned 14 years of age was because the society I lived in up to that point discouraged types of knowledge that could result in such identity assertions. Moreover, non-heteronormative sexual orientations, transitional, and other non-standard and minority identities have often been a target of such political practices around the world. Growing up in such societies, children have been actively discouraged to investigate and respond to epistemic prompts that could have resulted in these kinds of identities, even if those prompts are instances of their proprioceptive self-knowledge. The prevalence of, say, the “gay conversion therapies” is a case in point.

Second, political regulation of identity in the public sphere often includes various value assignments to different identities. For example, some societies have had explicit rules delineating between ‘preferred’ and ‘non-preferred’ personal identities, prescribing allowed and disallowed public roles for each. As a striking and evident example, consider the recent history of the American South, where Black and White Americans had different degrees of freedom, which affected how these collective identities, and their social worth, were understood. The assignment of value to

personal identity sometimes takes shape of explicit legislation, but very often of (an intended but implicit) result of myriad other policies, from housing, education, policing, healthcare, and similar. Any policy that affects different identity communities differently, other things being equal, is potentially an instance of political value assignment. In any case, this value assignment plays a crucial role in the process of acquisition and evaluation of personal identities. The phenomenon of racial ‘passing,’ characteristic of the segregation era in the United States, is an instance of adopting a personal identity in response to variable political value assignment.⁵

III. 2 *Politics as Output*

Given the foundational role of politics in developing and conceptualizing personal identity, discussing justice in recognition must necessarily account for this role. If we consider it outside existing historical contexts, from some sort of Rawlsian “original position,” we could argue that justice in recognition should aim at assigning equal value to all (otherwise morally appropriate) personal identity claims. However, since no society is without history of some kind of value assignment, justice cannot be successfully achieved by mere proclamations of equal identity value. The field of personal identities in public sphere is not at level due to variable past value assignments, so the aim of justice should be to first even out this field and only then extend equality of value.

In order to do that, societies must approach this process critically and first reflect on what kinds of values (and for what reasons) have been assigned to various identity groups. The new practices of recognition should then start as practices of restitution

⁵ For ‘passing,’ see Mallon (2004).

of equal value, which can be delivered through various public programs of social and economic support. For example, since non-standard gender or sexual identities had unequal value assignments in the past, leveling the identity field requires public support to the communities centered around these identities today. Similar approach should apply to racial or ethnic identities that have had unequal value assignments in the past.

III. 2. 1 *Hard Cases: Transracialism*

Admittedly, there will be hard cases for societies to resolve. By 'hard cases,' I mean identity claims whose justifiability will not be initially evident, or whose social recognition will be affected by the perceived lack of a firm ontological grounding. One of such cases was the recent 'transracial' claim by a person known as Rachel Dolezal, who although coming from a Caucasian descent, identified as Black. Dolezal's identity claim caused a minor (or not so minor) public scandal, involving the philosophical community as well. Some philosophers, such as Rebecca Tuvel, thought that transracial claims should be taken analogously to transgender ones on the basis of the condition of empathy. Following Sally Haslanger's views of identity (Haslanger 2012), Tuvel argues that it is reasonable for a society to accept someone's identity change only if it is possible for that person to know what it's like to exist and be treated as a member of the category X. Absent the possibility for access to what it's like to exist and be treated in society as a black person or as a man (or as an animal), there will be too little commonality to make the group designation meaningful (Tuvel 2017, 272).

Tuvel's views have been subject to harsh criticism, both academic and political, and I don't mean to take part here in either. However, I wish to include her views into the range of possible

responses to this kind of transitional identity assertion. By doing so, I also wish to go beyond discussing the case of Rachel Dolezal. Instead, I will take this case as an instance of the possibility of racial identity transition as such and discuss options for its social and political recognition. As I see it, there are three possible recognition-centered responses to this kind of identity assertion:

- Recognize the assertion because it is justified,
- Reject the assertion because it is unjustified, or
- Conditionally recognize/reject the assertion on the basis of probability.

I will discuss each in turn. I will take Tuvel's argument as the proxy for the first, Tina Fernandes Botts' argument as the proxy for the second, and my argument as the proxy for the third option.

III. 2. 2. *The Argument for Recognition*

The thrust of Tuvel's argument in favor of 'transracialism' is the analogy between gender and race. She thinks that if a society allows for a transition of gender, it should allow the transition of race. The basis of the analogy is Tuvel's suspicion of claims that there is some innate bodily disposition that defines 'what it's like' to be a woman. This suspicion is justified: accepting an exclusive bodily foundation of womanhood (or manhood) is problematic. As Tuvel suggests, experiences of being a woman are incredibly varied, and it is plausible to assume that every individual experience of womanhood is unique. If that is so, then there is no universal bodily denominator for gender.

However, even if we accept this, it does not necessarily follow that embodiment plays no role in a person's claim to feel like a woman or a man. Gender may be a category of social class built on sexual difference, but that doesn't mean that its existence is exclusively due to social causes. Similarly, it doesn't follow that to feel like a woman and to feel like a White person are equivalent in all relevant respects. Moreover, I think the following two propositions are true:

1. Embodiment plays a causal role in gender self-identification (the claim to feel like a man or a woman).
2. Embodiment doesn't play a causal role in racial self-identification (the claim to feel like a White or a Black person).

We could justify these two claims in the following way. First, we could appeal to the difference between *body image* and *body schema*, as elaborated by Shaun Gallagher (Gallagher 2005), on the grounds of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's work (Merleau-Ponty 2012). Namely, the concept of body image tries to explain the appearance of the human body in one's perceptual field. We perceive our bodies through five senses as something that is separate from the subject that does the perceiving. On the other hand, the concept of body schema explains the ways our bodies shape our perceptual fields. Different features of our bodies affect the way we perceive the world.

The main difference between the two is that the "perceptual content of the body image originates in intersubjective perceptual experience" (Gallagher 2005, 26) while the content of the body schema originates in elements that are not ordinarily available to sensory perception, but that significantly shape the way we are.

Basically, the content of our body image is constituted by our interaction with society.

On the other hand, the content of the body schema is largely independent from social influence; it is given to us by our bodily constitution. The concept of body schema refers to a set of ‘sensory-motor functions’ that operate below the level of conscious perception. We can, however, become aware of some parts of the body schema through proprioception. In other words, just as we can know the position of our body without having it in our perceptual field, we can also know other bodily features without them being observable by our senses, such as fatigue, hunger, or sexual drive (Wong 2010). Social forces and categories are powerless in determining how we experience our bodies from the inside. While the image is political, the schema is ontological.

We could construct a distinction analogous to body schema and body image, and posit the difference between *sexual schema* and *sexual image*, where sexual schema pertains to the way our body is ‘sexed’ independently from our consciousness (through hormonal and other automatic internal processes), and sexual image to the way our body appears sexualized to our sensory perception. We access our sexual schema through proprioception and our sexual image through intersubjective perception.

As a product of proprioceptive knowledge, sexual schema is a somewhat vague concept. It does not require existence of certain body parts. Instead, it pertains more to a bodily experience that indicates to the person that acting upon a certain identity assertion is more likely to produce happiness and well-being to the person. If gender aims to represent sex socially, and if sexual self-understanding derives from sexual schema, then individuals could have inner access to true atomic propositions that indicate which gender categories best represent their sexual self-understanding (these gender categories don’t have to exist as social forms). In

other words, individuals could have bodily indicators of their gender membership (or indicators that none of the existing membership categories fit). To “feel like a woman or a man” could also mean just this: to know proprioceptively which gender denomination would be more likely to yield more utility to the person. It is a phenomenological concept that escapes full intellectual grasp from the outsider’s perspective. The sexual schema is, as Gayle Salamon points out, ‘strictly individual,’ or subjective (Salamon 2009, 81-98).

Racial identity is structurally different. If it makes sense to talk of proprioceptively accessible atomic propositions that inform one’s gender identity, it doesn’t make sense to imply the same of race. The amount of melanin in one’s body does not, independently from the political context, shape one’s perceptual field. There is no ‘color schema’ that could serve as the baseline for the identity fit between the person and the category. One cannot know proprioceptively one’s skin color. Therefore, racial identity exists only as a ‘racial image,’ an act of identification generated by the political assignment of value to certain bodily features.

Although both gender and race are social constructs, they are not constructed in an entirely analogous way because they function differently as identities. On the basis of distinction between sexual image and sexual schema, it is plausible to assume that gender identities would in some form exist even if we did not have the gender norms that currently inform our societies. However, it is not plausible to assume that under similar conditions racial identities would exist. Given their different relation to the underlying ontology (schema) and politics (image), gender identity claims seem more grounded in how things really are rather than how things are politically constructed.

III. 2. 3. *The Argument for Rejection*

So, Tuvel's analogy between gender and racial identity does not work. Does that mean that there cannot be transition of racial identities? Perhaps we could reject the transracial claim on the basis of hermeneutical argument, such as the one espoused by Tina Fernandes Botts, who claims that racial identity is nothing more than a context-dependent intersubjective social category. Namely, Botts suggests that transracialism is unintelligible because the hermeneutical understanding of race does not allow for racial transition. She suggests that race is defined by society, which is simply the way things currently are (in the United States). For her, it is a fact that racial identity is

a category of being that is context-dependent and generated collectively through an intersubjective dance between individuals and the worlds they inhabit, and between individuals and other individuals (Botts, 2018, 321).

Botts claims that racial identity is nothing other than this. The current social consensus says that a person's ancestry defines their race, and that's where the story about race and transrace ends. One cannot change one's ancestry; hence, one cannot claim a racial identity that contradicts the existing social consensus on race.

However, this argument has certain problems. First, there is a tension between Botts' overall hermeneutical position and the claim that race is determined by ancestry. Intersubjective positions and context (crucial for hermeneutics) are dynamic and subject to change, but ancestry isn't. If the current American consensus changes, what will happen to the claim about ancestry? For Botts, ancestry is constitutive of racial identity, so it is not clear what role it would play in case societal consensus changed (similar point was

made by Tuvel). The tension is between constructivism, which is inherent to hermeneutics, and naturalism, which is inherent to ancestry-based claims.

Second, it is not clear that hermeneutics offers the best shield against the claim that transracialism is politically possible. One could say, for example, that if the definition of race is based on societal consensus, then wasn't Rachel Dolezal's transition (and Tuvel's defense of it) just an attempt at influencing this societal consensus and changing its contours? If we are hermeneuticists, shouldn't we in principle be open to actions that (re)construct the "intersubjective dance between individuals and the worlds they inhabit?"

In order to resolve some of the problems in both Tuvel's and Botts' accounts, I will argue that the probabilistic concept of identity can give us the normative guidance needed to evaluate racial (or any other) identity transformation. If the acts of self-identification are processed appropriately, then societies are obliged to extend them legal and other recognition. The question about the recognition of identity transformation can be successfully answered through the probabilistic norms of self-identification. 'Transracialism' should not be accepted on the basis of analogy with other trans claims, nor should it be rejected outright because it doesn't reflect our current social consensus on race. The proper liberal response to it should be more nuanced.

III. 2. 4. *The Argument for Conditional Recognition/Rejection*

If we accept the claim that the probabilistic value of some identity assertions can be established intersubjectively, then we could, in both theory and practice, evaluate a transracial identity claim on the basis of the atomic propositions it includes in its inference chain, as well as the inference chain itself.

The way to do that is not without complexity, but it is fairly straightforward and could be done if we determine some things beforehand. Namely, different types of identities will consist of different types of atomic propositions. Some propositions are shared among many identities, while others are specific to each identity type. Depending on the type, unique or shared atomic propositions will vary in inferential relevance, or ‘weight.’ For example, racial or ethnic identities will include (and assign comparatively great weight to) propositions stating facts about the individual ancestry, while gender identities will assign great weight to propositions about persons’ proprioception, or their ‘inner’ sense of gender identification. Every particular identity will depend on a unique configuration of atomic propositions and their corresponding variable weights.

So, in order to evaluate an identity assertion, we have to determine its unique configuration and calculate the probabilistic value of its atomic propositions. To complete the evaluation, we need to compute the probability of the identity assertion being true (its prior probability) given the truth of these atomic propositions (its conditional probability).

For example, let’s consider the following hypothetical scenario. Let ω (the universe of propositions) for some person x include a set of propositions c_i (a unique configuration consisting of individual atomic propositions q, r, s). This means that x has the elements of c_i as the basis of her identity assertion. Let there be two possible identity assertions x could make from the configuration c_i , B and W . Let the prior probability of B and W for x be the same, $P(B) = P(W) = 0.50$ (for example, imagine that x does not have a prior preference toward either of them). Let the propositions have the following interpretation:

$q =$ “I feel q .”

$r =$ “I look like an r .”

$s =$ “My ancestors are s .”

Furthermore, let’s suppose that the likelihood that c_i will cause x to identify as B is 0.70 and to identify as W is 0.10 (imagine that 70% of persons identifying as B s would hold c_i to be true and only 10% identifying as W s would do the same.)

The strength of x ’s B -ness can, per axiom iv, be calculated using Bayes’ rule, as a ratio of the likelihood of c_i given B multiplied by the probability of B , and the probability that c_i is true in either case, B or W . Using the hypothetical probability assignments, that would give us $P(B | c_i) = 0.58$.

This calculation shows that even if x is nearly certain that her atomic propositions from the configuration c_i are true, her (and ours) overall confidence in her B -ness should still be far from absolute certainty (although at around 58% it is still high, granting sufficient reason to believe it).

There are several things that might raise doubts about x ’s B -ness. First, in case x is not sufficiently confident about the truth of the propositions making up the configuration c_i , she (and us) might be doubtful. The Bayesian model proposed here operates with x ’s near certainty about c_i . Second, an unequal prior probability distribution between B and W might (but does not necessarily need to) indicate that x internalized some prior value assignments towards B and W . For example, x might believe that identifying as a B might be more beneficial for her, or instrumental for achievement of some her other desires.

The biggest problem in evaluating propositional configurations such as c_i is, of course, establishing their value intersubjectively.

Some of them could be established independently of x 's opinion, like s . However, how can anyone know x 's feelings of q or objectively judge whether she really looks like an r ? Well, as indicated before, although we cannot access emotional states of other people, we can take x 's behavior as the proxy for the strength of her conviction that she feels q . We could, for example, determine whether x actions in a certain time interval correspond with the conviction of feeling q and to what degree. While this may sometimes be challenging, it is certainly not impossible to do. There is less certainty with propositions like r , though we could rely in part on the societal consensus about physical or bodily cues about some identities (however, we should approach this with caution, given the political nature of aesthetic standards and bodily indicators).

The preceding analysis does not aim to be exhaustive, but to provide an outline of what the evaluation of transitional identity claims could look like. Any identity claim, be it transitional or not, will depend on a universe of relevant atomic propositions, accompanied by some probabilistic values. Instead of blanket recognitions or rejections, societies could design recognition policies centered around the critical probabilistic approach and make decisions in hard cases using the methodology outlined in this section. Given the fact that hard cases of identity transition do not happen that often, applying the method should not be particularly cumbersome.

The virtue of this method is twofold. First, it offers a fairly high degree of precision, enabling us to quantify the ways people make identity assertions using simple insights of the probability theory. Second, it provides for meaningful flexibility, very much needed to formalize something that is already in flux. The probability method allows us to update and change our beliefs about identity assertions

on the basis of available evidence, without losing precision or accuracy of thought.

However, it is important to emphasize that despite this method's use of mathematical and logical concepts, we ultimately can't have certainty in claims about personal identity. The utilization of probabilistic calculus should not trick one into believing that we have finally "unlocked the secret" of personal identification and came up with a fool-proof formula. We should not fetishize mathematics and think that probabilistic statements such as $P(B) = 0.58$ mean anything more than that, all things considered, we seem to have a fairly strong reason to believe that B is true for x . Quantification of probabilistic claims is not a shortcut to truth; it is merely a measure of the strength of specific epistemic reasons we happen to have at a given moment in time.

Conclusion

In this paper, I attempted to conceptualize personal identity in terms of two constitutive properties: ontological and political. In the first part of the paper, I suggested that the ontological properties could be best expressed using a logical structure. I discussed a few possible logical vocabularies for this purpose and concluded that an inductive framework provides the best tools for this. I utilized insights from the theory of probability to show that identity assertions are probabilistic propositions, made through an inferential process from some atomic propositions.

In the second part, I discussed the political properties, both in terms of inputs to identity acquisition, as well as in terms of outputs, as policies for recognition of different identity claims. In order to provide context to the conceptual development of identity, I discussed a 'hard case' of racial identity transition.

The aim of the paper was not to provide an exhaustive view about personal identification, but to offer some initial steps in developing the concept further. Personal identity we share with others is notoriously hard to conceptualize. Perhaps a useful step forward is to think about it in inductive terms and use principles of probability to shine more light on the most intractable problems in its conceptualization.

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