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# Sincerity, Authenticity and Profilicity: Notes on the Problem, a Vocabulary and a History of Identity

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## I. Introduction: The problem of identity

In his seminal essay on the question 'How Can the Mind Participate in Communication', Niklas Luhmann stated: 'The autopoiesis of social systems is nothing more than this constant process of reduction and opening of connective possibilities' (Luhmann 2002, 172). This programmatic pronouncement about society as an evolutionary process of couplings and decouplings is made in the context of an outline of Luhmann's theory of the connection between (human) minds and society. Different from the classical philosophical mind-body problem, which questions if and how the physical and intellectual aspects of human life are integrated with one another, Luhmann, the sociologist, is primarily concerned with what could be called the mind-society problem: How is society related to (human) consciousness? Or, put differently: To what degree is society connected with what humans think, feel or intend? Luhmann's radically 'anti-humanist' answer to the mind-society problem is one of the most controversial elements of his theory: Operationally speaking, minds and society are not connected. As an encompassing system of communication, society consists of communicative operations. Minds, on the other hand, consist of mental operations. Neither kind of communication can connect directly with the other: In order to continue its respective autopoiesis, a mind needs to think or feel, and society needs to communicate; there is no operational link between the two. As Luhmann succinctly stated: 'Humans cannot communicate; not even their brains can communicate; not even their conscious minds can communicate. Only communication can communicate' (Luhmann 2002, 169).

This radical *operational* difference, that is, the radical operational closure of both psychic and social systems, does not mean that these two systemic realms are not connected at all. They are in each other's environment and structurally coupled. Human thought operates in a social environment of communication – we think, for instance, about what we read and hear – and society operates within the environment of human thought – what is said or written often emerges in the context of someone's thoughts and feelings. Without mental operations, this article could not be written and neither could we have academic journals. Both society and thought make use of language, and thus

the common medium of language is the basis of the tight structural coupling, or, to speak with a biological metaphor, of the symbiosis, between minds and society.

While Luhmann's concept of structural coupling does connect minds and society, the concept of operational closure still subverts a traditional idealistic assumption and aspiration that is almost considered common sense even until today, namely that society either is or ought to be guided by human reason. Social institutions are still often conceived of as grounded in human ideas. The law, for instance, can be understood as the result of the human endeavour to make society more just; similarly, the academic system can be understood as a social manifestation of the human desire for knowledge.

For Luhmann, this is clearly not the case. Instead, through evolutionary processes, including the structural coupling between social and mental processes, a legal system has emerged along with a semantics of 'justice'. This semantics allows us to think and speak of justice, but there is no evidence, or any good reason to believe, that there was first the idea of justice in a human's mind, and then, as a consequence, the legal system was introduced in society.<sup>1</sup> Such a theory would amount to some sort of humanist 'creationism', akin to the idea that humans began to walk on their legs because someone had the idea that this would be more fitting to their nature than walking on all fours.<sup>2</sup> In fact, social, bodily and mental processes are, while structurally coupled, operationally closed off to one another – there is no direct causal link between them, none can be reduced to be a mere effect of the other. In other words, they are distinct systems entering into complex environmental relations and interdependencies. They do 'disturb, stimulate, and irritate' (Luhmann 2002, 176) one another – but no system is at the helm of such processes or in a position to causally determine the other. Each system operates according to its own internal structures and cannot be steered or directed from the outside.<sup>3</sup>

If social systems, such as the law or academics, along with their respective social institutions and professions, are neither manufactured by the ingenious human spirit, nor manifestations of inborn human qualities (such as the desire for justice or the quest for knowledge), but rather contingent products of social and mental co-evolution, or in other words, if their existence is due to social and mental, but not 'human', autopoiesis, then the mind–society problem arises: What is the relation between mind and society? – Or, as Luhmann stated it: How can the mind participate in communication? As a social theorist, Luhmann approached this issue mainly from a sociological perspective and asked how society, or, more concretely, communication is 'irritated' by psychic systems. However, the question can also be posed from the other side, not from the point of view of

1. Many cognitive scientists make a similar point arguing that reason often functions as providing reasons *after* a decision or action, not as a motivating force (Cf. Mercier and Sperber 2017).

2. Narratives of the invention of social structures by individual sages or founders of civilization are present in ancient philosophies, such as early Confucianism. See, for instance, the ascription of the invention of five basic social relations (husband–wife, parents–children, rulers–subordinates, older–younger siblings, among friends) to the sage ruler Shun 舜 in *Mencius* (*Mengzi* 孟子) 3A: 4.

3. This is likewise reflected in theories of the 'modular mind' (See also footnote 1).

society, but from the point of view of the mind. In this way, the question becomes a philosophical, or, more specifically, an existential one: What is the relation between me – that is, my mind, my thoughts, my feelings – and my roles in society? How are the different internal (mental) and external (social) aspects of my existence connected? And further, if one assumes with Luhmann that mind and society are operationally unconnected, how can I be a coherent unit of not only mind and body (as the traditional philosophers tended to ask), but, more encompassing, a coherent unit of social persona, mind and body? Simply put, the question is: What is my identity? Or perhaps more cautiously: Do I have an identity to begin with? Such general questions also provoke more specific ones, such as, for instance: How much of my ‘selfhood’ is constituted by my job as professor? Or, even more concretely: To what degree do I express ‘myself’ in this article?

Luhmann, the sociologist, does not answer such philosophical or existential questions, but he acknowledges that they must be posed – at least by a modern individual who becomes aware of the mind–society divide. If society and mental experience are merely structurally coupled, and thus connected, but at the same time operationally closed, and thus unconnected, and if, thereby, the connection between our inner mental life and our outer social life is without hierarchical order, evolutionary contingent, and thus neither founded on reason nor nature, then identity becomes a major problem. The ‘distance between the individual and society’, says Luhmann in *A Theory of Society*, ‘induces the individual to reflect, to ask about the “I” of I, to search for an identity of its own’ (Luhmann 2012, 51). Once we realize how deeply separate our mental self-experience is from our social existence, we see the latter as ‘the outside’ and the former as the ‘inside’. And we begin to ask, as Luhmann says: ‘What, then, is “inside”?’ (Luhmann 2012, 51).

The mind–society problem, however, is not the only feature of modern existence inducing the identity question. This question is also historically grounded in terms of the problematic of social ‘space’ or ‘placement’ – and we will discuss this historical grounding in more detail and with reference to other authors further down in this article. For Luhmann, modern society emerges through the transition from stratified to functional differentiation. The old feudal society of the middle ages was divided into social strata: One was born and thus *placed* into a specific social stratum and assigned a specific social persona such as farmer, knight, priest or artisan.<sup>4</sup> Because of such fixed and self-evident placements, identity questions did not have to be posed:

In the old world, inclusion was concretized by social position, whose normative requirements only then offered the possibility of more or less meeting expectations. Nobody found themselves in a situation of having to explain who they were. Among the upper classes, it sufficed to announce one’s name; in the lower strata of society, people were known in the places where they lived. (Luhmann 2013a, 21)

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4. Max Weber (1958), and later Hartmut Rosa (2013) developing on Weber, have provided detailed analyses of social divisions in terms of social places, or regarding subjects as ‘placeholders’ for roles.

Between the 16th and 18th centuries, European medieval social structures were thoroughly replaced. In the emerging modern world, functional differentiation into a variety of systems constituted a radical reshaping of society. Consequently, society is no longer divided into different strata, or classes of people, but into different functional social spheres such as the economy, education, law, politics and media. The functional structure of society is increasingly global and now characterizes most of contemporary world society. As personas we are socially constituted by our respective inclusions into various function systems or social subsystems: We are students or professors, and voters or party members, and customers, and in the social media system, we have profiles –all of which can become significant in forming modern notions of identity.

In *A Theory of Society*, Luhmann explains in detail what the modern transition to functional differentiation into various social subsystems meant for the individual:

The transition to functional differentiation (...) [provoked] changes whose extent is only now apparent. As with every form of differentiation, it was left to the subsystems to regulate inclusion. But this now meant that concrete individuals could no longer be concretely placed. They had to be able to participate in all functional systems depending on the functional area in which and the code under which their communication was introduced. (...) Individuals now had to be able to participate in all such communications and accordingly switch their couplings with functional systems from one moment to the next. (Luhmann 2013a, 20–1)

In modern society, we are no longer confined to at one place or in one major role with which we can identify, nor do we live within the confines of one particular space. We constantly move between different, operationally disconnected social systems – which often includes travelling in a variety of literal and figurative spaces. From philosophy professor to mountain climber to divorce case client to cancer patient and so on, we are constantly shifting identities as we move through different spaces. Luhmann conceives of this situation as a paradoxical self-division of the (by definition in-divisible) individual into different selves which produces the ‘problem of identity’:

The in-dividual becomes defined by divisibility. It is in need of a musical self for the opera, an ambitious self for the job, a patient self for the family. What remains for itself is the problem of identity. (Luhmann 1993, 223)

As a result of this modern problem of identity, individuals have become unsure about themselves: ‘Society consequently no longer offered them any social status that also defined what the individual “was” in terms of origins and quality’ (Luhmann 2013a, 21). The world is drastically different for the modern individual, Luhmann thinks: ‘The new order of inclusions brings dramatic change to the self-conception of individuals’ (Luhmann 2013a, 21). Along with the multiplicity of

social systems, individuals need to be capable of shifting between different systemic identities, and along with the respective dynamics of these systems, they also need to adjust and reconstitute their various system-tied ‘selves’. Metaphorically speaking, the individual has to learn to swim in an ever-changing ‘liquid modernity’ (Zygmunt Bauman’s 2000) which forces it to often redefine and resituate itself within a never-ending social flux:

More typical of today are situations in which we have to explain who we are; in which we have to send test signals to discover the extent to which others are in a position to judge whom they are dealing with. ‘Education’ or signals are therefore needed that point to the assets at a person’s disposal, and ‘identity’ and ‘self-realization’ become problems. (Luhmann 2013a, 22)

Identity formation has become complicated: Our job does not necessarily indicate our economical wealth, our political commitments or our marital status – and even being married is no longer equated with one particular sexual orientation. Luhmann concludes: ‘A person can therefore not really know who he is, but has to find out whether his own projections find recognition’ (Luhmann 2013a, 22).<sup>5</sup> And he points out that ‘the literature therefore distinguishes between physical-mental existence and “social identity”’ (Luhmann 2013a, 22). This distinction between ‘physical-mental existence’ and ‘social identity’ reflects the body/mind–society problem in its modern shape. Not even touching upon its bodily aspects, the problem is complicated by the fact that both ‘mental existence’ and ‘social identity’ have become increasingly unstable, fragile and convoluted because of functional differentiation. In contemporary society, we can expect that individuals not only change their moods and opinions frequently but also their manner of speaking, their jobs and their partners.<sup>6</sup> So how can we manage, if at all, to establish identity by connecting such drifting and disparate aspects of our ‘selfhood’? From a Luhmannian point of view, modern identity is highly precarious for two reasons: first because of the systemic gap between minds and society, and second because of the fluidity, multiplicity and incoherence of ‘social identity’ under conditions of functional differentiation.

While Luhmann diagnosed the problem of identity and outlined the structural conditions of its emergence, he neither made it the subject of a monograph nor did he address in any detail the strategies that have been employed in order to deal with it. To take on the task of studying the problem of identity, and of various methods to ‘solve’ it, we feel that it is prudent to begin with a terminological clarification of some key concepts. This is what we intend to do in the following section.

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5. Erving Goffman has provided a detailed study of how to deal with this particular challenge in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959).

6. This is frequently referred to as ‘situational identity’.

## II. A vocabulary of identity

### Self, persona and identity

As preparation for addressing the mind–society divide and the related problem of identity as diagnosed by Luhmann from a philosophical perspective, we would like to outline a very brief glossary of terms. Luhmann himself is actually not very precise in his own use of terminology regarding selfhood. He mostly uses *Individuum* (normally translated into English as ‘individual’) when speaking of human beings as what may be called ‘existential entities’. But, at least to our knowledge, he never defined the exact theoretical usage of the term – despite having provided a lengthy treatment of the semantic history of individuality (Luhmann 1993; see also Moeller 2004). On the other hand, he speaks of *Person* (‘person’ or ‘persona’ in English) when referring to the ‘social identity’ of an individual, or more precisely, when referring to ‘participants in communication’ who are ‘identified’ and ‘addressed in communication’ (Luhmann 2012, 59). We will now try to modify, extend and specify this terminology for the philosophical purposes of working towards a more dynamic discussion of identity.

**Self.** ‘Self’ will be used here to designate the mental aspect of what Luhmann refers to as the ‘physical-mental existence’ of the individual. In short, the self is the ‘I’ that we experience in our thoughts and feelings. It is, in modified Kantian terms, the non-transcendental or empirical unity of our perception that accompanies all our thoughts and feelings – which we cannot but experience as *our* thoughts and experiences. Arguably, then, newborn children do not yet have such a self. It is formed when we think and feel in the first-person perspective; it actually is the ‘reification’, or perhaps better, the *subject* of all cognitive and emotional contents of the first-person perspective. It is what ‘owns’ our thoughts and feelings, our sensations of pain and lust, our dreams and desires, our doubts and despair – everything that we experience as our inner life. This self is continuous over time, although, of course, highly dynamic and fluid. Its contents change constantly; we feel and think differently all the time, but we normally do think of ourselves as the continued inner self that we have always been since we began conceiving of ourselves in terms of a self in the first place.

**Persona.** Similar to Luhmann’s definition of the term *Person*, we will use ‘persona’ to designate the personal ‘addressee of communication’. It is the one who gets promoted or fired, who gets elected or charged with a crime and who signs a contract or fails an exam. Personas have social media accounts; they have money, own cars and are pictured on passports. They can be fingerprinted, photographed and, more generally, *observed* in society. More recently, they can also be ranked and rated – as professors, Airbnb hosts or guests or as Uber drivers. On *Facebook* or *Twitter*, they can be friended and followed.

Speaking in a different terminology – employed, for instance, by Erving Goffman (1959),

but also by Lionel Trilling (1972) and by the contemporary Confucian thinkers Henry Rosemont Jr. (2016) and Roger Ames (2011) – they are the bearers of roles. They are fathers and mothers, daughters and sons, teachers and students, superiors and subordinates. Personas are expected to speak and behave in accordance with their roles so that they can actually exercise them properly, and they need to be spoken to and behaved towards in a certain way as well. Personas exist within a framework of social conventions, rituals, rules, regulations, norms and codes. They can be disciplined and punished, or praised and rewarded. They can be morally condemned or revered as heroes or saints. Crucially, they must be distinguishable from one another. No persona is just like any other.

**Identity.** The term identity is meant to designate the physical, mental and social *composite* that a self can identify with and that a persona can be identified as. It is composed of, but critically transcends, bodily features, elements of the self and characteristics of the persona. It can incorporate ethnical and gender attributes, sexual preferences, age and skin colour characteristics, height and weight and a medical history. It can contain religious beliefs and political convictions, deeply engrained sympathies and aversions, love and hate, tastes and addictions. It can be tied to a medical history and a career path, university degrees and personal property; and it can be associated with the languages one speaks, the books one has read or the discrimination one has suffered. Identity is shaped through the integration of bodily, mental and social aspects. It is supposed to connect these systemically disconnected realms. Through the constitution of an ‘identity’ the self and society suggest to themselves that such a connection exists and that it can be congruent and coherent. In Luhmannian terms used above, it is the ‘self-conception of individuals’ or, a ‘projection’; and the individuals’ task is to find out whether this projection can ‘find recognition’ in society. In other words, it is a projection that needs to be successfully communicated in society so that the self can eventually believe in and adopt it and that society can communicate it.

### **Paradigms of identity**

From a philosophical perspective, the problem of identity can be conceived of as an existential task: The self has to develop a self-conception – it has to think and feel as a specific self – and it has to be able to project this conception towards society so that it is being ‘recognized’ (although we are not sure that the Hegelian connotations of this term are warranted in contemporary social contexts) on the outside as what it thinks and feels it is on the inside. In other words, the self and the persona have to match and mutually support one another so that identity is achieved. This process of achieving identity is synchronic, dynamical and dialectical: self-conception, self-projection and acknowledgement of the self as a persona in society are constantly reinforcing and challenging one another. The formation of an experience of identity emerges as the result of the successful efforts of the self to affirm the persona that society associates it with (and, also, to the body it perceives as its own). Through identity, society identifies the self in the form of a corresponding persona, and the

mind complements the persona with a corresponding self.

Following Luhmann, society and selves (as minds) are structurally coupled through the medium of language. Language is the medium in which sense or meaning (*Sinn*) is constructed. In this way, certain linguistically expressed sense patterns allow minds and society to cooperate in the efforts to construct identity. The construction of identity takes place as sense-making. Society articulates certain vocabularies and a certain semantics of identity – often in moral or normative terms – that the self can adopt in the form of ideas and inner experiences. Insofar as a self actually thinks and feels along with an identity semantics, or senses of identity that society provides, we can speak of an existential vocabulary, or of existential paradigms. Existential paradigms are models of identity commonly practiced and exercised by self and society. They are ‘lived’ vocabularies in the sense that they constitute a framework of meaning along which selves think and feel and along which society communicates.

Such existential paradigms and models of identity shift historically and are regionally and culturally different – which is no great wonder given their formulation in specific language-based vocabularies. There is a multiplicity of languages, and all of them change over time – and in some historical periods, as in the present one, they change with great speed. However, it seems that existential paradigms are not strictly relative to a specific time, language, culture or region. Certain basic existential paradigms of identity can be found in various periods and languages. Luhmann stated with respect to the relation between social structures and semantics that there is a ‘mixture between continuity and discontinuity’ (Luhmann 1993, 7). Similarly, we assume, existential paradigms are related to the historical, linguistic and cultural contexts in which they occur, but they are not determined or caused by such environmental conditions. Some paradigms seem to flourish more prominently than others at specific times and places, but they can well overlap, or even be in competition with one another at the same place and location. This is especially true in a highly complex and multifaceted ‘late’ or ‘post’modern global society. Here, we would like to present a very short glossary of such existential paradigms.

We start our overview with a paradigm that was of particular prominence in earlier historical periods, namely ‘sincerity’. This paradigm, in the definition of Lionel Trilling, allows for constituting identity through sincerely living up to a public role.

***Sincerity and devotion.*** Lionel Trilling has located the existential paradigm of sincerity in an (early) modern European context in his intriguing study on *Sincerity and Authenticity* (1972). Here, Trilling conceives of ‘sincerity’ as being ‘true to one’s own self for the purpose of avoiding falsehood to others’. Because of this ‘external’ purpose sincerity has ‘a public end in view’, so that it is achieved from the ‘esteem and fair repute that follow upon the correct fulfillment of a public role’ (Trilling 1972, 9). In his analysis of sincerity, Trilling has in mind the early modern European bourgeois citizen who is defined through his profession and his roles, for instance, as a family patriarch and as a public political figure. In Trilling’s analysis, a sincere identity is formed when

the 'Me' lives up to such public 'roles'. Trilling's 'Me' corresponds to what we call the 'self', and the public roles constitute what we have defined, following Luhmann, as the 'persona'. Thereby, a sincere self-conception, and sincere identity formation, consists in the alignment of the self with the social expectations tied to a persona. What Trilling means by sincerely being true to oneself is, for instance, that a judge enacts his role by being actually just, and that as a father he is truly fatherly. The self has to incorporate the assumed qualities of the role, and thereby the persona will be rewarded with 'fair repute'.

Accordingly, three core aspects of the sincerity paradigm are honesty, commitment and being sociable. Sincere identity formation means that the self has to align its feelings and intentions with its roles, and its thoughts have to correspond to the communications ascribed to it. Furthermore, it has to proactively commit itself to its roles and not just 'play' them. A sincere judge will not only truly believe in his judgements, but also existentially commit himself to being a judge. He will accept this role as his 'calling' and believe in the significance and necessity of the role. Since sincerity is geared towards the 'fulfilment of a public role', the sincere persona must be sociable. Commitment to a role also means commitment to the social context within which roles emerge, as every role is part of a social relation. Therefore, commitment to a role also implies commitment to an organization, a group, a community or something of the kind.

While Trilling locates the sincerity paradigm in early modern European society, Moeller and D'Ambrosio (2017) associate it with a Confucian ethics (as formulated in Ames 2011 and Rosemont 2016) as well. It seems evident that in both early China as well as in large parts of present-day East Asia (e.g. China, Korea) Confucian family values such as 'filial piety' (*xiao*) represent a semantics of identity formation that is widely practiced and serves as a model for many selves in society.

Another contemporary example for the endurance of the paradigm of sincerity is the emergence of a 'New Sincerity' movement in North American society. As a political and aesthetic paradigm opposing irony, New Sincerity propagates honest language and serious social commitment (see Wampole 2012; Fitzgerald 2012).

Religious or ideological *devotion* is a specific subset of the paradigm of sincerity. The devoted self will shape an identity by honestly committing to a sacred or secular belief system and integrate itself into a group which represents it – such as a religious community or a political party or faction. Clearly, this existential paradigm transcends historical and cultural boundaries – it is just as ancient as it is modern (given the recent surge of religious and political fundamentalism), and equally powerful in Eastern and Western, and Southern and Northern, cultural or linguistic contexts. However, a sincerity-based identity paradigm along with its orientation towards certain groups is increasingly challenged by what the sociologist Ulrich Beck has called the 'hyperindividualization' of modern society (see Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002) and, in part, gives way to authenticity.

***Authenticity, individualism and irony.*** According to Trilling, early modern sincerity was eventually replaced by authenticity. Trilling depicts the transition from sincerity to authenticity,

which he finds at least indirectly described in Hegel's *Phenomenology of the Spirit*, quite poetically. Eventually, he says, we discover:

that somewhere under all the roles there is Me, that poor old ultimate actuality, who, when all the roles have been played, would like to murmur 'Off, off, you lendings!' and settle down with his own original actual self. (Trilling 1972, 9–10)

Authenticity emerges as the discovery of the paradoxical disingenuousness of a sincere existence. The self that sincerely commits to socially prescribed roles is seen as a traitor of the 'original, actual self'. The paradigm of authenticity reverses the vector of identity formation, rather than pointing from the outside to the inside, it now points from the inside to the outside. The self is no longer required to derive its identity from the social persona, but, to the contrary, it is supposed to create a social persona on its own inner image. Accordingly, notions of honesty, commitment and sociability are overshadowed by concerns with originality (or uniqueness), creativity and independence. The social persona is now expected to reflect the unique individual – identity has to be special, otherwise it is not true identity. Such originality must manifest itself in creativity. If the individual is never to be fully expressed by prescribed social roles, then the persona must be invented – and who else other than the self could do this, if it is to be an *authentic* persona? Consequently, the dependency on social relations is diminished. An authentic existence does not necessarily have to take place 'outside of society' (Smith and Kaye 1978), but it will aim at creating a space inside society which is supposed to be different and independent from conventional social formations and groups.

Individualism is a paradigm that is closely related to, and often merged with, authenticity. It belongs in the same existential family as authenticity since it also emphasizes originality, creativity and independence. Perhaps, as Trilling implies, it is the more primary paradigm that begot authenticity in the first place. In any case, its focus is more radically on originality than on creativity.

As mentioned, Niklas Luhmann pointed to the fact that 'in-dividuality' as derived from Latin, means indivisibility. It is linguistically parallel to the Greek notion of the *a-tom*. Humans were conceived to be 'individuals' in the ancient world because it was believed that they had indivisible souls. Initially, this concept indicated the ontological and theological essence of human beings. In modernity, however, individualism arises in the context of a conflict between individual rights (initially primarily the right to private property) and society. The tension between individual and society eventually gives rise to the idea that society is not only composed of individuals, but that its purpose is to protect and serve the rights of the individual. In the eyes of critics of individualism like Henry Rosemont (2016), this brought about a paradoxically antisocial understanding of society dominating current Western countries which needs to be abolished. Be that as it may, the idea of individualism is based on the assumption that everyone is born as a unique and single

individual. Somewhat contradictory to a radical concept of authenticity, the individual is therefore not something that we must create, but it is already naturally provided. The notion of such an individuality has been paradigmatically expressed by Jean Jacques Rousseau at the beginning of his *Confessions*:

I am not made like any that I have seen; I venture to believe that I was not made like any that exist. If I am not more deserving, at least I am different. As to whether nature did well or ill to break the mould in which I was cast, that is something no one can judge until after they have read me. (Rousseau 2000, 5)

Eventually, however, both the individualistically and the authentically conceived ‘I’ will have to be creative in inventing its social persona and its identity. The difference is that while the individual ‘I’ is taken to be supplied with its own self at birth, the authentic ‘I’ has to create this self along with its identity. This difference may or may not be seen as merely technical or trivial.

In the 20th century, Richard Rorty has presented a variation of authentic existence: the figure of the ironist (1989). The ironist is a pragmatic character who does not ultimately commit to any truth claim. For him, all conventional vocabularies and ideas are provisional and he does not seriously adopt any for once and for all – he rather takes them with a grain of salt. Rorty says that the ironist:

is trying to get out from under inherited contingencies and make his own contingencies, get out from under an old final vocabulary and fashion one which will be all his own. The generic trait of ironists is that they do not hope to have their doubts about their final vocabularies settled by something larger than themselves. This means that that their criterion for resolving doubts, their criterion of private perfection, is autonomy rather than affiliation to a power other than themselves. All any ironist can measure success against is the past – not by living up to it, but by redescribing it in his terms, thereby becoming able to say, ‘Thus I willed it’. (Rorty 1989, 97)

The ironist never allows society to overrule his own autonomy. The self remains in command. It uses conventional vocabularies idiosyncratically in order to maintain its sovereignty. The ironist does not let the non-originality of external vocabularies taint his originality. He engages in (ironic) identity construction with the means of originality, creativity and independence. Despite his emphasis on uniqueness, the ironist may have historic predecessors, though. Socratic, Zhuangzian, Romantic and Kierkegaardian irony are all candidates for comparisons with Rorty’s irony.

**Proflicity.** After Trilling (1972), sincerity and authenticity, along with related models of identity, have been discussed in the relevant philosophical literature (see Taylor 2007). It seems, however, that more recent social and technological developments have brought to the fore a third existential

paradigm that deserves attention. For lack of a better term, we will provisionally call it ‘proficiency’.<sup>7</sup> Proficiency is, we believe, the dominant paradigm for constructing identity under the social condition of pervasive ‘second-order observation’.

Luhmann described the radical shift to modern society not only in terms of the replacement of stratified differentiation with functional differentiation, but also, at least in his later works, in terms of the increasing ubiquity of *second-order observation*: ‘A consequence of functional differentiation that is just as important is the far-reaching shift in observation to second-order observation’ (Luhmann 2013a, 102). Second-order observation ‘has become the advanced mode of perceiving the world in modern society’ (Luhmann 2013b, 100). In what may be called the completion of modern society according to Luhmann, ‘all functional systems were adapted operationally to second-order observation, to the observation of observers’ (Luhmann 2012, 87).

The concept of second-order observation is, we think, the most pertinent concept for understanding present-day society. Simply put, it means not directly observing something, but rather observing it as it is observed by someone else. Luhmann says that it is ‘the perception of what others say or do not say’ (Luhmann 2013b, 100). This happens every time something is seen on a screen, be it a TV programme, a video on the Internet or a friend’s Instagram page or Twitter account. When looking at the ratings of a restaurant or a hotel, we also operate in the form of second-order observation –or when reading a book review or checking the latest university rankings. Concrete examples of second-order observation, which developed on a full-fledged scale only after Luhmann’s death in 1998, are rating agencies in the economy, the peer-review process in the academic system and social media communication in the new mass media.

In essence, the structure of second-order observation has been illustrated decades prior to Luhmann by the economist John Maynard Keynes in his thought experiment of the ‘beauty contest’—which was designed as a model to describe the functioning of financial markets (Keynes 1936, 156). It can serve equally well as a model of second-order observation. Elena Esposito summarizes its basic idea:

It is not a case of choosing those [faces] that, to the best of one’s judgment, are really the prettiest, nor even those that average opinion genuinely thinks the prettiest. We have reached the third degree where we devote our intelligences to anticipating what average opinion expects the average opinion to be. (Esposito 2013, 4–5).

In second-order observation, value –such as financial value, beauty value, moral value or, as we intend to outline here, *personal value* –is determined by second-order observation ranking

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7. We thank David Stark for suggesting this term as an improvement of the earlier attempts ‘proficiency’ and ‘profilability’. It is derived from Sherry Turkle’s studies on the identity constructions through the use of social media. She quotes, for instance, a person named Stan saying: ‘What I learned in high school was profiles, profiles, profiles, how to make a me’ (Turkle 2017, 183).

and rating mechanisms that determine ‘what average opinion expects the average opinion to be’. Not the ‘object’ (i.e. the product, the university, the face, the human being) itself is observed, but how it is observed by observing agencies, rating mechanisms or review processes that are taken to be representative of formulating ‘public opinion’. Borrowing a term used by Walter Benjamin in his reflections on photography, we may say that second-order observation promotes the *Ausstellungswert* or ‘exhibition value’ (Benjamin 1955) over all other values – or transforms them into exhibition value. In order to generate personal value, one has to exhibit one’s identity on presentation platforms that allow second-order observation mechanisms to verify it.

Social media is perhaps the best example for second-order observation. Photos or messages are posted on these social media sites within a framework of second-order observation; they allow us to see how someone is being observed by him- or herself and by others, and they are produced with the knowledge that they are seen in this way. They are thoroughly manufactured *for* second-order observation. New apps are readily available to assist in such manufacturing (Fan 2017). Today, the operation of social media is done through a structural coupling of the mass media and the intimacy system, a coupling that was largely unimaginable just a few decades ago. However, it is not only social media that functions this way. As Luhmann stressed, many systems, including most notably the economy, the academic system and tourism, function this way as well.

We now exist with and within such systems and have to construct identity accordingly. Arguably, second-order observation has weakened, but not totally obliterated, the sincerity and the authenticity paradigms. Attitudes such as honesty or originality hardly seem to suffice anymore to achieve identity formation under these conditions. What is now called for is the successful communicative presentation of identity, potentially including one’s sincerity, authenticity and/or irony, in the form of a *profile*. One achieves identity by achieving exhibition value through ‘profilicity’ within social systems that function along with second-order observation.<sup>8</sup>

The three core aspects of profilicity are (a) distinctness or visibility resulting in *quantitative attention*, (b) a certain ‘coolness’, or other forms of ‘excellence’ resulting in *qualitative acclaim* and (c) coherence with generally expected ethical expectations in a given context (e.g. political, academic or aesthetic) resulting in *normative approval*. The triple-A presentation of identity (i.e. those achieving attention, acclaim and approval) is capable of generating exhibition value.

Like an authentic existence, a profilic existence has to be special, but special in essentially the same way as others are special.<sup>9</sup> Profile pictures on a website appear in the same format and have to follow a set of basic rules: no nudity and nothing politically or religiously offensive, for instance – though depending on the nature and ‘ethos’ of the website, the opposite can also be called for to achieve visibility. Academic profile photos provide a good example as well; many fall

8. For a more detailed discussion of ‘profilicity’ and its relation to the speeding up of society and Hartmut Rosa’s work, see D’Ambrosio (2018).

9. Anthony Giddens has described this sublation of difference in sameness as a basic rule of authenticity as well: ‘All self-development depends on the mastering of appropriate responses to others; an individual who has to be “different” from all others has no chance of reflexively developing a coherent self-identity’ (Giddens 1991, 200).

into one of two categories: the erudite-looking scholar in the office, or the adventurous traveller hiking or posing by mountain or lake. The unique style of one's profile picture is not derived from one's inborn or created uniqueness, but from the format by which academic profile pictures signal uniqueness. Different from authenticity, under conditions of second-order observation, the source of profilic distinctness, unlike the source of originality, is observation-centred as opposed to being self-centred – it is geared towards gaining attention. Simply put, it is primarily the profile picture that needs to be distinct, not me. My own distinctness will follow and be shaped in line with the attention, acclaim and approval generated by my presentation.

Excellence, style or 'coolness' must complement mere visibility. Academic papers need to pass a second-order observation-based peer-review process of a well-reputed journal in order to be considered of academic quality. The mere presentation of a video on a social media website without confirmation of it being liked lacks exhibition value. When checking a restaurant or a hotel on a commercial website, people not only look at the pictures, price and location, but also, and perhaps more closely, at the reviews. In this way, profilic identity is essentially tied not only to visibility, but also to visible acclaim.

Of increasing importance for maintaining profilicity is to avoid moral ostracization. Just as a brand name can be ruined by being associated with immoral practices of a company, a profilic identity can be destroyed by being publicly shunned or shamed. Someone unfortunate enough to be shunned by their peers will, under conditions of second-order observation, not primarily be considered to be 'insincere' or 'inauthentic', but become non-profilic. Others will make sure to distance themselves from any association with or endorsement of the culprit – who will be unfriended, no longer cited by their peers or have their accounts discontinued. In this way, approval becomes an indispensable condition for maintaining profilicity. Without approval, a profilic identity can be tarnished beyond repair.

### **III. From sincerity to authenticity to profilicity: The emergence of a (late) modern paradigm of identity**

After having suggested a brief and preliminary glossary for analysing constitutive and dynamic aspects of the problem of identity, we now intend to reiterate in a somewhat more detailed fashion than in the previous section the specific development from sincerity to authenticity and eventually to what we have called 'profilicity'. In this section, we intend to imbed this neologism more thoroughly into existing social and political theories of modernity. We wish to suggest that the paradigm of 'profilicity' is of particular relevance for new '*very*' *late modern* ways of dealing with the problem of identity that are presently replacing modern, or late modern, forms of authenticity as they have been described, for instance, by Hartmut Rosa, or Anthony Giddens.

Although we argue that each of the three paradigms sincerity, authenticity and profilicity can be found, to some degree, in any period, and that they often coexist and may allow a self to pursue

different strategies of identity formation more or less simultaneously, aligning them with broad historical periods can help exposing intricacies of the development of the problem of identity. Paradigms compete with one another over time in establishing what Anthony Giddens (1991) has called ‘ontological security’.

### **The rise of authenticity in the context of the modern displacement of the individual through functional differentiation and dynamization**

In pre-modern society, ontological security was often tied to the placement of the persona in a relatively fixed social space. As Luhmann put it, people rarely had to explain who they were, and specifically not, we assume, to themselves. Such a placement, along with a set of corresponding roles, was able to provide a reasonably informative background for establishing a standard for interaction. Concretely, this led to relative congruity expected between, for instance, one’s occupation, attire, economic power, literacy and vocabulary and religious or political views. Sincerity meant a commitment of the self to such a congruity that in turn would constitute an identity.

The relative inefficiency and danger of travelling meant that pre-modern societies enjoyed an additional layer of stability in terms of a cushioning provided by, albeit shifting, spatial boundaries.<sup>10</sup> Compared with the modern age, people did not move about as easily, meaning that one’s position was not only a figurative ‘place’ in society, but also that most people tended to be literally located in a particular area for an extended period of time. The confines of space generally included a limited number of known participants, which bolstered the understanding and affirmation of each persona’s role-based identity. One is, for example, the smith not only at his workshop, but at the market, at church and in the streets. After all, everyone in town knows who he is: the smith. In Europe, the development of the ‘family names’, such as ‘Smith’, often followed this pattern; they were commonly derived from a placement into a profession or locality that was taken to be determining. Similarly, in China, surnames indicated the placement within a specific lineage which was also envisioned to remain stable over time.

In modern society, literal and figurative displacement increases along with functional differentiation. Hartmut Rosa (2013) describes the ‘dynamization’ of society as a centre-piece of modernization. This notion speaks to not only the speeding up of certain aspects of life, but also ‘dynamic stabilization’—the idea that some facets of today’s societies paradoxically require constant change in order to remain constant. The existential impact is colossal. For example, today’s ease of travel means that space is far less relevant for identity construction, especially for those living in, travelling to and moving between the increasingly anonymous cities. When one is not

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10. There are, of course, many exceptions. Certain groups of people travelled constantly, and some covered huge distances. However, when compared with modern societies, and especially the past few decades, travel in pre-modern societies was extremely slow and relatively limited (see Rosa 2013).

meaningfully recognized, sometimes even within their own neighbourhoods, various earlier factors in the development of identity are unavoidably subverted. Sincerity, for example, is more difficult to maintain and loses its foundation in social structures and the 'lifeworld'. A drastic change can therefore be seen in the adoption of various manifestations of individualism.

New external pressures fed into the conception of a detached decision-making power in the modern, and supposedly free, individual. Society no longer expected the same degree of reverent 'living up to' one's predetermined roles. Instead it demanded a capacity to choose for oneself. Choice extended to areas previously controlled by social status, the church, politics and thickly associated social norms. Everything from clothing and marriage, to occupation and sexual orientation, could, one after the other, be reconfigured as a result of the exercise of individual agency, and therefore became an indication of identity. Coupled with the dissolution of social roles and thick normative systems, the individual was ascribed with a new degree of agency that it had to make use of in order to achieve identity.

The divisibility that therein developed meant, however, that the self became more complex. Eventually, the smith could no longer simply be a smith –and to be named Smith no longer provided social identification and became insignificant. In modernity, choices and their associated identity constructions were begetting of decisions; often a single choice could determine one's marital status, or political leanings, for a lifetime. We find this in the classic American 'Fordist' mentality; namely, a good job with fair wages and decent benefits *for life*. After finding a spouse and settling into a long-term mortgage, one could reasonably expect that few major changes or challenges to identity would occur outside the chosen path. Modern individual identity is thus, as Rosa argues, linked with a '*Bildungsroman*, the coming-of-age novel or developmental narrative':

[...] the space of experience and the horizon of expectations [...] allow one to conceive of one's life (as well as the development of society) as a directed motion and not to have to carry on traditions in a [sic] unreflective way and [...] the horizon of expectations remains stable enough to allow long-run, time-resistant life perspectives to develop, the gratification of needs to be systematically postponed, and the completions of the biographical pattern to be patiently awaited. (Rosa 2013, 230)

Here, one's life, and identity, are not determined by placement through birth to the degree they were in pre-modern societies. In modern society, one has options which are given as trajectories – each harbouring their own straightforward path and particular *telos*. One must choose to work at a factory, go to college or sign up for the army. Each has a different end goal, but they are all paths promising the formation of an individual identity. And once in route little variance should be expected.

In high or late modern society, expectations for a lifetime are undermined as the relative stability of space and place collapse even further. What was guaranteed from generation to generation in

pre-modern society, and then promised for a lifetime in modernity, is now subject to constant yearly, daily or even momentary disruptions. Making, again, a great American ‘Ford factory’ dream largely is no longer possible. In late modern societies, people change jobs with increasing frequency, as they do their place of residence, partners and various other identity-conferring commitments. Consequently, a sincere commitment to social roles and functions becomes less and less determining of identity.

According to Rosa’s diagnosis, the dynamization of late modernity further disrupts the self’s previous anchoring in a particular social place and familiar space. Importantly, this dynamization occurs not simply ‘out there’ in society. Related to instrumental reason, obsessive calculation, teleological thinking and the desire to control nature, the dynamization in late modern societies affects thoughts, feelings and attitudes. For example, presented with several options for a flight between cities we begin to think instrumentally about which fits our schedule best. The criterion for picking a flight is almost inevitably ‘What allows me to do more’ or ‘How can I decrease downtime between activities’—be it in terms of work, sunbathing or even sleep. Not only are we less and less amazed at going halfway around the world in 15 h, it becomes a bother, a chore, something to ‘deal with’. The flight itself is just something to ‘be done with’ so that we can move on to the next *functional* activity. And external expectations have adjusted accordingly. ‘Can’t you just fly in for the afternoon?’ ‘Oh, if you’ll be in Europe anyways why not come to...’ ‘Through internalizing these pressures we convince ourselves of what *must* be done; ‘If I take the redeye I can be at work in the morning’. In other words, as options and various external demands speed up, we compartmentalize our time accordingly, optimizing it to have as little downtime (free time) as possible. Naps are ‘powered’ through, time with the family must be ‘quality’ and child play is scheduled as a ‘date’. Even the more relaxing pleasures of exercise, yoga, meditation or just ‘downtime’ are often self-inflicted ploys to ‘recharge’ for a more functional tomorrow. The adoption of ‘dynamized thinking’ accompanies a compartmentalization of identity—the existential mandate of functional differentiation.

Echoing Luhmann in some respects, Rosa uses the term ‘situational self’ to designate an incongruent composite of various personas and selves which need to be combined with one another in the absence of an overarching unity. Rosa describes situational identity:

A radically situational identity is marked out by the fact that a subject can be, say, faithful and introverted in church, ‘soft and feminine’ in intimate relationships, chauvinistic and full of vitality at work, pacifist and counterculture at a peace demonstration, militantly aggressive and atheistic at the party convention, all without feeling the related inconsistencies as problematic. (Rosa 2013, 240)

Here, Rosa describes the ‘problem of identity’ very similarly to Luhmann, who spoke of different selves needed for the job, the family and the opera. Interestingly enough, though, Rosa

concludes that such inconsistency may not be considered problematic anymore. We suggest that this achievement – that neither the self nor society considers inconsistent functional personas as a problem – is based on a transition from one paradigm of identity, namely sincerity, to others such as individualism, authenticity and now also proficiency.

The challenge to identity in modernity and late modernity was well charted by Anthony Giddens in his book on *Modernity and Self-Identity* (1991). Here, Giddens argues that in modernity and late modernity, ‘the self establishes a trajectory’ whereby ‘coherence’ can only be established ‘through the reflexive use of the broader social environment’ which requires unparalleled levels of the ‘impetus towards control, [and being] geared to reflexivity’ (Giddens 1991, 148). These ‘new mechanisms of self-identity’ are required given the ‘disembedding mechanisms [which] intrude into the heart of self-identity’ in modern and late modern societies (Giddens 1991, 148). The ‘disembedding mechanisms’ are those that, as we outlined above, ‘prise [pry] social relations free from the hold of specific locales, recombining them across wide time-space distances’ (Giddens 1991, 2). The self, however, does not simply ‘empty out’. Rather, it forms a new self-mastery ‘over the social relations and social contexts [that are] reflexively incorporated into the forging of self-identity’ (Giddens 1991, 149). Giddens summarizes: ‘the ontological security which modernity has purchased, on the level of day-to-day routines, depends on an institutional exclusion of social life from fundamental existential issues which raise central moral dilemmas for human beings’ (Giddens 1991, 156). Replacing the final words ‘which raise central moral dilemmas for human beings’ with ‘which raise central identity dilemmas for human beings’ demonstrates what is existentially at stake. The conditions of modernity and late modernity have directly led to the dismemberment of a pre-modern sincerity-focused identity.

For Giddens, the solution is to ‘reflexively make’ the self, which ‘has to be accomplished amid a puzzling diversity of options and possibilities’ (Giddens 1991, 3). Essentially, Giddens thereby expresses a call for authenticity. Being divorced from its social roles the self is required to construct identity by either creating (authenticity) or discovering (individualism) itself. Often the two distinct approaches are part of a broader project of identity, which, following Taylor, can be grouped together under a broader notion of ‘authenticity’, that includes both individualism (as self-discovery) and authenticity (as self-creation) in the narrower sense.

In authenticity looms, a certain dejection of the different personas tied to different social functions. The social placements that provided fixed reference points for identity no longer hold up. When they are enacted or theatrically staged with a certain degree of cynicism, as Goffman (1959) described it quite brilliantly, they can serve negatively as the backboard for constructing identity *against* or in spite of them. Irony is then turned to as personas are more compartmentalized and the gap between distinct social roles, and between them and the self, becomes too large to ignore. The self can no longer settle into one, or even a couple of functions, placements or roles, and develops an ironic form of conscious ‘role-play’. Given their obvious mutual incongruity, the self can turn to an ironic, non-committed attitude towards its multiple personas as a further variation of

authenticity-based identity.

There is, predictably, a traditionalist backswing against modern and late modern multiple function-based identity construction. Demands for a ‘new sincerity’ have been expressed. Richard Sennett, for example, argues for a return to a ‘craft’ ethos where work can offer ordinary people self-development and supply identity (Sennett 2009).<sup>11</sup> Defenders of a new sincerity decry what they perceive as moral shortcomings in today’s society with its overemphasis on individualism, authenticity or irony. However, theoretically, the plea to return to a culture dominated by sincerity seems, like remaking America’s great Fordism, a nostalgic appeal for bygone times. As Rosa remarks:

In late modernity self-projects that are oriented toward stability appear to be anachronistic and condemned to failure in a highly dynamic environment, while forms of identity based on flexibility and readiness to change are systematically favored. (Rosa 2013, 243)

Again, this is not to say that sincerity has been completely abandoned – the very appeals to it show that it is still considered to be of some moral value – but rather that roles have become less and less individually relevant and socially significant in functionally differentiated societies. While we agree that thinking of oneself as father, daughter or welder might certainly be useful at times, individualism, authenticity and irony have become at least as important in the late modern world for successfully achieving a notion of identity.

### **The rise of proficity in the context of a ‘very’ late modern prevalence of second-order observation**

However, the central point that we intend to convey in this essay is that in current times of ‘very’ late modernity, the age of authenticity is being overcome, and that another paradigm of identity is on the rise: proficity. Proficity deals with the challenges posed by today’s ‘disembedding mechanisms’ in a novel fashion. Whereas sincerity hopes to find reassurance in external norms and the authenticity paradigm turns inward for both self-discovery and creation, proficity finds an entirely new space for social place. With proficity security is found in the external through self-presentation and identity construction in the mode of second-order observation.

The rhetoric associated with the ‘Age of Authenticity’ has become worn out. Variations of ‘be yourself’, ‘find yourself’ and ‘create yourself’ now paint billboards and Internet advertisements with numbing frequency. Being original does not mean standing out; it is, paradoxically, what everyone is asked to do. Having nestled quite snugly into widespread acceptance, authenticity is now obviously inauthentic (which is not to say that it ever was authentic).

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11. A similar emphasis on sincerity is found in the works of the contemporary Confucian thinkers Henry Rosemont Jr. (2016) and Roger Ames (2011) who have formulated a ‘Confucian role ethics’ as, in essence, an ethics of sincerity.

In its twilight years, authenticity has come to lean on a presentation-oriented crutch. The growing importance of the Internet, social media and the proliferation of profiles prioritizes presentation in identity projects. 'Expressing oneself', which had already been a factor in authenticity, gains prominence over discovery and authorship. The content is again expected to be loosely 'unique' in a profile, but the standards are more constrained. Most importantly, consideration for what passes the test of profic presentability becomes the focal point for judgements. The 'presentation of self in everyday life' to speak with Goffman (1959), now operates on the basis of presenting profile pictures, publishing peer-reviewed articles or posting various recordings of one's activities on second-order observation platforms. Then, on such platforms, one can observe how one's presentation is observed, and in light of this one obtains clues for further shaping the presentation of one's identity.

Proficiency unabashedly displays expressed concern for the second-order in, for example, the use of hashtags, memes, Instagram hotspots and other forms of reposting. Proficiency both discovers and makes a place for a persona in a newly constructed 'virtual' space that does not necessarily require corporeal space, which, as Sennett (2009) laments, has been largely neutralized in contemporary identity construction. The most important space in proficiency becomes the ever-accessible professional and private online world.

Under conditions of proficiency, presentation is increasingly decoupled from representation. Unlike roles in the sincerity ethos, proficiency constructions do not operate on the basis of an inner commitment to long-term roles, and unlike in the authenticity paradigm they do not indicate a 'true self' underlying various, and potentially incoherent, functions that desires recognition. Proficiency-based constructions of identity primarily succeed through public attention, acclaim and approval – through being followed, through being noticed, through being rated, ranked, approved and liked. Reflexivity, creativity and agency thereby become geared towards second-order observation. In proficiency, I am presenting an identity that I hope will be validated by my co-presenters who constitute, along with me, the same second-order observation platform or system that takes on the form of a virtual academic, professional or private 'general peer'.

#### IV. Conclusion

Arguably, in contemporary society, one of the most fundamental existential problems is the mind–society problem, or the problem of identity. This essay has argued that the identity problem is addressed through particular orientations towards existential paradigms. They constitute models of identity which are expressed in the form of socially pervasive semantics that selves can adopt to form self-conceptions, find meaning in life and orient their existential experiences. Three such existential paradigms have been introduced: (a) sincerity and devotion, (b) authenticity, individualism and irony and (c) proficiency. This list is not supposed to be complete and highly preliminary – other paradigms may fall under the umbrella of any

of these three categories, and others might be conceived of as well. Moreover, the paradigms can historically, culturally or individually coexist and overlap. As shown above, one may become more dominant under specific social conditions or for specific selves, but they do not in principle exclude one another. While, for instance, a profic identity seems to thrive in our times of socially ubiquitous second-order observation, sincerity and authenticity may still be communicated, experienced and felt.

Identity formation, as a necessary response to the mind–society problem, is therefore unstable and provisional. It is a continuous ‘work in progress’. Given the systemic disconnectedness of body, mind and society, a singular coherent identity – an identity that would perfectly align or connect the three realms – seems to be impossible. The existential task of constructing an identity produces illusions, but illusions that seem necessary, for without them neither self nor society could function in the way they do. The formation of an identity bridges the systemic gap between body, mind and society, and without this platform, we could not uphold the socially highly productive and existentially, rationally and emotionally indispensable conviction that we are, against all theoretical and empirical evidence, human agents. In the past, when the mind–body problem was of great concern, such a necessary illusion was built upon the notion of the ‘soul’, while today, as the mind–society problem has become more pressing, it hinges increasingly on the persuasiveness of existential paradigms and their models of identity.

‘No portrait is more intensely drawn than the self-portrait’, writes Timothy Mo in his novel *An Insular Possession* (Mo 1986, 531), but, we’d like to add, it is also true that no portrait is more intensely presented and observed.

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