

“Social Identity” Is Not “The Answer”

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The collapse of the culture of Enlightenment rationality has been filled from within and without by rationality's enemies: irrationality; uncontrolled desire and emotion; and the deliberate destruction of the academic rational-theoretical disciplines, all replaced by aspects of human activity which can be translated into marketplace productivity—i.e. can produce money for someone.

Of all the possible replacements for the rejection of reason as a common cultural practice, the weakest and most tenuous in attempting to hold a culture together is a desire-based egoism and the individualism of free and self-interested economic (personal) gain—i.e. the fundamental assumption of neoliberalism. Even a superficial examination can see that the consequences of such a paradigm when given primacy in a culture would cause far greater pain and further collapse of the culture than the paradigm they replaced. Granted that the primacy of reason was largely rejected by Western culture as a result of the series of brutal and inhuman wars fought under its banner in the early 20th century, the consumption model that took its place only led to more and more inhumane wars, and has pit one person against another, and economic elites against the rest of the people, in particular the economic underprivileged.

Many people saw the shortsightedness of this philosophy, turned away from its values, and adopted instead the relativism of the primacy of “the social” and of language itself as a way of viewing human interchange. They see societal bonds established by language and the growth of cultural practices and ideas to be primary in human nature and the unifying of social groups of identity. However, we are now seeing that such relativistic social values have an even shorter shelf life than an overvalued reason, because if values are simply socially-originated or maintained, they are unsusceptible to normative analysis (e.g. why is oppression bad?) and insufficient as normative guides. Instead, socially based norms are limited to the group which identifies with them and agrees to them and only for as long as they agree to them. Distinctively reasonable and normative guides for formulating beliefs, for acting, and for analyzing group values require a primacy of thinking objectively over small-group intersubjective agreement. This is because both reason and norms have an objective dimension to them and are interrelated in just that way (e.g. being nonfactual). So *no norms, no future* should be the motto of those who see the end coming to our current cultural fascinations with self, money, desire-fulfillment, and a relativism of beliefs and values that comes with postmodernism and identity politics, and who seek an alternative to this collapsing worldview. Norms, as “ought” statements, cannot and should not ever have been rejected or reduced to the empirical, the linguistic, or simple social agreement. “Ought” has its own domain, in both logic and ethics, and both are quite necessary and applicable in and to social life. Cultural norms will simply not fill the “ought” gap left from the rejection of reason, because such cultural interpretations are too ephemeral and fleeting

due to their focus only on what is, rather than on what should be. That such social or linguistic givens *per se* can't and won't hold a culture together should be evident by now.

But with what will we replace them? Generation Z seems to be searching for a normative guide that has not yet been found. If the unifying paradigm to come does not involve reason and its objective normative concerns at some primary level, then that paradigm too, whatever it is, will fall, just as the "social is primary" philosophy is failing us right now. We should face the plain fact that human history shows that cultures need primary normative and appealed to (not just "agreed to") *objective* guides in order to unify, survive, and thrive, and these guides must not only have primacy in the culture, but they must be taken as holding for all involved. If not, then, for example, rule of law becomes a matter of opting in or opting out, a behavior we regularly see with the U.S. attitude toward international law and its very own treaties. If rationality is not involved in this objectivity (indeed, rationality is the very condition of understanding and acknowledging such objectivity), then it cannot be properly *normative*. As a consequence, it has no claim on me and I have been given no *reason* to respond to it. Such is our collapsing culture today.

The same problems with the "primacy of the social" are seen in the postmodern fascination with identity groups. If objective norms are rejected, the best alternatives are said to be groups with which individual egos self-identify, or with whom they are comfortable identifying. This is more of the desire/ego-based alternative to a collapsing cultural unity that cannot last. Why should anyone outside of a given "identity group" care about what that group says about their self-interest simply because they are members of a group whose interests have not been taken into account in social-political policies? Unless that group has an objective argument or principle as a primary part of their public agenda, such as that their *humanness* has been abused or ignored by social and/or political institutions, and unless they are willing to unite together with every other group to make changes that an objective view of justice requires—i.e. that will benefit all (and not just their own group interest) under a principle that calls upon society to respect their *human dignity*—then the simple fact that they might "self-identify" in one way and that they "feel oppressed" qua group by a ruling class, *in itself* makes no claim on anyone else in society. But the moment they appeal to such a principle as "human dignity" or "equality," they cease to function as an identity group, *per se*. Hence one of the internal contradictions of identity politics comes to light.

As a counter example to the normal identity group, look at how the "Black Lives Matter" frequently (but not always) operates. What one normally hears from that movement is not the message that says "we identify as Black, so respect us," but rather that black lives are *human* lives and have a *human dignity*. While sometimes the spokespeople stray into the former message of self-identity (and thus lose their moral claim on others to that degree), the notion of "humanity" and "respect" involved in the latter set of claims is a set of objective concepts, and betokens a degree of rationality in order to maintain what "Black Lives Matter" represents. I hear those claims, and *as human being* (not just as a white male who identifies as such, listening to a black person who identifies themselves as such), I *must* (i.e. am called to) condemn their oppressors and abusers, and I *must* work against those who perpetrate actions that harm them. The horror and outrage that we experience in watching the cold-blooded murder of George Floyd does not come primarily from a "Black man" being murdered, but from a human being being murdered, *made all the worse* in its offense by it being a Black man being murdered, and *worst of all*, being murdered by a cop. The moral abhorrence is just that: a gross violation of a moral principle that all people

should not be subject to cold-blooded murder. This principle of the inherent dignity of humans is further evidenced by the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960's, in the "I am a man" refrain.

The point here is that unless identity groups include a similar objective universal concept of "humanity" in their platforms that call me into unity with them, by virtue of a moral claim made on me, then they remain just small groups clamoring for a self-interested piece of the socio-economic pie that they feel has been denied to them and that they desire. More specifically, the only equality identity groups per se can call out is "our equality." But that is not a principle; it is a desire. Hence the left's current socio-political malaise. Ethical obligation on otherwise diverse individuals with equally diverse interests comes only in the assertion of objective ethical principles that bind everyone. But that is something identity groups generally fail to do. Thus, their argument is not a very compelling one, because it only claims that dominant groups have a responsibility to appease them simply because their *group desirability* something. [The pragmatic argument "If the cops abuse black people, they'll abuse white people in time," is not an ethical argument nor a social-ethical argument against police brutality, because its premise is completely self-interested.]

This focus on "differences" between groups of people rather than their common humanity that is one of the pillars of postmodern ideas is quickly illustrated in the writings of the postmodernist feminist author Iris Marion Young. Her denial of such objective concepts as "human nature" is stated forthrightly in her book *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, where the emphasis is on our *differences*, not the unity of our common humanity. The logic of identity such as "humanity" that applies to all, for her, represses difference. In opposition to Young, I would argue that unless identity groups that form on the basis of this "difference" are willing to embrace the idea that their identity, their self-understanding, is one of being part of "humanity"—and that means belonging in solidarity to other humans who do not share their group's specific, contingent, ever-changing cultural identification—then they have nothing to say to anyone else except a call to fulfill their (self-interested) desires and/or press others to share in power, for no other reason than that they as a group want it. In short, identity groups per se simply continue to splinter a culture already economically and racially splintered, and just celebrates that splintering. If that continues, the postmodernist, neoliberal, baby-boomer belief would be right: no culture-wide unity is possible, and thus there is no solution to the ills for which they seek redress is ultimately within their grasp.

To the degree that reason in the past was seen as primary in the sense that it existed as complete in itself, as apart from and in complete isolation from the senses, body, world, language, etc., that is a god of reason that rightfully died and was buried. But that its progeny—a view of rationality that, although anchored in the world is able to partially transcend it by conceptual expressions of that world in the form of beliefs and values—is a view of reason that, if dead, means the death of humanity. This seems to have escaped the notice of the most radical identity politics and "resist" supporters of postmodern views. Irrational creatures of the human kind that reject the view that humans are in fact creatures with reason reject their own humanity and end up celebrating their narcissism and perhaps animal passion instead, as we have seen in the current neoliberal consumption culture. They end up committing species suicide, as we are seeing ourselves do right now in our allowing our leaders to continue to deny the reality of and delay action on the world's climate crisis, and to stockpile their so-called "tactical" (i.e. "usable") nuclear weapons.

If we don't look back and grab onto what is left of the primacy of reason, as Western culture

now collapses and disperses, there is no reason to be optimistic for a future for humanity. Nowhere do we see that failure to grasp the primacy of the objectivity of reason more clearly than in the denials of climate change, denials of science, in the racism of immigrant bans, indefinite jailing of immigrants without due process (the latter another objective value!), and proposed wall-building, and on the reliance on military force to impose the will of those in power. The immigrant issue in particular represents the denial of the rational understanding of an objective concept of human equality and human dignity.

In the face of the urgencies that confront us, the debate should not be centered around the issue that *siloed groups* of identity *desire to be recognized*, but rather **what norms can express a unified humanity that is being abused by its own institutions** . The concept of humanity (a *objective concept*) by definition cannot be limited to the self-interest of identity groups. If one is focused on “difference,” as many postmodernists such as Young are, then one must deny “humanity” in any significant sense. That is part of the current standoff today within liberal and progressive thought: it is frozen in its ability to act, because it is not unified around central themes that unite all groups. The solution to this problem would be to *transcend identity into humanity*. Our climate crisis calls us to do this, because it is our “humanity” that faces its extinction, not our “identity groups,” and such cases may force us to come out of our self-woven group cocoons and to understand our commonality. You don’t see identity groups protesting that climate change is affecting them, *qua* identity! Rather, without an objective concept of humanity to unify us, our parochial, desire-based interests will inevitably lead to our own demise.

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