

Pluralistic Insight into Identity both for Ourselves and for Others¹

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Abstract

I provide a method of investigating identity both for ourselves and for others by exploring the connection between William James' pluralism and Hannah Arendt's ideas on the self. In §2, I present James' pluralism for how we can view our world and self, which will serve as the foundation for this investigation. In §3, I lay out how Arendt attributes the availability of identity for others in terms of action. The question of "Who are you?" is addressed in this section by applying James' pluralism to Arendt's notion of action. In §4, I apply Arendt's notions of solitude and loneliness to an investigation of the identity of ourselves. I conclude that when we view the world pluralistically we can find insight into how to understand the identity of both ourselves and others.

1 Introduction

In *The Compounding of Consciousness*, William James (1967) presents a pluralistic worldview; our minds can make sense of the world in a twofold way. We can intellectualize our world through concepts and definitions, or we can think about our world in nonconceptual terms. James claims that these two modes are not reducible to each other. This two-fold, pluralistic thought can be applied to the idea of the self. "Who am I?" This is a question we can ask ourselves, and we can ask this question towards another ("Who are you?"). Utilizing James' pluralism we get different answers to these questions, depending on which mode of thought we employ.

In order to investigate such answers, I call upon Hannah Arendt for her thought in *The Human Condition* and *The Life of the Mind*. In the former work, Arendt claims that an individual's true identity can only *come into being* upon death, but in life it can become *available* to others through action and speech. Thus, Arendt claims that an individual can never have their true identity revealed to oneself. However, one can find light in the question of their identity through *solitude*. In the latter work, Arendt distinguishes solitude from *loneliness*, the state where one cannot be for themselves. James' pluralistic thought will prove invaluable for our understanding of solitude.

In the following analysis, I will provide a method of investigating identity both for ourselves and for others by exploring the connection between James' pluralism and Arendt's ideas on the self. In §2, I present James' pluralism for how we can view our world, which will serve as the foundation for this investigation. In §3, I lay out how Arendt attributes the availability of identity for others in terms of action. The question of "Who are you?" is addressed in this section by applying James' pluralism to Arendt's notion of action. In §4, I consider the identity of ourselves through an investigation of

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solitude and loneliness in Arendt's thought. The question of "Who am I?" is addressed by applying James' pluralism to Arendt's notions of solitude and loneliness. I conclude that we find insight into how to understand the identity of ourselves and others when we view the world pluralistically.

2 James' Pluralism

To understand James' notion of pluralism, it will be helpful to begin with his thought on the Mills' notions of mental compounding and mental chemistry, which James presents in *The Compounding of Consciousness* (James, 1967). The former notion, introduced by James Mill (1869), refers to how our mind takes simple ideas and forms more complicated ones; for example, our ability to imagine a unicorn calls for a compounding of the images of a horse and a horn. John Stuart Mill (1848) extended this idea to that of the latter notion, mental chemistry. Our minds do more than just compound ideas; sometimes they combine ideas in such a way that they may be impossible to undo. James provides the example of water. We could say that our notion of water as H₂O is a mere compounding of the notions of two hydrogen atoms and one oxygen atom. However, the notion of H₂O is not identical to that of two hydrogen atoms and one oxygen atom, for the former "affects surrounding bodies differently" (James, 1967, 548) than the latter; H₂O is a substance that quenches our thirst and makes things wet and so forth, while the ideas of the separate parts of H₂O cannot capture this absolute alone. The ideas need to be fused in a way that allows for the additional meaning to be included. Thus, we must arrive at the notion of H₂O by means of mental chemistry.

James provides a further example of the alphabet to help clarify this notion (ibid, 549). The alphabet contains twenty-six letters, each which may be represented by an idea. But the idea of the alphabet of a whole provides a new idea, which James calls the introduction of a twenty-seventh fact in our consciousness (ibid, 549-550). He claims that we cannot dissect the alphabet into mere awarenesses of each individual letter but rather that there is awareness of the whole. In this manner, James presents two modes of appearances. One, there is the mode of parts, and two, there is a mode of wholes. However, a problem arises concerning these two modes of viewing since we need to know the relation between parts and wholes. James claims that there are only parts in the physical world (ibid, 551). For example, while we may call the grouping of organs a "bird" it remains that there really is just a collection of those parts, which our mind is able to bind into a whole. Thus James makes this distinction that while our world consists of parts, in the mental world, wholes are realized *in themselves*; the mode of viewing things as wholes is an experience *for itself*. While this distinction may be obscure, it will suffice for this discussion to note that James rejects the reduction of the experience of the absolute or whole into the experience of parts.

James argues that the monist who attempts to make this reduction cannot escape the dualistic language they use to make this reduction (ibid, 553)³. My interpretation of this

³ The reader may be wondering what debate these terms of "pluralism" and "monism" refer to. While it may be tempting to think of them in metaphysical terms (i.e., the former states that there are two substances, while the latter states that there is just one), I interpret James as advocating something different; he is talking about human experience, and thus monism in this sense holds that there is just one way of experiencing the world (or that all the ways are reducible to one another), while pluralism holds that there are two modes of experience (that cannot be reduced to one another).

claim is that James is drawing out the difficulty in explaining “mental chemistry” in purely conceptual or “intellectualist⁴” terms⁵. This argument against intellectualism can be understood through his example of a photographer (James, 1967, 560): When we envision a photographer, our concepts lead us to define such a person as one who photographs. But we can add more concepts to our image of the photographer (e.g., she might be wearing a red shirt). Now our definition has changed. Is this new person still a photographer? If so, then James maintains that our definition of a photographer now seems to include a requirement of wearing a red shirt. Thus, James’ point here is that intellectualism leads us unable to account for change in our experience. To avoid this problem, James claims that we don’t experience the world in a one-fold way such that appearances of parts and wholes are reducible to one another. Rather, there are two ways of viewing and thinking about the world, through conceptual terms that allow us to talk about the world with concepts and definitions, and through nonconceptual viewing that allow us to capture holistic human experience.

I fear that the latter notion and its distinction from the former may still be unclear, so I hope to make it clear by introducing Goodman’s analysis of eight themes in James thought regarding the conceptual and nonconceptual:

1. There is a nonconceptual element in experience that is widespread or ordinary.
2. That element is known by a kind of acquaintance.
3. Conceptual knowledge is shallower than acquaintance. It is “merely pragmatic,” whereas acquaintance lets us see into the life of things.
4. Nonconceptual knowledge cannot be described, but it can be indicated or pointed to.
5. Nonconceptual knowledge can be described, as a flow, confusion, profusion, particularity, animal life, the full self, whole field, a “much-at-once.”
6. Concepts cut rather than synthesize.
7. Concepts are made out of the same material as perception.
8. Philosophy should seek a return from a life in concepts to a thicker life of intuition, empathy, and activity.

(Goodman, 2004, 143-144)

We can now relate these themes to James’ discussion concerning the relation between wholes and parts. Experience can be viewed as wholes and parts. The latter is the result of conceptual terms; we can dissect our experiences by talking about them through concepts and definitions. But the former viewing, that of the whole, is to view the world without trying to rationalize it; it is to experience what James calls *the absolute* (James, 1967, 551). Through these themes that Goodman draws, especially the fifth, we can see that James believes that the nonconceptual viewing of the world could involve “letting go” or simple acceptance of the world around us. With this understanding in mind, next, I provide the reader with a method of thinking about identity nonconceptually by investigating the question of identity of others through Arendt’s thought on human action and speech.

⁴ Intellectualism in James’ sense, roughly put, seeks to reduce aspects of experience to abstract concepts, which are used to classify or organize such aspects (Ibid, 559-560)

⁵ Goodman (2004, 143-144) shares a similar interpretation.

3 Identity in Action

Before we investigate identity in the work of Arendt, we first need a brief overview of her account of action. Arendt avows that action is the sole activity that resides *between* humans, and thus it has no direct relation with things and matter (Arendt, 1958, 7). Action corresponds to the condition of political life; Arendt claims that to be human involves living among and interacting with other humans. This condition also holds that human beings are human because nobody who has lived or will live is the same as another. Because of our differences, our actions hold the significance of our lives on history. Arendt claims that action has a close connection with the condition of natality; when a human is born, they have the capacity of *acting*, which provides them with the ability to interact with and reveal themselves to others, and to have an impact on human political life (ibid., 9). In other words, action is very important to human life, and, as I will argue below, very important to identity. I interpret Arendt's definition of action as the human capability of *doing*; in order to play a role in society, and therefore history, humans must interact with one another. By doing so, each actor discloses their own unique self to the world.

Indeed, Arendt claims that the agent is revealed through action and in particular through *speech* (ibid., 175-181). In being human (i.e. being equal), we can understand each other. Yet additionally, in being human (i.e. being distinct), we are able to distinguish ourselves from each other and thus to make our identity known. Arendt maintains that this "paradoxical" plurality is the basic condition of action and speech. Through action and speech, an agent's interactions with others reveal the question of their identity. With every person that one meets, the answer to "Who are you?" is implicit in their speech and action. Here Arendt makes salient the need for speech. Through spoken word, the actor identifies themselves "as the actor, announcing what they do, has done, and intends to do" (ibid., 179)⁶. Arendt is making the claim that speech allows humans to identify themselves when they perform actions. For example, I can tell my friend which bar I am going to tonight. This reveals myself as the actor who is going to the bar, and my friend can read this speech as *making explicit* the action, which in turn *makes explicit* an aspect of my identity⁷.

In this manner, when asking ourselves "Who are you?" when we meet someone, we can find pieces of the answer in their speech and action. But when we learn about someone through their speech and action, we attribute different qualities (i.e. concepts and definitions) and thus become entangled in a description of *what* that person is. The point is that while the *who* of a person is disclosed implicitly in action and speech, our attempts to talk about this *who* lead us to describe *what* that person is (ibid., 181).

James' pluralism can be introduced here to help with this dilemma. As previously stated, we may talk about persons with concepts and definitions, which is facilitated by the ability to view the world in conceptual terms. Yet, while we can use these concepts and definitions in describing a person, we often want to do more than this. Our talk about persons has significance. When you talk to me about a third person, we both have

⁶ Note that Arendt is not here saying that when someone speaks you literally find out the facts of their past.

⁷ This aspect may be some aspect of my character or dispositions. Maybe my friend attributes that I'm feeling rather gregarious tonight.

an understanding of that person that is implicit in our use of concepts and definitions; the *who* is implicit in our discussing of the *what*. If we heed Arendt's words, then by our use of conceptual talk about a person, a person's identity becomes available to use. The true identity of that person, may not be completely present, but it is implicit and thus available through their action and speech. Thus when we talk about this person, our use of conceptual terms succeeds only because we have an understanding of that person's identity which made available to us through their action and speech. While we could try to pin down this understanding conceptually, it seems to me that we could never succeed; we must view the identity of others holistically⁸. We can view and talk about another person with concepts and definitions, and in talking about another person, we must have some notion of their identity that involves prior nonconceptual viewing of that person. To help clarify, recall and apply Goodman's assertions of James' themes 2, 4, and 5. The implicit availability of someone's identity comes to us through our acquaintance with that person (theme 2); we cannot describe their identity completely, nevertheless we can talk about this person and understand each other (theme 4); and the best way to describe this nonconceptual viewing of their identity would be to call it a flow or a confusion⁹.

Two further concerns arise here; we need to know if the true and full identity of a person (i.e., who they are) can be made not just available to others in facets but into actual being. And two, we need to know if one can know their own true and full identity. Concerning the former enquiry, Arendt asserts that who someone is comes into being only in death (ibid., 193). This coheres with Arendt's notion of action; when a person dies, they can no longer act and thus no new qualities or aspects of their essence can be introduced, for without new action, there can be no new disclosures of the agent. In this manner, we may say that when a person passes, their identity is frozen in time. In death, the actor leaves behind their complete story. Everything we can find out about that person is available to us. We may say that their essence is not only available in facets, but their full essence is manifest in the world, which we can know by the story that they leave behind (ibid., 186).

Second, in answer to the second concern of whether we can know ourselves fully, Arendt argues in the negative (ibid., 180). We may only disclose ourselves through our action and speech. We make our identity available to others, but as Arendt states, we cannot be the authors of our own story that we leave behind in death. As stated earlier, action goes between humans; it is part of the public realm. I interpret Arendt as saying that in order for us to know ourselves, we would not only have to step outside of ourselves, but traverse beyond our own deaths. And such a perspective is way beyond human capability. Nevertheless, Arendt alludes to the question of "Who am I?" in another work. In the next section, I investigate show how we can find insight into this question despite our inability to fully know ourselves; we can be "by ourselves".

⁸ As Arendt points out, any attempt to describe who someone is, or describe how we use such descriptions, results in more descriptions. Would we say that we can fully describe someone? I cannot see how, for persons are not only constantly changing but identity rests in potential (i.e., persons can always take new forms). It would be very difficult if not impossible for us to fully know let alone describe conceptually a person in this way.

⁹ At first read, this fifth theme might seem contradictory, for James claims that nonconceptual viewing would preclude concepts such as flow and confusion. However, I interpret that these concepts that are summarized in the theme promulgated by Goodman are "fill-in" terms that will help us understand what it means to nonconceptually view something. In other words, we need to use terms and concepts to help the reader understand how we might go about viewing something nonconceptually. We can then view the terms and concepts of flow and confusion as filling in for an indescribable, holistic phenomena.

4 Solitude and Loneliness

Arendt (1978, 185) makes a distinction between two states, solitude and loneliness. These two notions correspond to two ways that we may interact with ourselves. In the previous section, we saw that Arendt claims that to be human is to interact with others. By doing so, we reveal ourselves through action and speech, which we understood using James' pluralism to allow us to understand each other both conceptually and nonconceptually. But what about the question of identity for ourselves? When I ask myself, "Who am I?" I engage in reflection; how I carry out reflection determines whether I will be in solitude or in a state of loneliness. Arendt avows that due to our ability of inner dialogue within ourselves (e.g. being able to ask ourselves questions within our minds), we may keep ourselves company. This results in a state of solitude. However, if we are unable to split-up ourselves into the speaker and listener of this inner dialogue, then we will fall into loneliness, and thus further away from knowing ourselves. Given this result, we need to know what exactly is this inner dialogue and how can we achieve solitude through it.

Arendt claims that when we engage in dialogue with ourselves we must aim to be both the one who asks questions and the one who answers, and we must not contradict ourselves in this action (ibid., 185-186). We may think that this dialogue consists of our silent thoughts about things where we entertain different relations between concepts. However, Arendt seems to want to dive deeper in that true, successful inner dialogue escapes logical reasoning and concepts. She describes the relation between consciousness and thinking (ibid., 189). When we think conceptually, we use concepts and definitions to think *about* things. But this ability presupposes consciousness in the sense of self-awareness. In order to think, human consciousness must be actualized, and Arendt claims that this is only possible because we can accompany ourselves in solitude. And we may accompany ourselves in solitude only when we are *for* ourselves. If we are to be for ourselves, we cannot contradict ourselves, for we would not want to be our own opponents. I interpret Arendt's main point here to be that in order to have silent dialogue with ourselves (using conceptual terms), we must have consciousness in the form of self-awareness, and this arises out of the human condition of being able to think oneself (not just about oneself) as both the speaker and listener¹⁰. Concerning the success of this dialogue as solitude or loneliness, James' pluralism again resonates with Arendt's point and makes it much clearer concerning how to be "for oneself".

When we think to ourselves in concepts and definitions, we can talk about things in our world by description. Concerning ourselves, we may describe *what* we are (viewing ourselves conceptually), but if we are to try to know *who* we are (viewing ourselves nonconceptually), we must engage in successful inner dialogue; we must be for ourselves. This is only possible when we "let go" of trying to pin our identity down with concepts. When we try to know *who* we are by viewing and thinking about ourselves conceptually, we get entangled in our descriptions (similarly to our enquiries into the identity of others discussed in the previous section). If we take Arendt's account to be true, we can never know ourselves fully, but we can be here for ourselves. When we

¹⁰ It is important to note that Arendt also claims that prior to our ability to think both for and about ourselves, we must be able to engage in dialogue with others (ibid., 189). By engaging in dialogue with others, we then become aware that we may engage in dialogue with ourselves (i.e., consciousness in the sense of self-awareness), and in turn we may think in silent dialogue.

apply James' pluralism and think about ourselves nonconceptually, we don't really come to know ourselves, however we can gain something that is valuable through nonconceptual self-awareness. If we want to be in solitude rather than loneliness, if we want to be both the speaker and listener for ourselves, then we must be fully *present*. My input here is that perhaps, as Arendt claims, we can't know ourselves, but we can be present by and for ourselves if we can escape the continuous conceptualization of our experience. When we are able to realize ourselves in the present moment, when we are able to let go of trying to pin ourselves down with concepts and definitions, and when we are able to grasp this nonconceptual self-awareness, then we come to a state at ease. We no longer need to conceptually know ourselves, for we have found the condition of nonconceptual solitude. We stop trying to explain ourselves *to ourselves* and simply let the experience take hold. The question of "Who am I?" becomes trivial, for we have found an answer that is far better; "I am here."

5 Conclusion

In summary, the questions of "Who are you?" and "Who am I?" have been addressed in Arendt's thought in light of James' Pluralism. Apropos the former enquiry, when we take Arendt's account seriously, we find that viewing persons through their actions conceptually and nonconceptually yield different answers such that there is an implicit nonconceptual understanding in our conceptual viewing of other persons. With regards the second question, "Who am I?" it appears that in order to understand ourselves completely, we should stop trying to accomplish such understanding conceptually, for it might not even be possible. Rather, we should view ourselves nonconceptually by being present and thus in solitude. Arendt's thought leads us into a position where we may view ourselves conceptually or nonconceptually and receive different results. I leave the reader to speculate that, despite these differences these two views that we may take concerning the identity of ourselves expound, we may find that both the conceptual and nonconceptual views have merit. Conceptual thought allows us to talk and think about ourselves and others, which seems to be a pragmatic necessity. But nonetheless it seems that we need nonconceptual thought to access who others really are, and further, we need nonconceptual thought to avoid loneliness. We may never know who we really are, but this is not something that should worry us. Rather than try to be the authors of our own story, we can simply realize ourselves by being for ourselves. I can be present and in solitude by my ability to know that "I am here", which escapes my ability to define it with concepts¹¹.

¹¹ As a closing comment, there are likely many examples of nonconceptual thought, but I think it will help to understand nonconceptual thinking through mindfulness practices. Consider meditation techniques, such as focusing on the breath, as nonconceptual thought. Indeed, these techniques are aimed at drawing the practitioner to the present moment, and these techniques involve the focusing the mind on oneself without thinking with concepts.

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