Perpetual Change: Moving beyond Object Dependent Identity

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Abstract

In this paper, I disassemble classical notions of identity and propose a new mode of identity-creation through change itself. While static characteristics or categories are traditionally utilized in forming identities, the existence of change creates problems for maintaining them. Rather than continue following that same pattern of category formation, I argue that flux, or in this case a history of changes that a thing or being has undergone, can innately contain a sense of identity. In making this argument, I use science fiction, several philosophers, existentialist Buddhism, and the comic book character of Spider-Man. By instantiating one's identity through change, the natural eradication of boundaries over time will become less likely to trigger existential crises. It would place an individual more in line with the natural flow of reality. It serves to reconcile the inevitability of change with the human need to possess an identity.

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Identity is a fickle beast. All things—including identity—are fleeting and subject to intense change. With change comes impermanence, which is frequently ignored within common perceptions of reality. Individuals treat change as either an avoidable force, or one that can be controlled. However, Octavia Butler aptly summed up the magnitude of change's significance: "All that you touch/ You Change/ All that you Change/ Changes you/ The only lasting truth/ Is Change/ God/ Is Change."[1] Change is perpetual and unyielding, and people's treatment of objects as static entities leads to existential anxiety upon their visible dissolution. As a result, a movement towards identity as defined by a process, or a series of processes, could solve the dilemma created by the static account.

Genesis of Change

The question of why change exists is vital to the movement towards process-derived identity. Change is a fundamental force upon which reality itself operates and functions. The way we measure forces and objects around us is often through the calculation of motion. Motion, however, through its very nature, implies change. Shifts in location can result in changes to the nature of an object. This is conveyed by Heraclitus, who has historically been "linked to the idea" that "we don't (or indeed can't) step into the same river twice."[2] If you "step again into what seems to be the same river," it is not, in fact, still "the same water into which you step[ped]."[3] Since even internal content such as identity is consumed by flux, the formation of identity becomes a complicated matter. The world exists in motion, and within motion lies change. Change is at the heart of the world's inner workings.

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[1] Octavia E. Butler, *Parable of the Sower* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 1993), 3.
[2] Catherine Osborne, *Presocratic Philosophy: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 87.
[3] Ibid.

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What is Identity?

Identity is a social construction that has very real power in an individual's ability to influence the world around them. It is a form of self-definition and encompasses the way one outwardly projects their sense of self into their surroundings. It is also a way of trying to separate a singular object from all other objects which might look similar, as well as from the wealth of objects that appear entirely dissimilar. Identity is used to set things apart, separate them out, and place them into categories so that they can be more readily discussed, comprehended, and made useful. Much like essence, identity is understood as the interior content of an object. Much of human life is absorbed, captured, and defined by identity. With such importance placed upon it, it is problematic that identity is so rarely clearly defined and is often grossly misunderstood. Timothy Morton, an American professor and philosopher, proposes that the misunderstanding lies in the lack of acknowledgment of the unknowability of the essence of objects.[4] However, even within this proposition there is an expressed belief in some form of innate permanence within objects, as Morton simply claims the essence to be withdrawn, not inherently in a state of perpetual flux.[5] With this notion of essence, he perpetuates the very issues created by the static account to begin with, in no way moving past the reliance upon perceived stability within the world. Impermanence is inescapable.

What are Objects?

Objects comprise that with which relationships can be formed. They are *that which* can be acted upon and interacted with by outside agents. Objects to which words can be ascribed can subsequently be captured and utilized. People are objects insofar as they are entities that can have names and qualifiers and possess the capacity of being acted upon by exterior beings. One's

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[4] Timothy Morton, *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 16.
[5] Ibid.

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relationship with another person is predicated upon the supposition that they are in fact another being. A relationship can be had with inanimate objects, as well, yet, relationships do not necessitate meaningful connections. The mere fact that two things exist, and a subsequent acknowledgment of said existence expressed or understood by at least one party, is enough to define an interaction as that of a simple relationship. Without the existence of a relationship, however, a thing cannot become an object. Objects become objects through relation, while things simply are that which exists. All objects are things, but not all things are objects.

People can become objects through an act of Othering, as the negation of another is a commonly accepted form of understanding self. Even in close, personal relationships this occurs. Martin Buber, a Jewish philosopher in the 20th century, expresses this when he insists that the act of Othering, through nothing more than the utterance or acceptance of the "I-You" dichotomy, guarantees that the Other "is no thing among things," nor that which "consist[s] of things."[6] While at face value this may appear contradictory, Buber seems to insinuate this relationship is in fact transcendent. Yet, surpassing any relationship which one might have with a thing, this dichotomy in fact supports the ability to have a relational experience through othering. Othering is a form of external particularization. A person you encounter is a particular person, but an object nonetheless. Buber explains this expressly, stating that, when he "encounter[s] [a tree]," it is "neither the soul of a tree nor a dryad, but the tree itself."[7] With the encounter or experience of another thing, the Other becomes an object within one's reality.

What are Processes?

Processes, at their core, involve, the passage of time. Changes in substance, appearance, or function are possible, observable manifestations from within or in response to a process.

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[6] Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Touchstone, 1970), 59.
[7] Ibid.

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Processes are also vehicles through which relationships can be activated. Relationships can only form within the context of time passing, so processes are a necessity in their formation. A process can be chemical, observable with advanced scientific equipment. Other processes exist in a grayer area, such as political processes, which are notoriously difficult to definitively decipher and define. Processes can also be relatively easy to observe and comprehend, such as the order in which an individual's life plays out. Without the ability to comprehend processes at a fundamental level, or to observe the causal factors at play, reality becomes an incomprehensible jumble of random screenshots of seemingly uncorrelated, indiscernible events.

The rejection of the processes which provide a context for an object's existence in the moment of analysis is one of the most confusing aspects of the static model. If an object is entirely divorced from its context, all potential formable relationships over the course of processes are lost. Without the possibility of relationships, it ceases to be an object at all. Identities without relationships are transient, as identities without context cannot be personalized enough to actually provide reasonably meaningful or maintainable forms of self-identification.

The Identity Obsession

The desire to possess or create a discernable identity is prevalent within human societies, spreading far beyond the realms of nationality, religion, or sex. It is a core component of the way human beings are oriented in regard to comprehending reality, as well as their location and purpose within it. The larger the environment and the more competitors that are present, the stronger the call to identification and individualization becomes. Once one feels a sense of purposelessness, identity is often sought as a remedy.

Out of the existential anxiety of a lack of an a priori identity, people try to latch onto objects around them. Consequently, out of a fear of reverting back to a place of non-identity, people attach the attribute of staticity to the object. This tends to make existence slightly more

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palatable, as it oversimplifies the nature of existence. Objects become singularities rather than moving entities which interconnect and overlap. This clearer image, in actuality, obscures one's vision, as it divorces the truth of interconnectivity from the perception of reality.

This frantic search for stability attaches itself not just to physical objects, however. People's relationship to media is also subject to the same tendencies, which is precisely why sitcoms follow strict formulas. Changes in character personalities and situations, locations, and identities are often superficial. There is a strict adherence to maintaining the status quo. Episode conclusions tend to revert to the same position in which the episode began. People find comfort in continuity, so television producers feed into it within the media they put forward. The seemingly strange element, however, is the backlash which often occurs when a show, or other medium, doesn't change enough. Even amidst a wave of comfort, people often perceive the hollowness innate in the static mode. Excess stagnation can distract the mind temporarily, but it often accentuates changes when it becomes more readily visible. Few popular characters have suffered this treatment quite like Spider-Man, however. Marvel Comics has consistently forced him to regress back to his position as a high schooler, with all the teen drama that naturally abounds. The most egregious example of their commitment to maintaining this norm is seen in the comic series *One More Day,* where Spider-Man, after his character had been happily married for years, is violently forced back to his genesis. With the shooting of his sickly aunt, he decided to sell his marriage to the devil to save her, forcing his character back into his pre-married state. His identity as a high school student is the only one which Marvel Comics appears to feel comfortable with. His identity as a husband, a father, an entrepreneur, or even as an adult in general, would be changes too dynamic for Marvel to be able to cope with. Like sitcoms and a

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plethora of other media, the status quo is maintained and change is reversed in an attempt to shelter consumers from that change.

The Dangers of the Static

One of the greatest dangers of maintaining the static model of objects is its tendency to lead towards social regressionism. I choose to use the word "social" rather than "moral," since morality as a concept is problematic and even largely at fault for this discussion—which will soon be examined in greater detail. Social regressionism is a state of reverting back to large-scale trends of actions which are dually harmful to both the weak and the powerful. No group truly profits from such actions in the long-run, regardless of short-term returns. It is inherently dangerous to utilize systems which bring about such regressions, and static models of identity result in even violent regressions.

Violent Reactions to Change

Why do people often have such violent reactions to change? Quite simply: change is terrifying. A little change can be ignored, but some changes are so massive, so radical, that their impacts are unbearable. Some changes defy expectations or are too powerful to handle. Some changes are simply too large to change with.

Many people glean their identity from where they live, and conceptions of nationhood are among the most powerful and dangerous. The largest likelihood for violent responses presides within the static model of the state. When one refuses to view a nation as a series of interwoven processes over the course of hundreds, even thousands of years, the context of the nation is lost. In times of high internal stress, this type of reductionism can prove fatal for those too weak to defend themselves from within the system.

Yet, when change is feared above all else, the idea of incorporating new elements within a preexisting system is taboo. Strict senses of nationalism form, and harsh legal structures are

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crafted to enforce and regulate accepted norms. Fear of the outsider, or the Other, is the source of xenophobia, as well as its self-perpetuating, self-sufficient fuel. The stranger has an alien tongue and foreign customs. Their very presence causes the delicate structure of nationalism to begin to quiver. As it begins to stabilize, violence tends to amplify exponentially. When the object of "nation" is all a group of people are able to latch onto as a source of both identity and meaning, the consequences of upsetting the balance can be dire. When situations grow too grim, everyday individuals can become capable of untold atrocities, agreeing to be actively or passively complicit in unspeakable acts. This dark capability is what Hannah Arendt refers to as the "banality of evil."[8]

Racism also occurs—oftentimes—as a result of negative reactions to change. Groups who have historically had majority power, able to enact systemic discrimination as a method of maintaining that power, react violently to any perceived reduction in power or influence. Countries often naturally diversify as their population increases, and with diversification is the accompanying increase in minority population. While a nation's identity would necessitate constant flux and renegotiation as populations shift and new cultures emerge, those who force it into a static identity are fighting against the natural flow of a nation.

Consumerism and Attachment

Sometimes, in an attempt to define oneself, a person might try to derive their identity from less than substantial sources, such as possessions. The idea of possessions is inherently static, as it presumes that an object belongs to you and is in a continual state of ownership. Stephen Batchelor explains this as "a sharply defined dualism between subject and object."[9] Batchelor describes the life of one who is trapped within that dualism as "seek[ing] his or her

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[8] Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin Books, 1977).
[9] Stephen Batchelor, *Alone with Others: An Existential Approach to Buddhism* (New York: Grove Press, 1983), 27.

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well-being, as well as his or her sense of meaning and purpose, in the preservation and acquisition of objects from which he or she is necessarily isolated."[10]

The attachment to possessions feeds into the system of capitalism, which helps perpetuate its existence. Identity derived from possessions, when combined with capitalism, creates an efficient feedback loop. Just as capitalism is an organism compelled by a hardwired drive towards expansionism, so consumerism responds, in turn, through endless expansion. The larger consumer-oriented capitalist structures grow, the greater the reliance upon consumption becomes a source of identity and purpose. The pursuit of financial gain becomes an end in itself—an object—and no longer serves to produce anything more than continual gain. Rather, the drive towards attaining prestige and power—which were the reasons for pursuing monetary gain in the first place, as well as radically different sources of identity within capitalist structures—exists in a stage of relative infancy.[11]

A New Model: Identity of Flux

The answer to the dilemma of the static mode of valuation is that of an identity in flux—or a fluid identity. The idea of fluidity, while antithetical to classical conceptions of static identity, is more authentic as it follows the organic nature of real-world processes. This results in an identity which readily assimilates the effects of change, incorporating it in order to continuously adapt. Major life events do not cause an individual's sense of self to fracture and crumble beneath them. Instead, these new experiences of life processes are incorporated into the way the individual perceives themself.

One potential pushback would be whether the possible implementation or subsequent longevity of such a mode of identity could be in any way realistic, either in its introduction or

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[10] Ibid.

[11] Michael Forman, "The Modern Mind" (class lecture, University of Washington Tacoma, July 21st, 2017).

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sustainment. However, there already exists a functioning form of identity in flux: the gender-fluid identity. As an identity, gender fluidity removes itself from object dependency, rejecting objects like socially-gendered clothing as signifiers of identity. It also discards biology-based identity derivation, refusing to reduce one's identity to that of either presence or absence of specific sexual reproductive organs or even basic chromosomal configuration.

Another area which could potentially appear problematic—at least initially—is that of classical modes of ethics seen through normative social and legal structures. Traditionally, identities are monitored and regulated through those normative structures claiming moral superiority through their position as established systems. Despite claims of sovereign authority, whether from religious or secular sources, the very formations being pushed do not in any way possess static qualities. However, although those formations are not static, they are treated as such in order to deter changes in standard procedure living or in the way societies are structured. The lack of historical and contemporary consistency in those structures is something which must be shown, however, if these formations are to be disproven.

Nietzsche devoted much of his work to shattering that which was commonly accepted and discrediting claims of moral eminence. For this reason, his writings are ideal for exposing the chinks in the armor of those seemingly unassailable institutions which violently reinforce normative moral structures. In his book, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, he critically examines and dismantles traditional conceptions of morality, even going so far as rejecting the notion of the existence of morality to begin with. Nietzsche makes it clear that supposed moral truths do not, in fact, have a traceable origin from which a lineage of thought can be observed. The existence of recognizable variations and modifications to moral norms over time is express evidence against the origin-based claims of the self-consistency and validity of moral systems.

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Moral norms are not transcendent or perennial. The primary example Nietzsche utilizes is the shift from ideas of good and bad to that of good and evil. He traces conceptions of the good back to Roman thought, where the good was that which was strong—that which was powerful.[12] Specifically, Nietzsche dissects the "Latin *bonus* (good man) as 'the warrior,'" showing through a series of linguistic turns that "*bonus*" is in fact "the man of strife, of dissention…as the man of war."[13] Furthermore, in Rome, as well as other societies of old, the "designate[ed] 'good'" was attributed to the "noble[s]" and other "men of a higher rank."[14] In fact, this status of superiority was something "they designate[d] themselves simply by their superiority in power."[15] However, in what Nietzsche refers to as the "slave revolt of morality," groups led by priestly orders carr[ied] out "act[s] of the most spiritual revenge" by performing a complete overarching value reversal.[16] This newly formed set of values did not occur naturally, but was crafted by mortals. Morals, as such, are the tools of the weak to alter the rules of engagement with the powerful as a means of leveling the field. Adherence to normative ethics or morals often plays a role in the way people perceive their own identity, as well as how their particular identity is situated in a broader, societal context. It is yet another attempt to form identities from supposedly static constructs.

Beyond Object Dependence

Once identity is truly divorced—to any reasonable degree—from object dependence, then an individual can better grapple with their own existence and their place within a community or universal context. Without objects weighing a person down, they can experience a fuller range of

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[12] Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals* and *Ecce Homo*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), 31.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Ibid., 28.
[15] Ibid., 29.
[16] Ibid., 34.

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colorful identities, embracing the fluidity which overtakes them in the wake of process-oriented identity. The perpetual motion of reality can be expressed through this form of identity, allowing one to better move along with the natural flow of life. With a true acceptance of the reality of change and perpetual motion, violence can be reduced. Doing away with the illusion of the static can help provide us with a world which is self-consistent, allowing us to experience life's changes without severe dissonance and violent reactions to those changes.

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