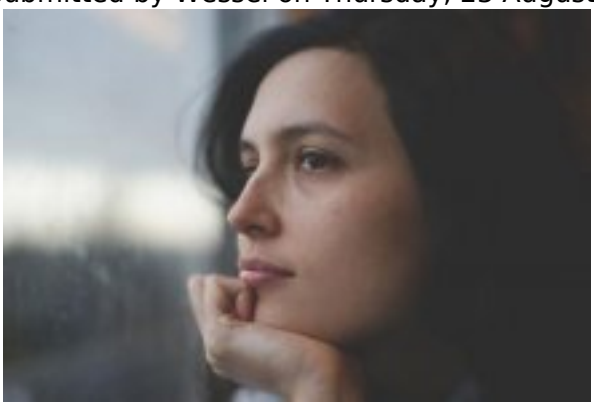
Who Do You Say You Are: A Question of (Self) Identity [1]

Submitted by Wessel on Thursday, 23 August 2018 - 22:23



Read time: 9 minutes
Perhaps one of the most difficult things for me to do is to respond to someone who asks "tell me about yourself". That is a broad question. Where does one start? There are so many thoughts, feelings, experiences and ambitions which one has accrued over one's life that it is difficult to distil it into something which won't come across as long-winded or narcissistic.

Tied up in this request is a question about identity: who are you?

When we hear the question "who are you", we may instinctively think of responding with our name. This is something of a cultural instinct: we know the context where someone specific (with a specific role or purpose) needs to be found amongst a multitude of people. Responding with our name assures someone that we are the person for whom they are looking.

But one's name is not always closely tied to one's identity. Some people are known by nicknames. I know people who no longer want to be called the same as they were in their youth, because they now perceive it as too juvenile. I also know people who changed their name because they changed their gender. Other people change their name simply because they never liked it, or add new names1. And yet others need to assume new names (amongst others) to escape persecution (or prosecution). In a sense these people all "change their identity", but at another level, they remain the same people whom they were before.

Other people identify themselves according to the people around them. People absorb the culture in which they live. Think, for example, of street gangs, where members express themselves (through language, fashion, etc.) in order to stand part from other groups. The American poet T. S. Eliot is sometimes described as an Anglophile, because of his penchant for British culture. Some people are described by the slur of "coconut", where they "look like" a person of colour but "behave like a white person", thereby "betraying their culture or heritage".

One can also identify oneself using several pithy descriptions. For example, I am male, I am white, I am South African, I am an Afrikaner, I am a Christian, I am straight, I am unmarried, I am able bodied and in good health, I am a software developer. All of these things put me into categories which others can possibly use to form *a priori* opinions of me regarding my views, beliefs and opinions (and not necessarily baselessly or even unfairly).

But are these things who I truly am? They could be. If one fixates on one's race or ethnicity (and, similarly, on others'), one *could* be drawn towards a racist outlook on life. If one fixates on one's nationality or heritage, it can lead to a nationalist (or, perhaps, separatist) outlook on life. If one fixates on one's career, that can absorb a person, consume their free time and interests. Humanity is, as a result, easily categorised into "us" and "them" based on various descriptors.

This might seem simplistic. And it is: none of us are just one thing2. But I am referring to what we

regard *ourselves* as *primarily*. Consider the term "gay community": this is often a self-stylisation and is meant to encompass a group of people who strongly, some perhaps even primarily, identify themselves as their sexual preference3.

How do you identify yourself? How do other people know you as? How would they remember you when you pass away?

In an excellent short video [2], which unexpectedly went viral, Sam Allberry addressed the General Synod of the Church of England in 2017. He confessed (not for the first time) his same sex attraction. But he made a point of it that that is not his *identity*. The kind of people to whom he is attracted does not define his identity. His identity, instead, lies in being a child of God, and someone who was saved by the sacrifice of Jesus.

This does not come automatically. And I can attest to that. For a long time I struggled with the fixation of being single (which led me to several insights, about which I wrote here [3] and here [4]). Even though it was not my desire to fixate on this singular aspect of my life, it was difficult. I did not go around proclaiming to everyone that I was single; I did not join groups for support or celebration. I tried to make plans about the future in a neutral objective sense, not taking one course of my life for granted over another. But, at night, alone, thoughts about this troubled and sometimes consumed me.

When it comes to identity, we need to look at the world objectively. Emotions and self-perception are strong, but we must not let them overrule objective realities. We also need to be careful that other people do not dictate our identity to us. For example, we might conform to others' behaviour or ideals in order to "fit in with the crowd". As another example, my identity is not one of privilege, although others might want it to be. (Certainly it is good to fair to reflect on that, but I won't allow it to become my identity; in the same way as I would not want to assume "poor" as their primary identity.)

Instead, I need to take a step back and consider the basic facts of who I am:

- I am created in the image of God. Irrespective of *how* (race, ethnicity, gender, etc.). This is a spiritual reality.
    - *All other people* are similarly created in God's image. This establishes a fundamental equality between us.
    - These facts have *primacy* in my perception of myself and of others.
- I live in a fallen world and in a fallen state [5], and my deepest proclivity is toward pride, selfishness and malice. This is over and above what other people may see of me and recognise me as. It precedes things such as my likeability and charitable involvements.
- I have chosen to accept Christ as my Saviour [6]. Therefore I am forgiven of my sins and adopted into the Kingdom of God. I am in Christ, and a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17). This is true, even if I don't feel like it.
- My purpose [7] is the furtherance of the Kingdom of God and emulating my Saviour, Jesus. This is more fundamental than my chosen career, privilege, upbringing, education, and the opportunities and difficulties which I have faced in my life. The contexts of my career, education, etc. allow me the opportunity to glorify Jesus in a distinct way, but these context do not themselves define me.

This is my identity. And this shapes my perspective of the world:

- I am a white Afrikaner. I can chose to overindulge in that fact and be racist for one or other reason, or I can recognise that my race and ethnicity is one manifestation in a beautiful tapestry of different colours, cultures and languages which God has created. And the fact that we are all created in His image, makes us equal. Elevating myself above this, is to reject God's image bearing creatures (humanity), and God's purpose in His creation; which implicitly is a rejection of God.
- I am heterosexual, able-bodied, healthy and neurotypical. I recognise that God intended for

His creation to function in a certain way in order to flourish. I can take for granted that I "function normally" in this regard and look down on those who do not. Or I can recognise that we are all affected by sin in this world, and downplay the sinful natures and perspectives which I harbour and elevate those of others, thereby being judgemental and sanctimonious.
- I am male. I can use my strength and desires to subdue and justify mistreatment of women. Or I can recognise that we have been created equal in the sight of God, and that mistreatment of women would be mistreatment of His good creation. And despite the fact that men and women are created equality, we are functionally different, *complementing* each other with different instincts, perspectives, aptitudes and biology.

Christians do not worship an "unknown god" (Acts 17:23); we worship a God who has revealed Himself throughout history to individuals and through Scripture. He is immensely personal [8], and that enables us to relate to Him, because we can know Him (insofar as we are able to understand an infinite Being). As we grow more and more familiar with God's identity, may our own identity be shaped as a whole as we learn about where we came from (creation), what brought us here (salvation), our price (Jesus's sacrifice), our purpose (Kingdom work), and our destination (new creation). May our identity be not a testimony to ourselves and our own accomplishments and achievements, but God's!

- 1. Growing up I had a good friend who wanted to add his late grandfather's middle name, thereby strengthening (in his mind) his familial bond.
- 2. Recently, Castle beer launched their #SmashTheLabel [9] (a.k.a. "I'm more than that" [10]) ad campaign.
- 3. We should not downplay this, or any other, self-identification. Tying one's identity to such an aspect can be the result of a lifetime of experiences: being ostracised by a community for one's sexual orientation, being bullied for being smart, being raised in a community of people of the same race or ethnicity who feel strongly about their heritage. All of these things can powerfully impact the psyche of a person on multiple levels, but can be traced back to a handful of primary causes.

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