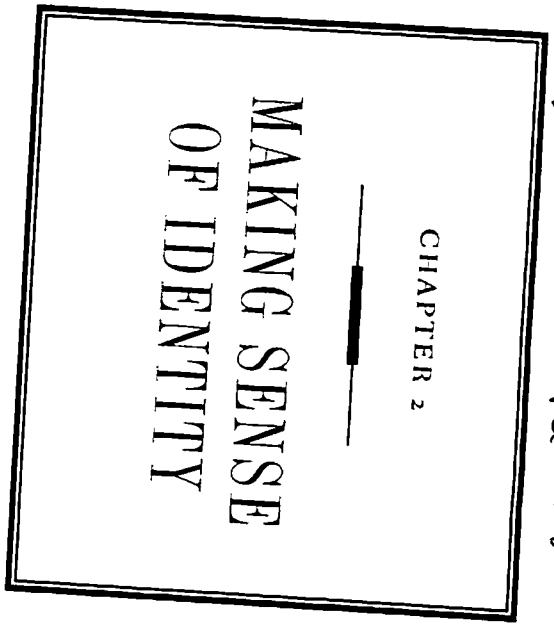


Amritha Sen,

— Identity & Violence — The Illusion of Being

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In an arresting passage in *A Turn in the South*, V. S. Naipaul expresses a worry about losing one's past and one's historical identity in the melting pot of the present.

In 1961, when I was travelling in the Caribbean for my first travel book, I remember my shock, my feeling of taint and spiritual annihilation, when I saw some of the Indians of Martinique, and began to understand that they have been swamped by Martinique, that I had no means of sharing the world view of these people whose history at some stage had been like mine, but who now, racially and in other ways, had become something other.

Concerns of this kind not only indicate an anxiety and a disquiet, but also point illuminatingly to the positive and constructive

tive importance people tend to attach to a shared history and a sense of affiliation based on this history.

And yet history and background are not the only way of seeing ourselves and the groups to which we belong. There are a great variety of categories to which we simultaneously belong. I can be, at the same time, an Asian, an Indian citizen, a Bengali with Bangladeshi ancestry, an American or British resident, an economist, a dabbler in philosophy, an author, a Sanskritist, a strong believer in secularism and democracy, a man, a feminist, a heterosexual, a defender of gay and lesbian rights, with a nonreligious lifestyle, from a Hindu background, a non-Brahmin, and a nonbeliever in an afterlife (and also, in case the question is asked, a nonbeliever in a "before-life" as well). This is just a small sample of diverse categories to each of which I may simultaneously belong—there are of course a great many other membership categories too which, depending on circumstances, can move and engage me.

Belonging to each one of the membership groups can be quite important, depending on the particular context. When they compete for attention and priority over each other (they need not always, since there may be no conflict between the demands of different loyalties), the person has to decide on the relative importance to attach to the respective identities, which will, again, depend on the exact context. There are two distinct issues here. First, the recognition that identities are robustly plural, and that the importance of one identity need not obliterate the importance of others. Second, a person has to make choices—explicitly or by implication—about what relative importance to attach, in a particular context, to the divergent loyalties and priorities that may compete for precedence.

Identifying with others, in various different ways, can be extremely important for living in a society. It has not, however,

always been easy to persuade social analysts to accommodate identity in a satisfactory way. In particular, two different types of reductionism seem to abound in the formal literature of social and economic analysis. One may be called "identity disregard," and it takes the form of ignoring, or neglecting altogether, the influence of any sense of identity with others, on what we value and how we behave. For example, a good deal of contemporary economic theory proceeds as if, in choosing their aims, objectives, and priorities, people do not have—or pay attention to—any sense of identity with anyone other than themselves. John Donne may have warned, "No man is an island entire of itself," but the postulated human beings of pure economic theory are often made to see themselves as pretty "entire."

In contrast with "identity disregard," there is a different kind of reductionism, which we may call "singular affiliation," which takes the form of assuming that any person preeminently belongs, for all practical purposes, to one collectivity only—no more and no less. Of course, we do know in fact that any real human being belongs to many different groups, through birth, associations, and alliances. Each of these group identities can—and sometimes does—give the person a sense of affiliation and loyalty. Despite that, the assumption of singular affiliation is amazingly popular, if only implicitly, among several groups of social theorists. It seems to appeal often enough to communitarian thinkers as well as to those theorists of cultural politics who like to divide up the world population into civilizational categories. The intricacies of plural groups and multiple loyalties are obliterated by seeing each person as firmly embedded in exactly one affiliation, replacing the richness of leading an abundant human life with the formulaic narrowness of insisting that any person is "situated" in just one organic pack.

To be sure, the assumption of singularity is not only the staple

nourishment of many theories of identity, it is also, as I discussed in the first chapter, a frequently used weapon of sectarian activists who want the targeted people to ignore altogether all other linkages that could moderate their loyalty to the specially marked herd. The incitement to ignore all affiliation and loyalties other than those emanating from one restrictive identity can be deeply delusive and also contribute to social tension and violence.²

Given the powerful presence of these two types of reductionism in contemporary social and economic thinking, both deserve serious attention.

Identity Disregard and the Rational Fool

I begin with identity disregard. The assumption of narrowly self-interested individuals has evidently appeared to be "natural" to many modern economists, and the oddity of that presumption has been made more extreme by the further insistence, which too is rather common, that this is what "rationality"—no less—invariably demands. There is an argument—an allegedly knockout argument—that we encounter too frequently. It takes the form of asking: "if it is not in your interest, why would you have chosen to do what you did?" This wise-guy skepticism makes huge idiots out of Mohandas Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., Mother Teresa, and Nelson Mandela, and rather smaller idiots out of the rest of us, by thoroughly ignoring the variety of motivations that move human beings living in a society, with various affiliations and commitments. The single-minded self-loving human being, who provides the behavioral foundations of a great many economic theories, has been adorned often enough by elevating nomenclature, such as being called "the economic man," or "the rational agent."

There have, of course, been critiques of the presumption of single-mindedly self-seeking economic behavior (even Adam Smith, who is frequently taken to be the founding father of "the economic man," had expressed profound skepticism of such an assumption), but much of modern economic theory tended to proceed as if these doubts were of marginal concern and could be easily brushed off.³ In recent years these general critiques have, however, been supplemented by criticisms coming from results of experimental games and other behavioral tests, which have brought out serious tensions between the assumption of pure self-seeking with singular affiliation and how people are actually observed to behave. These observations have empirically reinforced conceptual doubts about the coherence and sustainability of the presumed mental makeup of such single-focus people because of the philosophical and psychological limitation involved in not being able to make any effective difference between entirely distinguishable questions: "what shall I do?" "what serves my interest best?" "what choices will best promote my objectives?" "what should I rationally choose?" A person who acts with impeccable consistency and predictability but can *never* give different answers to these disparate questions can be taken to be something of a "rational fool."⁴

It is, in this context, particularly important to try to incorporate the perception and understanding of identity into the characterization of preference and behavior in economics.⁵ This has happened in many different ways in the recent literature. The inclusion of considerations of identity with others in a shared group—and the working of what George Akerlof, the economist, calls "loyalty filters"—can powerfully influence individual conduct as well as their interactions, which can take richly divergent forms.⁶

It must, of course, be recognized that the rejection of purely self-interested behavior does not indicate that one's actions are necessarily influenced by a sense of identity with others. It is quite

possible that a person's behavior may be swayed by other types of considerations, such as her adherence to some norms of acceptable conduct (such as financial honesty or a sense of fairness), or by her sense of duty—or fiduciary responsibility—toward others with whom one does not identify in any obvious sense. Nevertheless, a sense of identity with others can be a very important—and rather complex—influence on one's behavior which can easily go against narrowly self-interested conduct.

That broad question also relates to another, to wit, the role of evolutionary selection of behavioral norms which can play an instrumentally important part.⁷ If a sense of identity leads to group success, and through that to individual betterment, then those identity-sensitive behavioral modes may end up being multiplied and promoted. Indeed, both in *reflective* choice and in *evolutionary* selection, ideas of identity can be important, and mixtures of the two—combining critical reflection and selective evolution—can also, obviously, lead to the prevalence of identity-influenced behavior. The time has certainly come to displace the presumption of "identity disregard" from the exalted position it has tended to occupy in a substantial part of economic theory woven around the concept of "the economic man," and also in political, legal, and social theory (used in imitative admiration—a sincere form of flattery—of so-called rational-choice economics).

Plural Affiliations and Social Contexts

I turn now to the second type of reductionism: the assumption of singular affiliation. We are all individually involved in identities of various kinds in disparate contexts, in our own respective lives, arising from our background, or associations, or social activities.

This was discussed in the first chapter, but it is perhaps worth reemphasizing the point here. The same person can, for example, be a British citizen, of Malaysian origin, with Chinese racial characteristics, a stockbroker, a nonvegetarian, an asthmatic, a linguist, a bodybuilder, a poet, an opponent of abortion, a bird-watcher, an astrologer, and one who believes that God created Darwin to test the gullible.

We do belong to many different groups, in one way or another, and each of these collectivities can give a person a potentially important identity. We may have to decide whether a particular group to which we belong is—or is not—important for us. Two different, though interrelated, exercises are involved here: (1) deciding on what our relevant identities are, and (2) weighing the relative importance of these different identities. Both tasks demand reasoning and choice.

The search for a unique way of classifying people for social analysis is not, of course, new. Even the political grouping of people into workers and nonworkers, much used in classical socialist literature, had this simple feature. That such a two-class partition could be very deceptive for social and economic analysis (even for those with a commitment to the underdogs of society) is now widely acknowledged, and it is perhaps worth recollecting, in this context, that Karl Marx himself subjected this unique identification to severe criticism in his *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, in 1875 (a quarter century after *The Communist Manifesto*). Marx's critique of the German Workers Party's proposed plan of action (the "Gotha Programme") included an argument, among others, against seeing workers "only" as workers, ignoring their diversities as human beings:

[U]nequal individuals (and they would not be different individuals if they were not unequal) are measurable only by an equal

standard in so far as they are brought under an equal point of view, are taken from one *definite* side only, e.g., in the present case are regarded *only as workers*, and nothing more is seen in them, everything else being ignored.⁸

The singular-affiliation view would be hard to justify by the crude presumption that any person belongs to one group and one group only. Each of us patently belongs to many. But nor can that view be easily vindicated by claiming that despite the plurality of groups to which any person belongs, there is, in every situation, some one group that is naturally the preeminent collectivity for her, and she can have no choice in deciding on the relative importance of her different membership categories.

I shall have to come back to the question of multiple memberships and the role of choice in the idea of identity, but before that it is worth noting that in the variation of the relative importance of identities, there may be significant external influences as well: not everything turns specifically on the nature of reasoning and choice. This clarification is needed since the role of choice has to be understood after taking note of the other influences that restrict or restrain the choices one can make.

For one thing, the importance of a particular identity will depend on the social context. For example, when going to a dinner, one's identity as a vegetarian may be rather more crucial than one's identity as a linguist, whereas the latter may be particularly important if one considers going to a lecture on linguistic studies. This variability does nothing to rehabilitate the assumption of singular affiliation, but it illustrates the need to see the role of choice in a context-specific way.

Also, not all identities need have durable importance. Indeed, sometimes an identity group may have a very fleeting and highly contingent existence. Mort Sahl, the American

comedian, is supposed to have responded to the intense tedium of a four-hour-long film, directed by Otto Preminger, called *Exodus* (about the ancient Jewish migration out of Egypt, led by Moses), by demanding on behalf of his fellow sufferers: "Otto, let my people go!" That group of tormented filmgoers did have reason for fellow feeling, but one can see the massive contrast between such an ephemeral group of "my people" and the well-knit and seriously tyrannized community of people led by Moses—the original subject of that famous entreaty.

To consider the acceptance issue first, classifications can take many different forms, and not all of the categories that can be consistently generated would serve as a plausible basis for an important identity. Consider the set of people in the world who were born between nine and ten in the morning, local time. This is a distinct and quite well-defined group, but it is hard to imagine that many people would get excited about sustaining the solidarity of such a group and the identity it could potentially produce. Similarly, people who wear size 8 shoes are typically not linked with each other with a strong sense of identity on that shoe-size ground (rather important as that descriptive specificity is, when it comes to buying shoes and, more importantly, trying cheerfully to walk around in them).

Classification is certainly cheap, but identity is not. More interestingly, whether a particular classification can plausibly generate a sense of identity or not must depend on social circumstances. For example, if size 8 shoes become extremely difficult to find for some complicated bureaucratic reason (to grasp the intelligibility of such a supply shortage, one might have to place oneself somewhere in Minsk or Pinsk at the high noon of Soviet civilization), then the need for shoes of that size may indeed become a shared predicament and can give reason enough for solidarity and identity. Social clubs might even be set up

(preferably with a liquor license) to exchange information about the availability of size 8 shoes.

Similarly, if it were to emerge that people born between 9 and 10 A.M. are, for reasons we do not yet understand, particularly vulnerable to some specific ailment (Harvard Medical School might be marshaled to look into this), then again there is a shared quandary which can provide a reason for a sense of identity. To consider a different variant of this example, if some authoritarian ruler wants to curb the freedom of people born in that particular hour because of the ruler's supernatural belief in the perfidy of people born then (perhaps some Machethian witches have told him that he will be killed by someone born between 9 and 10 A.M.), then again a case for solidarity and identity based on that classificatory unity and persecution may indeed emerge here.

Sometimes a classification that is hard to justify intellectually may nevertheless be made important through social arrangements. Pierre Bourdieu, the French philosopher and sociologist, has pointed out how a social action can end up "producing a difference when none existed," and "social magic can transform people by telling them that they are different." That is what competitive examinations do (the 300th candidate is still something, the 301st is nothing). In other words, the social world constitutes differences by the mere fact of designing them.⁹

Even when a categorization is arbitrary or capricious, once they are articulated and recognized in terms of dividing lines, the groups thus classified acquire derivative relevance (in the case of the civil service examination, it may involve the difference between having a fine job and having none), and this can be a plausible enough basis for identities on both sides of the separating line.

The reasoning in the choice of relevant identities must, therefore, go well beyond the purely intellectual into contingent social

significance. Not only is reason involved in the choice of identity, but the reasoning may have to take note of the social context and contingent relevance of being in one category or another.

Contrasting and Noncontrasting Identities

We can also distinguish between "contrasting" and "noncontrasting" identities. The different groups may belong to the same category, dealing with the same kind of membership (such as citizenship), or to different categories (such as citizenship, profession, class, or gender). In the former case, there is some contrast between different groups within the same category, and thus between the different identities with which they are associated. But when we deal with groups classified on different bases (such as profession and citizenship, respectively), there may be no real contrast between them as far as "belonging" is concerned. However, even though these noncontrasting identities are not involved in any territorial dispute as far as "belonging" is concerned, they can compete with each other for our attention and priorities. When one has to do one thing or another, the loyalties can conflict between giving priority to, say, race, or religion, or political commitments, or professional obligations, or citizenship.

In fact, we can have plural identities even within contrasting categories. One citizenship does, in an elementary sense, contrast with another in a person's identity. But as this example itself indicates, even contrasting identities need not demand that one and one only of the unique specifications can survive, overthrowing all the other alternatives. A person can be a dual citizen of, say, both France and the United States. Citizenship can, of course, be made exclusive, as is the case with, say, China or Japan (this was,

in fact, the case even with the United States until quite recently). But even when exclusivity is insisted on, the conflict of dual loyalty need not disappear. For example, if a Japanese citizen resident in Britain is unwilling to take British citizenship because she does not want to lose her Japanese national identity, she may still have quite a substantial loyalty to her British attachments and to other features of her British identity which no Japanese court can outlaw. Similarly, an erstwhile Japanese citizen who has given up that citizenship to become a UK citizen may still retain considerable loyalties to her sense of Japanese identity.

The conflict between the priorities and demands of different identities can be significant both for contrasting and for noncontrasting categories. It is not so much that a person has to deny one identity to give priority to another, but rather that a person with plural identities has to decide, in case of a conflict, on the relative importance of the different identities for the particular decision in question. Reasoning and scrutiny can thus play a major role both in the specification of identities and in thinking through the relative strengths of their respective claims.

Choice and Constraints

In each social context, there would be a number of potentially viable and relevant identities which one could assess in terms of their acceptability and their relative importance. In many situations, the plurality may become central because of the widespread relevance of durable and frequently invoked characteristics, such as nationality, language, ethnicity, politics, or profession. The person may have to decide on the relative significance of the different affiliations, which could vary depending on the context. It is

quite hard to imagine that a person can really be bereft of the possibility of considering alternative identifications, and that she must just "discover" her identities, as if it were a purely natural phenomenon. In fact, we are all constantly making choices, if only implicitly, about priorities to be attached to our different affiliations and associations. Often such choices are quite explicit and carefully argued, as when Mohandas Gandhi deliberately decided to give priority to his identification with Indians seeking independence from the British rule over his identity as a trained barrister pursuing English legal justice, or when E. M. Forster famously concluded, "[I]f I had to choose between betraying my country and betraying my friend, I hope I should have the guts to betray my country."¹⁰

It seems unlikely that the thesis of singular affiliation can have any kind of plausibility given the constant presence of different categories and groups to which any human being belongs. It is possible that the often repeated belief, common among advocates of singular affiliation, that identity is a matter of "discovery" is encouraged by the fact that the choices we can make are constrained by feasibility (I cannot readily choose the identity of a blue-eyed teenage girl from Lapland who is entirely comfortable with six-month-long nights), and these constraints would rule out all kinds of alternatives as being nonfeasible. And yet even after that, there will remain choices to make, for example, between priorities of nationality, religion, language, political beliefs, or professional commitments. And the decisions can be momentous: for example, the father, Eugenio Colomi, of my late wife Eva had to weigh the divergent demands of being an Italian, a philosopher, an academic, a democrat, and a socialist, in Mussolini's fascist Italy in the 1930s, and chose to abandon the academic pursuit of philosophy to join the Italian resistance (he was killed by the fascists in Rome two days before American soldiers arrived there).

The constraints may be especially strict in defining the extent to which we can persuade *others*, in particular, to take us to be different from (or more than) what they insist on taking us to be. A Jewish person in Nazi Germany, or an African-American when faced with a lynch mob in the American South, or a rebellious, landless agricultural laborer threatened by a gunman hired by upper-caste landowners in North Bihar may not be able to alter his or her identity in the eyes of the aggressors. The freedom in choosing our identity in the eyes of others can sometimes be extraordinarily limited. This point is not in dispute.

Many years ago, when I was an undergraduate at Cambridge, one of my teachers, Joan Robinson, a superb professor of economics, told me (during a particularly argumentative tutorial—we used to have many of those): "The Japanese are too polite; you Indians are too rude; the Chinese are just right." I accepted this generalization immediately: the alternative would have been, of course, to give further evidence of the Indian propensity toward rudeness. But I also realized that no matter what I said or did, the imaging would not quickly change in my teacher's mind (Joan Robinson, by the way, was very fond of Indians: she thought that they were absolutely fine in a rude kind of way).

More generally, whether we are considering our identities as we ourselves see them or as others see us, we choose within particular constraints. But this is not in the least a surprising fact—it is rather just the way choices are faced in any situation. Choices of all kinds are always made within particular constraints, and this is perhaps the most elementary aspect of any choice. As was discussed in the first chapter, any student of economics knows that consumers always choose within a budget constraint, but that does not indicate that they have no choice, but only that they have to choose within their budgets.

There is also a need for reasoning in determining the demands

and implications of identity-based thinking. It is clear enough that the way we see ourselves may well influence our practical reason, but it is by no means immediate how—indeed in which direction—that influence may work. A person may decide, on reflection, not only that she is a member of a particular ethnic group (for example, a Kurd), but also that this is an extremely important identity for her. This decision can easily influence the person in the direction of taking greater responsibility for the well-being and freedoms of that ethnic group—it can become for her an extension of the obligation to be self-reliant (the self now being extended to cover others in the group with which this person identifies).

However, this does not yet tell us whether the person should or should not favor members of this group in the choices she has to make. If, for example, she were to favor her own ethnic group in making public decisions, this could rightly be seen as a case of shady nepotism rather than an example of shining excellence of morality and ethics. Indeed, just as self-denial may be a part of public morality, it can even be argued that a person may have to be particularly diffident in favoring members of a group with which she identifies. There is no presumption that the recognition or assertion of an identity must necessarily be a ground for solidarity in practical decisions; this has to be a matter for further reasoning and scrutiny. Indeed, the need for reasoning is thoroughly pervasive at every stage of identity-based thoughts and decisions.

Communitarian Identity and the Possibility of Choice

I turn now to some specific arguments and claims, beginning with the alleged priority of one's community-based identity which has been forcefully advocated in communitarian philosophy. That line

of thought not only prioritizes the importance of belonging to one particular community group rather than another, but often tends to see community membership as a kind of extension of one's own self.¹¹ Communitarian thinking has been in the ascendancy over the last few decades in contemporary social, political, and moral theorizing, and the dominant and compelling role of social identity in governing behavior as well as knowledge has been widely investigated and championed.¹²

In some versions of communitarian thinking, it is presumed—explicitly or by implication—that one's identity with one's community must be the principal or dominant (perhaps even the only significant) identity a person has. This conclusion can be linked to two alternative—related but distinct—lines of reasoning. One line argues that a person does not have access to other community-independent conceptions of identity and to other ways of thinking about identity. Her social background, firmly based on “community and culture,” determines the feasible patterns of reasoning and ethics that are available to her. The second line of argument does not anchor the conclusion to perceptual constraints, but to the claim that identity is a matter of discovery anyway, and the communitarian identity will invariably be recognized to be of paramount importance, if any comparisons were to be made.

To look, first, at the thesis of severe perceptual limitation, it often takes the form of an amazingly strong assertion. In some of the more fervent versions of the thesis, we are told that we cannot invoke any criterion of rational behavior other than those that obtain in the community to which the person involved belongs. Any reference to rationality yields the retort, “*which rationality?*” or “*whose rationality?*” It is also argued not only that the *explanation* of a person's moral judgments must be based on the values and norms of the community to which the person belongs, but also that these judgments can be ethically assessed *only within* those

values and norms, which entails a denial of the claims of competing norms on the person's attention. Various versions of these far-reaching claims have been forcefully aired and powerfully advocated.

This approach has had the effect of rejecting the feasibility of assessing—perhaps even comprehending—normative judgments about behavior and institutions across cultures and societies, and it has sometimes been used to undermine the possibility of serious cross-cultural exchange and understanding. This distancing sometimes serves a political purpose, for example, in the defense of particular customs and traditions on such matters as women's unequal social position or the use of particular modes of conventional punishment, varying from amputation to the stoning of allegedly adulterous women. There is an insistence here on splitting up the large world into little islands that are not within intellectual reach of each other.

These perceptual claims are certainly worth scrutinizing. There can be little doubt that the community or culture to which a person belongs can have a major influence on the way he or she sees a situation or views a decision. In any explanatory exercise, note has to be taken of local knowledge, regional norms, and particular perceptions and values that are common in a specific community.¹³ The empirical case for this recognition is certainly strong. But this does not, in any plausible way, undermine or eliminate the possibility and role of choice and reasoning about identity. This is so for at least two specific reasons.

First, even though certain basic cultural attitudes and beliefs may influence the nature of our reasoning, they cannot invariably determine it fully. There are various influences on our reasoning, and we need not lose our ability to consider other ways of reasoning just because we identify with, and have been influenced by membership in, a particular group. Influence is not the same

thing as complete determination, and choices do remain despite the existence—and importance—of cultural influences.

Second, the so-called cultures need not involve any *uniquely* defined set of attitudes and beliefs that can shape our reasoning. Indeed, many of these "cultures" contain considerable internal variations, and different attitudes and beliefs may be entertained within the same broadly defined culture. For example, Indian traditions are often taken to be intimately associated with religion, and indeed in many ways they are, and yet Sanskrit and Pali have a larger atheistic and agnostic literature than any other classical language: Greek or Roman or Hebrew or Arabic. When a doctrinal anthology such as the fourteenth-century Sanskrit book *Sarvadarshanasangraha* (literally translated as "collection of all philosophies") presents sixteen chapters respectively sympathetic to sixteen different positions on religious issues (beginning with atheism), the aim is to cater to informed and discerning choice, rather than to indicate incomprehension of each other's positions.¹⁴

Our ability to think clearly may of course, vary with training and talent, but we can, as adult and competent human beings, question and begin to challenge what has been taught to us if we are given the opportunity to do so. While particular circumstances may not sometimes encourage a person to engage in such questioning, the ability to doubt and to question is not beyond our reach.

The point is often made, plausibly enough, that one cannot reason from nowhere. But this does not imply that no matter what the antecedent associations of a person are, those associations must remain unchallenged, unrejectable, and permanent. The alternative to the "discovery" view is not choice from positions "unencumbered" with any identity (as some communitarian polemicists seem to imply), but choices that continue to exist even in any *encumbered* position one happens to occupy. Choice does

not require jumping out of nowhere into somewhere, but it can lead to a move from one place to another:

Priorities and Reason

I turn now from the argument based on perceptual limitation to the other possible ground for relying on choiceless identities, to wit, the alleged centrality of discovery in “knowing who you are.” As Michael Sandel, the political theorist, has illuminatingly explained this claim (among other communitarian claims), “[C]ommunity describes not just what they *have* as fellow citizens but also what they *are*, not a relationship they choose (as in a voluntary association) but an attachment they discover, not merely an attribute but a constituent of their identity.”¹⁵

However, an enriching identity need not, in fact, be obtained only through discovering where we find ourselves. It can also be acquired and earned. When Lord Byron considered leaving Greece and parting from the people with whom this quintessential Englishman had come to identify so closely, he had reason to lament:

Maid of Athens, ere we part,
Give, oh, give me back my heart!

Byron’s acquired identity with the Greeks vastly enriched his own life while also adding some strength to the Greek struggle for independence. We are not as imprisoned in our installed locations and affiliations as the advocates of the discovery view of identity seem to presume.

Perhaps, however, the strongest reason for being skeptical of

the discovery view is that we have different ways of identifying ourselves even in our given locations. The sense of belonging to a community while strong enough in many cases, need not obliterate—or overwhelm—other associations and affiliations. These choices are constantly faced (even though we may not spend all our time articulating the choices we are actually making).

Consider, for example, the Caribbean poet Derek Walcott’s poem “A Far Cry from Africa,” which captures the divergent pulls of his historical African background and his loyalty to the English language and the literary culture that goes with it (a very strong affiliation for Walcott):

Where shall I turn, divided to the vein?
I who have cursed
The drunken officer of British rule, how choose
Between this Africa and the English tongue I love?
Betray them both, or give back what they give?
How can I face such slaughter and be cool?
How can I turn from Africa and live?

Walcott cannot simply “discover” what is his true identity; he has to decide what he should do, and how—and to what extent—to make room for the different loyalties in his life. We have to address the issue of conflict, real or imagined, and ask about the implications of our loyalty to divergent priorities and differentiated affinities. If Walcott wonders what conflict there is between his inseparable attachment to Africa and his love of the English language and his use of that language (indeed his astonishingly beautiful use of that language), that points to broader questions of disparate pulls on one’s life. The presence of conflicting pulls is as real in France, or America, or South Africa, or India, or anywhere else, as it clearly is in Walcott’s Caribbean. The basic seri-

ousness of the disparate pulls—of history, culture, language, politics, profession, family, comradeship, and so on—have to be adequately recognized, and they cannot all be drowned in a single-minded celebration only of community.

The point at issue is not whether *any* identity whatever can be chosen (that would be an absurd claim), but whether we do indeed have choices over alternative identities or combinations of identities, and perhaps more importantly, substantial freedom regarding what *priority* to give to the various identities we may simultaneously have.¹⁶ To consider an illustration that was discussed in the last chapter, a person's choice may be constrained by the recognition that she is, say, Jewish, but she still has a decision to make regarding what importance to give to that particular identity over others that she may also have (related for example, to her political beliefs, sense of nationality, humanitarian commitments, or professional attachments).

In the Bengali novel *Gora* by Rabindranath Tagore published a century ago, the problematic hero, also called Gora, differs from most of his friends and family in urban Bengal by strongly championing old-fashioned Hindu customs and traditions and is a staunch religious conservative. However, Tagore places Gora in a big confusion toward the end of the novel when his supposed mother tells him that he was adopted as an infant orphan by the Indian family after his Irish parents had been killed by the rebellious sepoys in the ferocious anti-British mutiny of 1857 (the name Gora means "fair," and presumably his unusual looks had received attention but no clear diagnosis). At one stroke, Gora's militant conservatism is undermined by Tagore since Gora finds all the doors of traditionalist temples closed to him—as a "foreign-born"—thanks to the narrowly conservative cause which he himself had been championing.

We do discover many things about ourselves even when they

may not be as foundational as the one Gora had to face. But to recognize this is not the same as making identity just a matter of discovery. Even when the person discovers something very important about himself or herself, there are still issues of choice to be faced. Gora had to ask whether he should continue his championing of Hindu conservatism (though now from an inescapable distance) or see himself as something else. Gora chooses ultimately, helped by his girlfriend, to see himself just as a human being who is at home in India, not delineated by religion or caste or class or complexion. Important choices have to be made even when crucial discoveries occur. Life is not mere destiny.