

LETTERS TO ADAM K.

re: The identity of Europe

Dear Adam,

Your question about the identity of Europe keeps me more busy than I am inclined to allow myself. Why? Because my first reaction was to consider your question as a 'cul de sac', a dead-end street. But your eagerness to know more about Europe and to grasp her 'soul' – your metaphor for the spirit of the ancient European culture, motivates me to put my scepticism in the back-room in order to give your question the benefit of the doubt.

What could it mean when we speak about 'the identity of Europe'?

I propose to trace first of all the origin of the word 'Europe', one of the five continents, often called the back-garden of Asia. The name 'Europe' in Greek mythology goes back to a Phoenician prince, abducted by Zeus, King of the Olympian gods and goddesses. For the Greek in the seventh century b.c.e. it also meant the North, the "unknown territory". By referring to Europe as a geographic whole, one may wonder what the word 'identity' means in such a context. A geographic definition of Europe is simply not enough to justify a link with 'identity'. When we search for a Europe as a living Continent, a Continent of values and shared traditions, we will find it by going back to her prehistory, about 8000-2000 b.c.e.. There are thousands of artefacts through the whole of today's geographic Europe as the silent witnesses of a matrilineal culture. The Earth and the great Goddess were at the centre of the animist world view of our ancestors. An animist world view characterises itself through a close relationship between the world of the living, the 'living' dead and the yet to be born, all closely linked to *the earth where one is living*.

Today we can only speak in a meaningful way about Europe's identity, if the majority of her inhabitants perceives itself as a commonwealth, with their respective nations as member states of the commonwealth. This raises the question, which paradigms, guiding ideas and values underscore the political and cultural reality of the commonwealth 'Europe'.

Before commenting on this question, let's ask ourselves, Adam, where the idea of identity comes from; what it means, and how it operates. I will argue that the notion 'identity' contains a clue to the 'soul' of Europe. *Identity is a European concept*, a corner-stone of her paradigm, i.e. a set of ideas and values with the status of evidence. We experience these normative ideas as 'objective', as if they belong to reality itself.

Aristotle, 384-322, a Greek philosopher, formulated three laws or principles which – according to him – are presupposed in all reasoning and thinking.

The first one is *the law of identity: A is A*; the second one is *the law of non-contradiction: something cannot be both A and non-A*; the third one is *the law of excluded third: something is either A or non-A*. We can formulate these laws also as propositional forms: 1. if p, then p; 2. not both p and non-p; 3. either p or non-p.

'If p, then p' we call a tautology. Also 'not both p and non-p' and 'either p or non-p' are tautologies, that's to say: they do not provide any information about what-so-ever. They are by definition true and cannot be proven. They manifest themselves as evident.

In *Analyze Decondition, an introduction into systematic philosophy*, I accepted the common argument that these laws derive their relevance from the fact that they are presupposed in all reasoning and thinking. Today, my approach to these principles is slightly different. It is clear that the law of identity precedes the law of non-contradiction and the law of excluded third. They depend on 'A is A' or 'if p, then p'.

What I did not understand in those days, is that the use of these principles in ethics, physics or psychology, briefly, in ontology, the domain that comprises all reality, implies a structuring of our world view that does not follow out of these principles.

Why not? For the simple reason that these principles are empty, fully abstract, without any reference to something outside themselves. 'A is A' speaks about nothing else than itself: 'identity' functions well when used as a logical symbol, for example in 0 and 1, the foundation of all digital operations. However, as we use the law of identity within a physical or psychological reality, we project a static, timeless symbol without any fixed meaning other than a logical tool, on an entity, for example a child. The child becomes 'I', by which we attribute an identity to a child while it is still part of a greater environment, and will always be. So far, nothing wrong, except when we trespass the demarcation line between logic and ontology without realising that we do so. When we project the laws of Aristotle naively on the physical and ethical realities, we construct a dualistic world view, before we even have looked around. The principles of non-contradiction and excluded third – naively applied - oblige us to think in contradictions and exclusions, due to the principle of identity.

Our first error, the philosophical fall of man, is the projection of the principle of identity on humans, as if they are separate subjects, while *individu* in the etymological sense of the word, means: undivided. Its 'identity' is temporary and relative; not empty, abstract, timeless and absolute. By projecting the principle of contradiction on ethical questions, we start to believe in a radical opposition between good and evil, not realising that such a radical, irreconcilable approach – irreconcilable only from a logical point of view - creates a dualistic mind-set. The expression: who is not with us, is against us, is an example of the application of the principle of excluded third. Such an 'Aristotelian' mind-set starts to see everywhere only good and bad guys, and will act in such a way that the 'bad' guys turn indeed their back on them. So, it feels as if you are right but you get what you are asking for.

In order to let you see, Adam, what I mean with the creation of a dualistic mind-set, I quote Heraclitus, about 540-480, whose famous dictum is that *nobody can step twice in the same river*: not only the water of the river does change all the time, also the person. The underlying ontological assumption is: 'panta rhei' (everything flows). Following Heraclitus, one can easily understand that nothing in the existing reality excludes something else in the sense of a formal contradiction. Everything exists simultaneously! From this ontological perspective, follows that oppositions need each other...they may be understood as yang and yin in Chinese philosophy: forces that presuppose each other and hold each other in a dynamic balance.

Back to your question, Adam. The abstract, static, timeless nature of 'A is A' is useless, when projected on an individual, people or continent. 'The identity of Europe' has nothing to do with the principle of identity, as formulated by Aristotle. We can only grasp the 'soul' of Europe when we try to understand her way of thinking and perceiving. This leads to the paradox, a seeming contradiction, that *the notion of identity is our first asset*. I hope to show you another time that the notion of identity plays an important role in other ideas belonging to the European mind-set; such as substance; fact; God; individual; uniqueness; unalienable rights, and so on.

Your question triggers many other ones. What you are asking me, is the most difficult task I can imagine, because it implies that we study the role of our normative ideas in the construction and perception of what we call 'reality'. Michel Foucault did something similar in his *Archeologie du savoir*. I call the attempt a study of the eyes in the back of our mind...the eyes we take for granted; whose existence we do not know.

By studying other cultures and by reflecting on our intellectual tradition, we may succeed in lifting the voile that covers our mind-set just enough, to develop some insight into the differences of insight. The attempt of looking beyond the own borders, belongs also to the European tradition. Therefore, *alterity is our second asset*. It is not difficult to understand why *identity and alterity are identical twins*: these concepts evoke each other necessarily. They are as yang and yin.

Europe is an exception within the General Human Pattern, according to Jan Romein, a Dutch historian. The jump from the logical sphere of Aristotle's principles into the ontological reality, paved the road for the European exception within the general human pattern. To comprehend this road, is a precondition for the understanding of Europe's past, and her future position in a global world.

We might succeed in this research, if we avoid the mind-trap of seeing everywhere separate identities or so-called facts and individuals, while everything in reality, including humans, is interrelated. Especially humans are mirroring each other in every possible way.

Let's not play the fool, Adam. The existentialist idea that everyone is unique, is only one side of the coin. We are unique as microcosm that mirrors the macrocosm.

See you!

Fons

La Source, St. Jean de Valériscle

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