

FELIX NUSSBAUMER
Ambiguous identity

The first questions, man has ever raised indicate a primal strive for definitive answers and a direction or absolute truth upon which to act. One of them turned out to be of grand importance for the roads, down which the 20th century traveled philosophically, ideologically and artistically. It was first raised and answered by the Greek philosopher Gorgias and his contemporaries, who doubted the correlation between the nature and truth of existence in regards to human perception. Here, relativism, that is to say a critical position towards perception itself, was conceived. No man at this time had ever thought of, nor dared to question the validity of observation, so much so that after the Greek period's conviction, that information was neither possible to receive, nor to grasp or pass on, nobody led this unquestionable premise to a conclusion, because the epistemological abyss it presented was too frightening to be traversed or explored. Only from the 19th century onwards, thinkers in very diverse disciplines committed to basing their theses on this sort of new relativism. Wittgenstein merged Plato's idealism with linguistics to form a system based on the communication of images while figures such as Noam Chomsky remarked, that every political system was only justified by its means to *manufacture consent*. The period of the world wars brought existential thinking to a new minimum in argumentation, with Albert Camus abandoning the concept of logic altogether or new generations of artists and writers stretching and crossing the boundaries of language¹. Jean Paul Sartre finally condemned men to be free and had society face the absurdity of a concept they held on to since the dawn of civilization – identity. This now so ambiguously convoluted term is to be dismissed in this paper.

To incite the reader's understanding of the history of identity, the point of departure shall be a quote from the Austrian writer and literary figure Robert Musil.

"If there is a sense of reality, there must also be a sense of possibility."

Here, the relativist would argue against the objectivity of truth and dismiss the author's knowledge of the existence of an external, absolute reality. The mere fact that the ideological predisposition of relativism produces the fixation on the partial argument about the *sense of reality* is very telling, in that it makes the relativist's position reducible to the *sense of possibility*. Instinctively, relativism is nothing else, but the emancipation of more, less and unlikely

¹ In his Dadaist manifesto the Swiss poet Hugo Ball remarked that poets had created the most unique images through words, but they had never gone so far as to create words themselves.

possibilities. Reality, as perceived by the observer ought to be seen in context of this *sense of possibility*, of the realization that there may easily be different turnouts. What *is* now matters integrally as much as what might *be*.

This premise can now be applied to personal identity, in that it creates a world of possibilities for the individual to navigate towards. No one is bound to accept their fictional destiny of being an office worker, a cleaning lady or a secretary anymore and can now strive to be a jazz pianist, a painter or a revolutionary mathematician, independent of their background, ethnicity, gender or social status. At this point the philosopher sees his work as brought to its most favorable end, namely to liberate people from their own oppressive acceptance, though there are problematic roads yet to be explored. If the idea of an all-encompassing relativism is to be held as true, all of its conclusions ought to be drawn.

If identity were, as suggested by mere theoretical arguments, close in nature to a video game-character to be chosen, the rabbit hole would in fact end here. However, the certain influence, society has on an individual's identity, has to be taken into consideration. In this way, my usage of the terms *society* and *identity* can easily be clarified – identity is the fixation on a role that is suggested to the individual through the machinery of society. In this case, machinery to me does not seem to be an exaggerated term, for society is nothing but a complex factory, shaping people by a number of finite different roles and personalities, which are defined by its values and ideals. These ideals are nothing alike Marx's ruling ideology or any conspiratorial fiction about the government controlling the people, but the small things one encounters everyday. Every aspect of any product is the result of a synthesizing process, which also includes ideological predisposition. Look no further than a restaurant to witness certain rules, reminiscent of old and long-forgotten traditions. Albert Camus, for instance, may have questioned the validity of reason, yet never took a position on why one should eat with the fork in their left hand. Yet these are the things that shape us the most and that we accept the most easily. This *everyday ideology* is both positively uncontrollable and negatively affective on people's lives.

Most prevalently, the foremost point of critique found in post-modern culture is its aesthetic and epistemological detachment in both art and philosophy. This critique is indicative of a cultural process, which is driven by the fears and anxieties attached to a relativistic worldview. No self-proclaimed nihilist or existentialist I know is unable to find humor and provocation in Duchamp's toilet seat, quite on the contrary it is the people who have the most and the strongest convictions, who condemn said piece of art as bad or uncivilized. There is fear attached to the territory that Musil describes so eloquently as the *sense of possibility*. In order to liberate men, one must not only

write papers, but talk to people and bring them closer to being conscious of the narrow slice that is their human perception and their identities, they so restlessly carried for the entirety of their lives. One must understand the nature of identity, grasp that every life lived equates to unaccountably many lives left un-lived and that a life itself is nothing but a silently accepted role, stretched and exhausted to its fullest extent. Musil's *Mann Ohne Eigenschaften* gives up all his distinguishable properties in the light of all possible properties, since no man ever seizes to hope – all post-modern detachment and existential ambivalence may be described as a failure, but it is in fact only a cry for a new beginning, a new set of cards. This failure simply revitalizes and reminds us of our eternal strive for meaning.

Noam Chomsky famously told us, that politics are a way to *manufacture consent*, that is to build a basis on which to take meaningful and reasonable decisions. This concept itself is relativistic to an extent, yet it can be *relativised* further. One may dismiss this artificial consent altogether, since there is no apparent reason to accept it, in fact, with his claim Chomsky not only describes politics exclusively, but all sciences including philosophy and more precisely, logic itself. Naturally, logic only provides a framework on which to base assumptions and by which to justify actions. As mentioned before, there still is no reason to accept it, besides driving on a badly aged discussion that finally ought to be given up. I shall now return to Musil's quote to draw a conclusion.

If there were an existential freedom, it would be logically obliged to lie outside the confines of reality. We have seen that reality is artificial, as politics, science and logic are. They are not inherent but consensual, that is to create consent. I dare to claim that if Noam Chomsky had lived with Gorgias in the epoch of ancient Greece, he would have claimed about reality, what he now claims about politics. In this entire discouraging search for meaning however, man is not obliged to rest. Not finding hope is not to say, that one cannot impose hope. The most reasonable place to put one's hope is the path of life itself. The endless activity of searching and creating can be encouraging in itself, when having a sense of possibility. **It is crucial to remember that the absence of meaning in life does not signify the presence of meaning in death.**