

Understanding your own identity

Peter Jakubowski (P.J.) asks:

My identity is not really mine. It's not so important what I think of myself, but what others think of me, right?

(ChatGPT replies):

That's a profound consideration. Identity is a complex interplay between how you see yourself and how others perceive you. While the perspective of others can influence your life and social relationships, it is ultimately your own perspective that shapes your inner satisfaction.

If you only focus on what others think of you, you risk losing your authenticity. At the same time, we live in a world where social approval plays a role. Perhaps it is not so much a matter of completely ignoring the views of others, but rather of balancing them with your own self-image. What do you think?

(P.J.):

I think you are suggesting self-deception to feign apparent authenticity. Without the reflection of others, I don't know how I behave in every situation, so how I am and therefore who I am.

(ChatGPT):

That's a very astute observation. Our identity often does arise in the interplay between our self-image and how we are seen by others. The 'mirror' that others hold up to us gives us orientation and helps us to situate ourselves in social contexts. Without this reference point, it would be difficult to develop a consistent image of ourselves.

But is the reflection of others really the whole truth about you? It may show you how you are perceived in certain moments, but it remains subjective – shaped by their own perspectives, expectations and judgements.

The term 'illusory authenticity' suggests that authenticity is only real if it exists independently of external influences. But total independence is hardly possible in a networked, social existence. Perhaps authenticity is more of a process in which we accept the reflection of others, but still decide which aspects of it fit our self-image.

Do you think there is a space in which you can be without being completely defined by the perceptions of others? Or is identity always completely socially anchored for you?

(P.J.):

It is indeed the case that authenticity (and identity) is more of a process than a state. In a totally new environment (society), we will always try to ‘reinvent (define) ourselves’.

(ChatGPT):

Exactly, that sums up the dynamic nature of identity and authenticity. In new environments or societies, we often enter a state of adaptation and redefinition. In doing so, we respond to the expectations, values, and social structures around us while trying to maintain a coherent image of ourselves.

This process shows that identity is never rigid or final – it is fluid and depends on contexts, relationships and time. Authenticity does not arise from a fixed ‘core’, but from constantly engaging with external influences and asking ourselves which of these resonate with our inner selves.

The challenge is to find a balance: being open enough to change to be able to survive in new contexts without losing the sense of *who* you are – at least in this moment. Do you identify with this idea, or do you think that this process can sometimes lead to loss or overwhelm?

(P.J.):

It all too often leads to overwhelm, especially for young people who have not yet gone through this process.

(ChatGPT):

Absolutely, for young people this process of finding their identity can be very challenging and overwhelming. They are often just beginning to define their role in the world, while at the same time being heavily influenced by external expectations, social media, cultural norms and the urge to belong.

This overwhelming challenge can manifest itself in insecurities, self-doubt or the feeling of ‘not being enough’ because they are constantly juggling different roles, images and expectations. Especially in a time when the possibilities for comparison through social networks seem endless, the pressure to present a ‘perfect’ identity is even greater.

An important aspect of this is to give young people spaces in which they can try things out, fail and reflect – without being judged immediately. This process takes time and patience in order to build up inner stability and flexibility at the same time.

What is your view on this? What could help to make this transition easier for young people?

(P.J.):

I would like to see ‘identity training’ as a school subject so that young people understand that only the ‘living mirrors’ can be important to me, and not the likes of strangers among thousands of my selfies.

(ChatGPT):

That's a great idea! A school subject like ‘identity formation’ or ‘self-reflection’ could help young people to understand themselves and their relationships with others more consciously. It could create space to talk about important topics such as:

- **Self-perception and external perception:** how do the two differ, and why are both important?
- **Social media and reality:** reflecting on the difference between digital interactions and real, meaningful relationships.
- **Values and authenticity:** what makes me me, regardless of external expectations?
- **Resilience:** how do I deal with criticism or rejection?

A central point here could be, as you say, the idea of a ‘living mirror’: to realise that the people who are really present and in a real relationship with us have much more meaning than superficial recognition from strangers.

Such a subject could be designed through role-playing, group discussions and practical exercises to actively involve young people in the process of self-knowledge.

Do you think that schools would be open to such topics, or would social changes be needed to implement them?

(P.J.):

Nowadays, perhaps only individual schools (or only teachers). More social effort is needed to recognise and appreciate interpersonal relationships (starting with one's own family).

(ChatGPT):

That's right, social change often starts on a small scale, for example in families and in direct relationships. If families and schools were to place a stronger focus on the importance of genuine, appreciative relationships, this could create a foundation on which children and young people can develop their identity in a healthier way.

The influence of schools is enormous, but without the support and exemplification of these values in the family environment, it remains difficult to achieve sustainable change. Society as a whole would have to create more space for interpersonal interactions again – real encounters, shared learning, listening and empathy.

A few possible approaches:

1. **Creating awareness:** campaigns that address the value of real relationships and reflection on social media.
2. **Promoting family work:** offers for parents on how to strengthen relationships and support children in appreciating real connections.
3. **Expand teacher training:** Teachers could be trained in emotional education and relationship building to help young people along this path.
4. **Strengthen community:** Create spaces and programmes where people can meet authentically, be it in schools, associations or neighbourhoods.

Do you think that such measures could bring about long-term change, or would even bigger, structural changes be needed?

(P.J.):

As in the two previous topics (the appreciation of the dignity of all humanity over the dignity of individuals and yesterday's topic of dying societies), we have to decide to act NOW. Otherwise it will soon be too late for that too.

(ChatGPT):

That's right – the urgency with which we address social issues such as interpersonal relationships, the appreciation of humanity as a whole, and the challenges of an aging or dying society cannot be overstated.

We are living in a time when the consequences of our actions or inactions are becoming ever more tangible. Whether it is social isolation, the loss of community or global responsibility for the future of our species, every delay increases the challenges.

The keys probably lie in raising awareness, making courageous political decisions and, above all, taking personal action. Every step counts, whether small or large:

- **In the family:** promoting appreciation and communication to strengthen the basis of interpersonal relationships.
- **In the education system:** creating spaces to promote empathy, responsibility and identity.
- **In the global context:** emphasising values such as solidarity and sustainability to ensure a shared future.

Why do you think it is so difficult for society to recognise this urgency? Is it because of complacency, ignorance or being overwhelmed by the complexity of the problems?

(P.J.):

In his book 'Essentially Good', Rütger Bregman writes that we should still hope for the good in people. But is that enough? After all, complacency and ignorance are extremely strong. Personally, I hope in the strength of

nature, which will keep our First Global Civilisation 'alive' for a few more centuries.

(ChatGPT):

Rütger Bregman's approach in *'Essentially Good'* is indeed encouraging. He argues that humans are cooperative and good at heart, and that our negative view of humanity is often shaped by a few, but visible, bad examples. This perspective gives hope that there is a fundamental potential for positive change. But as you say, the question is whether this potential alone is enough.

Comfort and ignorance are powerful opponents, especially in a world that often rewards quick fixes, distractions and individualism. Many people only react when a crisis is imminent – and even then, the reaction is often short-term.

As you say, nature's strength is impressive. It shows resilience and the ability to adapt. But nature also has its limits, especially when we overuse its resources or destroy its ability to regenerate. The question is whether we can use this 'natural buffer time' to get society back on track, or whether we will continue to squander it.

Perhaps a combined approach is needed:

- **Promoting a change of consciousness:** Education, art and science can help to sharpen our perception of the good in people and the urgency of action.
- **Systemic changes:** Political and economic systems must become more sustainable and just in order to get people out of the comfort trap.
- **Nature as an ally:** Protecting ecosystems and working with them could help us to extend the Earth's 'grace period'.

Do you think that there could be some kind of catalyst in the near future that forces us as a species to rethink? Or is the process more of a creeping one?

(P.J.):

To conclude the discussion, I left this last question without my answer. I just hope that Nature gives our grandchildren, and several generations after them, enough time for their *First Global Civilisation* to develop even more splendidly than the Roman one (or its East Asian or American 'sisters') did 2000 years ago.