

# INTRODUCTION

## The Philosophical Context



The multidisciplinary fascination with identity parallels the movement from the ‘scientific management’ tradition to modern post-bureaucratic practices that treat the individual as an irreducible ‘building block’ of any given system of organizing. This ontological emphasis on the individual is a direct outcome of the intellectual migration from positivist doctrines to a constructivist understanding of societal dynamics. At the heart of this transition lies the pre-eminence of ‘meaning’ as a cornerstone for deciphering social reality. Grounded in the viewpoint that social realities are *constructed* rather than intrinsic, the concept of ‘meaning’ thus becomes integral to identity research. This implies that in the absence of meaning, facets of the self and social phenomena become obscured because both individual understanding and collective acknowledgement rely on meaning – thus emphasizing the deep interplay between the creation of meaning and the formation of identity, as discussed by Peterson (1999).

However, the ‘liberation’ of self-identity from the deterministic ‘confines’ of positivistic epistemology also introduces new challenges. Highlighting meaning as the central aspect to interpreting sociality shifts the focus away from the plausibility of enduring and permanent aspects of the social world (and inadvertently the self) towards the situated and emergent nature of social phenomena. The impermanent nature of meaning therefore serves to instantiate an inconclusive ontology in matters of (social) discernment and interpretation. Consider, for instance, that the significance attributed to events and experiences is inherently mutable, frequently assuming diverse

guises and altering its essence over a lifetime. Consequently, the identity that arises from such a pliable basis is itself transient and malleable: a divorce, initially experienced as a calamitous event, may with time be reinterpreted as a rite of passage, instrumental in forging a renewed self-conception. The shifting nature of meaning inscribed in the multiple contexts of self, the other(s) and discourses has therefore rendered futile various analytical attempts at highlighting a distinctive and enduring self: ‘coherence’ in matters of identity becomes an oxymoron when the meaning of things is largely dependent on ‘where we sit’ (Clegg 1975).

The ramifications of this fragmentary ontological perspective manifest most acutely in a diminished sense of personal agency. Given the ephemeral nature of the self-knowledge from which the meaning of individual identity claims is derived, the nexus between daily agency and an ostensibly constant ‘pre-existing’ self increasingly eludes clear reference. This raises a pivotal question: on what grounds do we assert any claim to ‘knowledge’? Conversely, while one might argue for the enduring and impermeable character of self-knowledge, the fluidity of personal experience and the capricious dynamics of interpersonal interactions cast doubt on the validity of such assertions. Thus, in the absence of a discernible, unique self mirrored by self-expression, we turn to discourse as the final adjudicator in ascribing meaning to our being and experiences. In this context, identity is construed as an outcome of social interaction, effectively dismissing the individual’s active role in the process of forming their own identity.

At this juncture, we encounter a theoretical impasse: without appealing to the notion of ‘fixed’ and ‘permanent’ characteristics within objects, entities and concepts, the inherently relative nature of the social sphere casts all precursors of self-expression into a realm that is either analytically impenetrable or ontologically ambiguous. The current identity literature therefore fails in its dissociation between the fluid nature of identity and one’s choice to assume and adopt different versions of oneself. In a post-bureaucratic world, everything is subject to scrutiny and as such even our intention and willingness to take action can be rationalized simply as automatic or unselfconscious normative behaviour. Alienation of the self therefore becomes inevitable in scenarios where the individual’s autonomy in attributing meaning to their experiences is diminished or removed.

The decoupling of intent from self-knowledge, or rather, the elision of the subjective precursors to daily agency, engenders an impersonal character of contextual experiences. If we accept that meaning is interwoven with discourse, then assertions of identity are, in Wittgenstein’s articulation, merely a reflection of a meticulously orchestrated language game. In the context of these arguments, the meaning of things emerges from the presupposed nature of structured role relationships (such as being a father, a friend, a coworker):

I am anxious because of the onerous work arrangements, not because I perceive the work arrangements as onerous in the first instance. Extending these arguments would also suggest that everyone within the same ‘onerous’ work arrangements would be anxious in the same way. This decouples the objective experience from the subjective lens through which we interpret the world.

The issue inherent in this stance lies in the unwarranted dissociation between the management of adverse repercussions of burdensome work arrangements and an individual’s ability to undertake actions that can both exacerbate and mitigate such consequences. In this instance, depression and anxiety become emotional states that can only be changed by way of removing oneself from the context of particular interaction, or by restructuring the arrangements in question. While this perspective may be practical in certain situations, it ultimately endorses only the reactionary aspects of agency. In this context, the concepts of self-regulation and self-management paradoxically conflict with their intended meanings. This myopic perspective holds particular relevance – and presents significant issues – within the high-pressure context of professional realms like project management, where foresight and strategic self-awareness are critical.

In light of the preceding arguments, this book is an attempt to make the subjective antecedents of situated identity positions visible. It is an attempt at illuminating the highly personal, and in turn distinctive, nature of self-identity. It will do so by considering situated experiences as intended circumstances of *internal* soliloquy without obviating the need to recognize the effects social arrangements have on delimiting and shaping the thought tendencies that precede self-expression. The book will attend to the situated implications of internal soliloquy by way of a phenomenological analysis of experiences of anxiety in project-based work arrangements. The focus on the *experiences* of anxiety is influenced by Archer (2000), who considers negative emotional experiences as a ‘window’ into the perceived world of the subject. In attending to the ‘outliers’ of everyday interaction, such as the experience of anxiety, the book therefore seeks to ‘peek’ into the contents of one’s subjectivity to assess how such artefacts shape perception, speech and the experiences of the ‘external’ world.

By underscoring self-identity as a ‘distinctive entity’ that guides self-expression, I aim not only to illuminate the ‘self-fulfilling prophecy’ of established self-definitions but also to draw attention to the limiting tendencies inherent in self-referential modalities of perception. By demonstrating how adopted identities ‘create problems’ on the empirical level, the book develops a *critical inquiry* into identity and in doing so foregrounds the *problematic*, in addition to the precarious, nature of the phenomenon. Most importantly, however, the book highlights a way to return the responsibility for how we experience the surrounding world to the individual. Echoing the philosophy

of solipsism, the arguments presented in the book offer a way out of existential dilemmas, and one that is not solely dependent on discriminating the particularity of structural arrangements, objects and processes that affect how we act and behave. In a way, the arguments presented in the book seek to empower project managers to assume responsibility for the professional worlds they *co-create*.

It is worth recognizing that identity encompasses not just the outward portrayal of self, but also the introspective narrative through which individuals conceive their existence. Suggesting that identity encompasses both who we are and how we reflect upon ourselves acknowledges that unravelling its intricacies is tantamount to solving the existential puzzle – answering the question of ‘who am I?’ becomes a profound journey of understanding one’s place within and contribution to the tapestry of personal beliefs, societal roles and the continuous construction of self-meaning. Thus, from a theoretical standpoint, my intention with this book is to present a philosophy that transcends dualistic inclinations to conflate the self with society (or the reverse), thereby proposing an alternative to the predominantly non-humanist portrayals of the self found in postmodern discourse. Pragmatically speaking, however, the aim of the book is to delineate an *object* of existential anxiety and in doing so provide the possibility for a more self-guided process of personal development. By advocating for individuals to assume ownership of their experiences, this book provides a pathway for project managers to construct their professional environment in a manner that reinforces their self-identity. Thought-provoking to say the least, the arguments presented in the book should nonetheless come as a welcomed change to a practice (that of project management) ‘consumed’ by institutional isomorphism.