# Chapter 3: Individual, Collective, and Identity

## A Question of Identity

Who are you? What elements constitute your identity? These complex and provocative questions participate in diverse dialogues on the conception of self and social dynamics. Like most philosophical questions, an attempt to arrive at a conclusion tempts us to misunderstand their real purpose. That is, the goal of questions like these is less about establishing a suitable answer and much more about understanding the question in its depth and complexity. For instance, while arriving at a description of one's personal identity may be a worthy goal, developing the self-awareness to consider how one conceives of identity and its function results in a broader and more transferrable skillset. This requires more than merely seeking answers; it requires discovering how we understand the question, our biases, and the limitations of our perception.

Forming personal and collective identity is an essential part of human existence. Most writers on this topic suggest that identity is a construct, an idea or perception that each of us creates and curates, either through active agency or passive acceptance. To actively curate identity means to consciously seek out or reject certain things to establish and reinforce one's sense of self. To passively accept an identity suggests an unawareness of what elements contribute to one's sense of self or the surrender of personal responsibility in identity formation. Each of us takes both active and passive roles in this process because, in truth, we each have multiple identities that we interact with throughout our existence. Like changing clothes to match a certain situation, we adopt appropriate identities in connection with our environment, our personal gifts and talents, and our physical or emotional state. That being said, most tend to have a primary personal identity and a primary collective identity that is the sum total of our personal interests, talents, life experience, beliefs, and desires.

## Me or We?

One way to think of identity consists of a dichotomy between a "Me" identity (or individualistic) and a "We" identity (or collectivist). Individuals or communities that have a "Me" identity tend to think in individualistic terms, celebrating the individuality of each person or group and expressing trust in and the independence of each member. "We" identities tend to celebrate the importance of group dynamics and community success rather than elevate the individual.

Challenges arise as we navigate the needs of our community identities with those of our personal identities. We may participate in communities that have values or objectives that conflict with our own. Additionally, we may identify as individualistic or collectivist personally even while we live in communities that embrace the opposite approach to identity.

Want to explore more?

The concept of self and community identities is widely discussed. Much of the discussion is illuminating and inspiring. Here are a few resources that you might want to explore if you would like to understand this concept more deeply.

* [Me or We? Cultural Difference between East and West](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=78haKZhEqcg&amp;t=182s)
* [Individualism vs Collectivism: Why it matters in the Classroom](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5mIGIS_OblE)
* ["Identity" in](https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/display/document/obo-9780199756384/obo-9780199756384-0025.xml#:~:text=Two%20perennial%20and%20influential%20sociological%20favorites%20on%20identity,on%20the%20used%20book%20market%2C%20and%20Stryker%202002.)

#### Literature

* The Parable of the Prodigal Son, Luke 15: 11-32

#### Poetry

* Thomas Hardy, [The Self-Unseeing](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/52313/the-self-unseeing)
* Mary Oliver,
* Derek Walcott, [Love After Love](https://www.themarginalian.org/2015/04/21/love-after-love-derek-walcott/)
* Maya Angelou, [Still I Rise](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46446/still-i-rise)
* Sylvia Plath, [Ariel](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/49001/ariel)
* Walt Whitman, [Song of Myself](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45477/song-of-myself-1892-version)
* William Wordsworth, [Tintern Abbey](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45527/lines-composed-a-few-miles-above-tintern-abbey-on-revisiting-the-banks-of-the-wye-during-a-tour-july-13-1798)
* Langston Hughes, [The Weary Blues﻿](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/47347/the-weary-blues)

#### Visual Art

* John Macallan Swan, ﻿[The Prodigal Son](https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/swan-the-prodigal-son-n01569)
* Bartolomé Estaban Murillo, ﻿[The Prodigal Son Restored](https://www.nationalgallery.ie/art-and-artists/exhibitions/murillo-prodigal-son-restored/five-things-know-about-murillo-prodigal)
* Liz Lemon Swindle, ﻿[The Prodigal Son](https://havenlight.com/products/the-prodigal-son-parable-by-liz-lemon-swindle?variant=27886608842845)
* Edmund Blair Leighton, ﻿[The Blind Man at the Pool of Siloam](https://moa.byu.edu/artwork-of-the-week-september-2018-week-38-2/)
* Jean-Léon Gérôme, ﻿[Prayer in the Mosque](https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/436482)
* Henry Moore, [Draped Reclining Mother and Baby](https://catalogue.henry-moore.org/objects/22973/draped-reclining-mother-and-baby)

### Reflection Questions

1. How would you describe your personal identity? Your community identity or identities?
2. What kind of community do you most often interact with, an individualistic or a collectivist one?
3. How do you resolve identity conflicts (either within yourself or with the communities to which you belong)?
4. How does your identity change in connection with various circumstances?

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