ERIKSON'S "IDENTITY": AN ESSAY ON THE PSYCHOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS OF RELIGIOUS ETHICS

by Walter E. Conn

The significance for religious ethics of Erik H. Erikson's study of psychosocial development has not gone unnoticed, though much work remains to be done to realize the rich possibilities that have been detected.[1] The concept of identity is in many respects the keystone of Erikson's work and at the same time one of its most popular but least understood aspects. Thus if Erikson's thought is ever to make its full contribution to ethics this central concept of identity must be clarified both in its own terms and in its relation to the conscious personal subject which stands at the heart of a religious ethics grounded in the radical drive of the human spirit for self-transcendence, the summons calling us to venture into a future of loving mutuality sustained by trust in the ultimate goodness of reality. This essay in conceptual analysis is a modest attempt then toward that fuller clarity (in many ways philosophy's most important product).

PSYCHOSOCIAL NATURE OF IDENTITY

Beyond the identity that is involved in a person's name and the place he occupies in his community, says Erikson, identity as personal "includes a subjective sense of continuous existence and a coherent memory."[2] In attempting to characterize the "sense of sameness and continuity as an individual" that constitutes the subjective sense of identity Erikson quotes from a letter of William James in which he writes that a man's character is discernible in the "mental or moral attitude in which, when it came upon him, he felt himself most deeply and intensely active and alive. At such times there is a voice inside me which speaks and says: '*This* is the real me!'" Such experience, Erikson has James continue, always includes "an element of active tension, of holding my own, as it were, and trusting outward things to perform

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their part so as to make it a full harmony, but without any guarantee that they will."[3]

As elusive as this subjective sense may be, says Erikson, what under-lies it can be recognized by others, "even when it is not especially conscious or, indeed, self-conscious: thus, one can observe a young-ster 'become himself' at the very moment when he can be said to be 'losing himself' in work, play, or company."[4] Indeed psychosocial identity is "at once subjective and objective, individual and social."[5] Erikson points to Sigmund Freud's sense of "inner identity" that he shared with the tradition of Jewry, "the capacity to live and think in isolation from the 'compact majority'," as an example of the social as-pect of identity formation.[6]

Erikson summarizes his understanding of the psychosocial nature of identity in the following passage:

The gradual development of a mature psychosocial identity, then, presup-poses a community of people whose traditional values become significant to the growing person even as his growth assumes relevance for them. Mere "roles" that can be "played" interchangeably are obviously not sufficient for the social aspect of the equation. Only a hierarchical integration of roles that foster the vitality of individual growth as they represent a vital trend in the existing or developing social order can support identities. Psychosocial iden-tity thus depends on a complementarity of an inner (ego) synthesis in the individual and of role integration in his group.[7]

In the foregoing discussion, which follows very closely Erikson's outline in his 1968 *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* article on psychosocial identity, we should note that in the shift from per-sonal identity to psychosocial identity there is the quiet appearance of an "inner (ego) synthesis" as a constituent element of psychosocial identity. It is also important to note, I think, that here, after more than twenty years of theorizing on identity, Erikson, for the first time in a major article, uses the term "psychosocial identity" in a deliberate, systematic fashion.[8] "Psychosocial" is not itself new; Erikson long had used it to describe the stages of the life cycle. But identity almost always had been qualified as "personal" or, more usually, "ego." Now the subjective and objective, individual and social aspects of identity—always recognized by Erikson as inseparable—are brought together systematically in one term. While this move lends some de-gree of theoretic neatness to his concept of identity, it does not re-move all the difficulties from a concept that Erikson himself admits has more than its share.

In a 1970 autobiographical essay for a *Daedalus* symposium Erikson quite freely admits that he must "circumscribe" rather than "define" an identity crisis, and he takes reassurance in the fact that Stuart

Hampshire had approved of his leaving the "much misused concept of identity undefined" because it primarily "serves to group together a range of phenomena which could profitably be investigated together."[9]

Identity then even in Erikson's writings is anything but a precise, univocal term. For the purpose of extending and deepening our understanding of the conscious, personal, self-transcending subjectivity grounding religious ethics, therefore, I will try to specify how ego identity (or synthesis) functions within the more inclusive psychosocial identity and how both are related to personal identity, the "self," and the "I." Erikson's 1970 *Daedalus* essay provides a good beginning here, for in it Erikson states clearly that the "psycho" side of psychosocial identity is "partially *conscious* and partially *unconscious*."[10] It is, he says, "a *sense* of personal continuity and sameness, but it is also a *quality* of unself-conscious living."[11] Here it seems that Erikson is referring to the difference between personal identity and ego identity that he had specified on various earlier occasions. For example, in a section of *Identity: Youth and Crisis* entitled "Group Identity and Ego Identity"—a collection of early observations which he hoped would help to "prepare the way for a new formulation of the ego's relation to the social order"—Erikson offers the following paragraph in an attempt to make the necessary differentiation between personal identity and ego identity:

The conscious feeling of having a personal identity is based on two simultaneous observations: the perception of the selfsameness and continuity of one's existence in time and space and the perception of the fact that others recognize one's sameness and continuity. What I have called ego identity, however, concerns more than the mere *fact* of existence; it is, as it were, the ego *quality* of this existence. Ego identity then, in its subjective aspect, is the awareness of the fact that there is a selfsameness and continuity to the ego's synthesizing methods, the *style of one's individuality*, and that this style coincides with the sameness and continuity of one's *meaning for significant others* in the immediate community.[12]

Here in speaking of ego identity as an "awareness" Erikson seems to be saying that both personal and ego identities are in some way "conscious." In another essay in the same volume, to his own question "Is the sense of identity conscious?" Erikson says that at times it seems only "too conscious," as in the case of an individual who becomes "the victim of a transitory extreme identity consciousness, which is the common core of the many forms of 'self-consciousness' typical for youth."[13] But, he goes on, "an optimal sense of identity, on the other hand, is experienced merely as a sense of psychosocial well-being. Its most obvious concomitants are a feeling of being at home in one's

body, a sense of 'knowing where one is going,' and an inner assured-
ness of anticipated recognition from those who count."[14] Here,
though "identity" is left unspecified, the context seems to indicate that
Erikson has in mind the most inclusive meaning, what he later calls
"psychosocial." Thus it seems that we can make no conclusion about
the consciousness of ego identity from this passage. Indeed one can
wonder if in asking whether a sense of identity is conscious Erikson
had not already answered his own question. Or is it possible perhaps
that we can have an unconscious sense of something? Obviously we
need to give more precision to the meaning of terms such as "sense
of," "awareness," "consciousness," and "self-consciousness." That task
would require a major project in conceptual analysis far beyond my
present scope, but I can make a beginning immediately, for Erikson
himself has given some attention to this question in a "theoretical
interlude" under the heading "I, My Self, and My Ego."[15]

Strength and Quality of the Ego

"What the 'I' reflects on," says Erikson, "when it sees or contemplates
the body, the personality, and the roles to which it is attached for
life—not knowing where it was before or will be after—are the various
selves which make up our composite Self."[16] For Erikson the "coun-
terplayers" of these "selves" are "the 'others,' with which the 'I' com-
pares the selves continually—for better and for worse."[17] Thus Erik-
son, following Heinz Hartmann, suggests that we not use the term
"ego" to refer to the self as the object of the "I" but instead, for
example, "speak of an ideal self rather than an ego-ideal as the image
of what we would like our self to be like, and of self-identity rather
than ego identity insofar as the 'I' perceives its selves as continuous in
time and uniform in substance."[18]

This suggestion may not seem especially radical, but its significance
is to be grasped in the fact that it allows us to clarify with some
precision the role of the ego as the "organizing principle" and "guard-
ian of the indivisibility of the person."[19] This point is worth repeat-
ing; perhaps we should turn to the concreteness of Erikson's own
words: "Only after we have separated the 'I' and the selves from the
ego can we consign to the ego that domain which it has had ever since
it came from neurology into psychiatry and psychology in Freud's
earliest days: the domain of an inner 'agency' safeguarding our coher-
ent existence by screening and synthesizing, in any series of mo-
ments, all the impressions, emotions, memories, and impulses which
try to enter our thoughts and demand our action, and which would

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tear us apart if unsorted and unmanaged by a slowly grown and reliably watchful screening system."[20]

With this specification of the ego's function made, Erikson has some systematic leverage to exploit in considering the question of "consciousness." "One should really be decisive," he asserts, "and say that the 'I' is all-conscious, and that we are truly conscious only insofar as we can say I and mean it."[21] He reminds us that though a drunken person may say "I," his eyes belie it as much at the time as his memory will later.

Now, if the "I" is the center and primary expression of consciousness for Erikson, "the selves are mostly preconscious, which means that they can become conscious when the 'I' makes them so *and* insofar as the ego agrees to it."[22] This distinction Erikson makes between the "I" and the "selves" from the viewpoint of psychoanalytic theory is basically the same as Bernard Lonergan's more phenomenological-transcendental differentiation between the "subject as subject" and the "subject as object." While I cannot pursue the details of that distinction here, I may utilize its notion of consciousness as "the presence of the subject to himself" in order to ask precisely what Erikson means when he says that the selves "can become conscious." Does he mean that a given self, when reflected upon by the "I," "becomes conscious" in the same sense that the reflecting "I" is conscious? If so, then it would seem impossible to specify the uniqueness of the "I" in terms of consciousness, as Erikson wishes to do. More likely Erikson means "becomes conscious" in a passive (i.e., reflected) sense rather than in an active (reflecting) sense. Here the sense of the language becomes elusive, but, if I understand his meaning correctly (and it is not crystal clear), I would suggest that when Erikson says that selves "can become conscious" he means that selves can be brought into the sphere of the "I's" consciousness and thus illuminated. We have then a reflecting "I" and a self or selves that is or are reflected upon—a "subject as subject" and a "subject as object."[23]

But if the "I" is conscious and the "selves" can be brought into the consciousness of the "I" the ego is, in Erikson's perspective, unconscious.[24] "We become aware of its work," he says, "but never of it."[25] This last point seems to offer clarification to the difficulty we noted above in Erikson's reference to ego identity as an "awareness." For now it seems likely that the awareness involved in ego identity is an awareness on the part of the "I" (not the ego) of the effects of the synthesizing ego (not of the ego itself). To make Erikson's further point in the language of Michael Polanyi, we may say that this awareness may be focal (i.e., "only too conscious"), but optimally it is merely a subsidiary "sense of psychosocial well-being."[26]

Erikson is insistent on this unconscious nature of the ego: "To sacrifice in any respect the concept of an unconscious ego, which manages to do for us, as the heart and the brain do, what we could never 'figure out' or plan consciously, would mean to abandon psychoanalysis as an instrument, as well as the beauty (to speak thomistically) which it alone can make us see."[27]

Indeed from the ethical perspective too this point cannot be stressed enough, for we cannot ignore the strengths and quality of the unconscious ego that organizes our experience and safeguards our personal existence if we are to avoid turning ethics into a moralistic shell of merely explicit, conceptualistic truisms.

Erikson, however, has no taste for turning the ego into an object of idolatry. It must be understood in the context of the entirety of personal existence, including especially the "I," for to "ignore the conscious 'I' in its relation to its existence (as psychoanalytic theory has done) means to delete the core of human self-awareness, the capacity which, after all, makes self-analysis possible."[28]

SOCIAL ASPECT OF THE EGO IDENTITY

I shall return to the question of the conscious "I" in Erikson's perspective soon. At this point, however, it seems appropriate to consider very briefly with Erikson the other, or social aspect of the ego identity, for Erikson's contribution to the question not only has constituted a genuinely significant breakthrough within the realm of psychoanalysis but also offers the possibility of a valuable "language" in which to speak about subjectivity in a way that does not leave it stranded on an island of solipsistic individualism—a language that is much needed if ethical theory is to have any real future.[29]

Erikson, having specified the ego's function, asks himself who or what its counterplayer is.[30] Standard theory of course points first of all to the id and the superego; Erikson summarizes the relationship this way: "The ego's over-all task is, in the simplest terms, to turn passive into active, that is, to screen the impositions of its counterplayers in such a way that they become volitions. This is true on the inner frontier where what is experienced as 'id' must become familiar, even tame, and yet maximally enjoyable; where what feels like a crushing burden of conscience must become a bearable, even a 'good' conscience."[31]

The theory goes on to specify the "environment" as also one of the ego's counterplayers. Here, though, Erikson feels that the theory offers very little in the way of specificity, and this, he says, is a "consequence of a really outmoded naturalist habituation to speak of 'the'

organism and 'its' environment."[32] That simplification decisively has been transcended, Erikson says, by studies in ecology and ethnology, which clearly indicate that "members of the same species and of other species are always part of each other's *Umwelt*."[33] Then Erikson draws his parallel for the human sciences:

By the same token, then, and accepting the fact that the human environment is social, the *outerworld of the ego* is made up of the *egos of others* significant to it. They are significant because on many levels of crude or subtle communication my whole being perceives in them a hospitality for the way in which my inner world is ordered and includes them, which makes me, in turn, hospitable to the way they order their world and include me—a mutual affirmation, then, which can be depended upon to activate theirs. To this, at any rate, I would restrict the term *mutuality*, which is the secret of love. I would call *reciprocal negation*, on the other hand, the denial on the part of others to take their place in my order and to let me take mine in theirs. . . . Foremost among the complexities of human life is communication on the ego level, where each ego tests all the information received sensorily and sensually, linguistically and subliminally for the confirmation or negation of its identity. . . . And only when, in our linked orders, we confirm or negate ourselves and each other clearly, is there identity—psychosocial identity.[34]

Since we cannot follow Erikson's full discussion of the "communality of egos," we would do well perhaps to listen to his conclusion on the topic: "One can only conclude that the functioning ego, while guarding individuality, is far from isolated, for a kind of communality links egos in a mutual activation. Something in the ego process, then, and something in the social process is—well, identical."[35]

Such a brief glance in no way can do justice to this side of Erikson's thought, but I hope it is enough to put us on guard against the one-sided, oversimplified view, wherever it appears, be it in philosophical reflection or psychological theory, that, as the psychoanalysts Hartmann, E. Kris and R. M. Loewenstein formulate it, the impact of "differences of behavior caused by cultural conditions" tends "to decrease as [analytical] work progresses and as available data move from the periphery to the center"—as if the social nature of man were in some way peripheral and as if in man there existed some pure center, free from social, cultural, and historical influences.[36]

Finally Erikson asks about the counterplayers of the "I," the "I" which is, according to him, "nothing less than the verbal assurance according to which I feel that I am the center of awareness in a universe of experience in which I have a coherent identity, and that I am in possession of my wits and able to say what I see and think."[37] And this, he says, is why autistic children struggle so desperately to "grasp the meaning of saying 'I' and 'You' and how impossible it is for them, for language presupposes the experience of a coherent 'I'."[38] In

Erikson's view "no quantifiable aspect of this experience can do justice to its subjective halo, for it means nothing less than that I am alive, that I *am* life."[39]

Therefore strictly speaking, says Erikson, the counterplayer of the "I" can be only "the deity who has lent this halo to a mortal and is Himself endowed with an eternal numinousness certified by all 'I's who acknowledge this gift."[40] Indeed, he continues, "only a multitude held together by a common faith shares to that extent a common 'I,' wherefore 'brothers and sisters in God' can appoint each other true 'You's in mutual compassion and joint veneration. The Hindu greeting of looking into another's eyes—hands raised close to the face with palms joined—and saying 'I recognize the God in you' expresses the heart of the matter."[41]

If the structure of the movement from the "other" as counterplayer to the "self" to the eternal deity as counterplayer to the "I" sounds more like the triadic theology of H. R. Niebuhr than psychosocial theory, perhaps we will be less surprised to hear Erikson claim that the same reality is expressed by a lover who recognizes "the numinosity in the face of the beloved, while feeling in turn, that his very life depends on being so recognized."[42]

The central point here, however, is that while Erikson may be most "at home" with the concreteness of the empirical, concerning himself (as he says clinical and social science should be) with the demonstrable while leaving the "thinkable" to philosophy, the fundamental thrust of his approach has been to incorporate what he calls the "inward," "backwards," and "downwards" methodological directions of psychoanalysis with an emphasis on those elements in man's total existence which lead "*outward* from self-centeredness to the mutuality of love and communality, *forward* from the enslaving past to the utopian anticipation of new potentialities, and *upwards* from the unconscious to the enigma of consciousness."[43] It would be difficult to imagine, I think, a better formulation of the central realities of the self-transcending subjectivity fundamental to a religious ethics of love and adventure than this articulation by Erikson of the concerns of his own professional commitment.

I think that Erikson's perspective offers the possibility of a truly concrete grounding of religious ethics in the fullness of the personal subject's reality. I hope I have indicated something of that possibility while attempting to clear the conceptual decks for the future work of bringing to realization Erikson's contribution to religious ethics.[44]

NOTES

1. See, e.g., William W. Meissner, "Erikson's Truth: The Search for Ethical Identity," *Theological Studies* 31 (June 1970): 310-19, and Nicholas Piediscalzi, "Erik H. Erikson's Contribution to Ethics" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion, Atlanta, Georgia, October 28-31, 1971). Both papers deal only with Erikson's explicitly ethical thought. While recognizing the critical limitations of any psychoanalytic approach, I explicate some of the central elements of Erikson's contribution to ethics in my "Erik Erikson: The Ethical Orientation, Conscience, and the Golden Rule," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 5 (Fall 1977): 249-66.

2. Erik H. Erikson, "Identity, Psychosocial," *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, ed. David L. Sills, 17 vols. (New York: Macmillan Co., 1968), 7:61.

3. As quoted in ibid. from William James, *The Letters of William James*, ed. Henry James, 2 vols. (Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1920), 1:199.

4. Erikson, "Identity, Psychosocial."

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.; quotation from Sigmund Freud, "Address to the Society of B'nai B'rith," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. and ed. James Strachey et al. (London: Hogarth Press, 1959), 20:273.

7. Erikson, "Identity, Psychosocial."

8. The term also occurs once in passing in the same year's extensive revision (Erik H. Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis* [New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1968], p. 220) of the much earlier "Problem of Ego Identity," chap. 3 of his *Identity and the Life Cycle* (New York: International Universities Press, 1959), which itself referred once to Sigmund Freud using the term "identity" with a "psychosocial connotation" (p. 101); see also Erik H. Erikson, *Childhood and Society*, 2d ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1963), pp. 241 and 354 for incidental, nonsystematic uses of "psychosocial identity."

9. Erik H. Erikson, "Autobiographic Notes on the Identity Crisis," *Daedalus* 99 (Fall 1970): 731. Erikson quotes Stuart Hampshire in the *London Observer* (December 1, 1968).

10. Erikson, "Autobiographic Notes," p. 732.

11. Ibid.

12. Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis*, pp. 45, 50.

13. Ibid., p. 165.

14. Ibid.

15. Ibid., pp. 208-31 (chap. 5), 216-21.

16 Ibid., p. 217.

17. Ibid.

18. Ibid., pp. 217-18. See Heinz Hartmann, "Comments on the Psychoanalytic Theory of the Ego," in *The Psychoanalytic Study of the Child* (New York: International Universities Press, 1950), 5:74-96.

19. Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis*, p. 289.

20. Ibid., p. 218.

21. Ibid.

22. Ibid.

23. For Bernard Lonergan's distinction see his *Collection* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1967), pp. 226-27.

24. Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (n. 8 above), p. 218.

25. Ibid.

26. See, e.g., Michael Polanyi, *The Study of Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, Phoenix Books, 1963), pp. 29-30.

27. Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis*, p. 218.

28. Ibid.

29. For the prevailing view see Heinz Hartmann, E. Kris, and R. M. Loewenstein, "Some Psychoanalytic Comments on 'Culture and Personality'" in *Psychoanalysis and*

Culture, ed. C. B. Wilbur and W. Muensterberger (New York: International Universities Press, 1951), pp. 3-31.

30. Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis*, p. 218.

31. Ibid., p. 219.

32. Ibid.

33. Ibid.

34. Ibid., p. 220.

35. Ibid., p. 224.

36. Hartmann, Kris, and Loewenstein.

37. Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis*, p. 220.

38. Ibid., p. 217.

39. Ibid., p. 220.

40. Ibid.

41. Ibid., pp. 220-21.

42. Ibid., p. 221.

43. Erikson, "Identity, Psychosocial" (n. 2 above), p. 63, and "Autobiographic Notes" (n. 9 above), pp. 740-41.

44. I am presently at work on several aspects of such a constructive project; for a beginning along these lines see my "Conscience and Self-Transcendence" (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1973). For an attempt to integrate Erikson's contribution with those of Jean Piaget and Lawrence Kohlberg within a perspective of self-transcendence see also my "Moral Development as Self-Transcendence," *Horizons* 4 (Fall 1977): 189-205, and "The Ontogenetic Ground of Value," *Theological Studies* 39 (June 1978): 313-35.