

Cultural identity: an osmosis but also a distinction between identical and diverse

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Identity can be defined as the qualification of a person, a place, an object based on a set of characteristics that determines its specificity, differentiating it from all others and thus enabling its identification. Besides, philosophically, identity – consider Aristotle – is one of the fundamental principles, both from an ontological and logical point of view, and its correlation with the principle of non-contradiction is a guarantee not only for any type of discussion and discourse that wishes to be truly such (i.e. a guarantee), but also to protect the dignity of each reality which – in some way – it represents. This is due to the infinite originality of each reality, whatever it may be.

Thomas Aquinas, reflecting on the transcendental of being, as presented in Article 1 of *Quaestio* 1 of the *De Veritate*, observes that every being, understood as entity (*id quod est*), can be considered, first of all, in himself. In this way, it can be acknowledged as something that is, and as an *indivisum*, a *unum* therefore, endowed with a character of inalienable and positive unitary wholeness. From this, therefore, comes the original basis of identity.

The being, however, can also be considered in relation to something else: from this point of view, it is seen as a quid *aliud*, an *aliquid*, something inherently different. From here comes the original basis of alterity and diversity and for this reason the need to go beyond any equivocal and univocal perspective in one's approach to reality.

If we come directly to the themes of identity and cultural diversity, a number of specific questions undoubtedly arise that open up a wider field for further reflection.

Is identity something immutable? Is it something material or immaterial? Or is it the result of dynamic evolution in which “the same” continues to persist in “the other”? How can the “old” and the “new” be integrated without altering the cultural identity of a people, a nation, as well as that of a single person?

If we apply these questions to the identity of any living being, their gradual metamorphosis does not stop them from always being the same: despite inevitable transformations (the infant, the child, the adult, the elder), a person is always perceived as being the “same”. They remain themselves even though they grow up and evolve. In this case, development shows an evolution marked by accidental mutations and not a substantial change. On the other hand, it is also true that the historical, contextual and relational dimensions in which the person is undeniably inserted, strongly contribute to moulding them, to giving them a new “form”, showing them not only as something that is, but as a reality that is and that “one makes”.

Ethical thought that is attentive to the profound meaning of action, in compliance with a law that exists both inside and outside the being, confirms this almost “meta-physical” plasticity of human action and relationships for us. It highlights the fact that we ourselves enter into almost symbiotic connection with what (people, environment and property) moves our affections, desires, thoughts, relationships.

Absolutizing, therefore, never helps to understand: identity is not something static or uncontaminated, as some proponents of identity purity would like and are against any form of change and / or contamination with the “other”, but a complex set of mutations and permanence, a continuous osmosis between the identical and the diverse.

Applied to cultural heritage, this concept of identity justifies Cesare Brandi’s theory of respecting the patina of time, the work of art, in that, far from modifying the work’s identity, it testifies to the changes that have taken place over time, despite essentially remaining faithful to itself: a reflection of life in its historical and evolutionary path. It is into this more general framework that a consideration on the concept of “beauty” fits, and is seen as the most precious legacy that our history has left us.

It is well known that no country in the world is so full of artistic treasures, cities and squares as Italy – though alas, it is also threatened by earthquakes – which represent a wealth of beauty, of artisan traditions that are able to produce wonders, of sun, sea and mountains. This positive image of our country can be traced to a distinct feature that characterizes it, to beauty: where else can our demand for identity be satisfied? But this is not enough, especially in a time such as the present where, in a world that has shrunk in size, in other words, has become global, there must be something more to offer: a reason to be different. It is beauty itself that can represent this distinctive feature.

However, it is not to be considered merely and solely as offer and availability. Beauty, in fact, can only become a resource in a society that does not enclose itself in restrictive standards, is able to escape rigid and repetitive patterns and go beyond the dull particular and the occasional happening.

A society, consequently, that knows how to see growth as a process that invests in all the dimensions of an individual, including their changes and evolution, following the path of beauty with an idea of integral growth and does not neutralize the more creative human dimensions, but sees them as part of a multidimensional idea of value. In this perspective education becomes truly “vital”, particularly in the education of values and beauty. Giving life to and nourishing a model of growth that is not repetition and standardization, but the continuous widespread creation and generation of cultural identity that achieves interpenetration, exchange, mutual influence.

And in this context – especially after the event of emergency situations related to the recent earthquakes – alongside the necessary initiatives related to people’s health and accommodation, the reconstruction of the houses and the restart of economic activities, there is also an urgent need to set up and establish a “Civil Protection” for our artistic heritage to protect them from degradation.

In this way, their beauty will be well guarded, preserved, promoted, enhanced and transmitted, as an authentic *bonum commune*, to future generations. Hence, a civil commitment, so that our culture does not die, that the beauty we have received is not destroyed. If it is the task of the “technicians”, particularly in these situations, to pay special attention to artistic heritage that is ‘at risk’, including the provision of more

streamlined and less bureaucratic procedures and regulations, it is everyone's responsibility to promote, not only when there are emergencies, a "culture of beauty".

Obviously, here we are referring especially to what genetically or naturally exists (the person, the location, the environmental object), including what is anthropically conceived and realized (the artifact of historic-artistic interest) or to what, as previously indicated, is subject to change and / or modification, and definitely not to inertia, much less degradation.

In witnessing this process, we can thus find satisfaction and reason for our existence and acceptance in our request for cultural identity as a fusion of the identical and the diverse. It is true that a clear distinction, though problematic, is that between the authentic and the diverse, understood as being reproduced, in the case of a work of art. In fact, among the various terms that distinguish the origin of a work of art when speaking of its attribution (authentic, original, replica, copy, attributed to, signed by, school, follower, fake), one finds the term "reproduced", that is, a work produced by means of digital reconstruction and reproduction: one acknowledged example is the oil painting on canvas, "The Wedding at Cana" by Paolo Veronese, reproduced in 2007, clearly representing something totally "new", but later followed by other works similarly reproduced over the years.

Thus, through computerization it is possible to obtain a work that is identical to the original, in which shape, color, and even "materiality" are identical, and consequently, very difficult to distinguish, in the case of both a subjective evaluation (historical, artistic, aesthetic, stylistic, iconographic analyses) and an objective evaluation (through the use of diagnostic and analytical technologies).

At this point a number of questions arise that are ethical rather than aesthetic: – where is the principle of unicum?

- where is its unrepeatability?
- where is its cultural identity?
- where is its inevitable market price?

The computerized reproduction of a masterpiece might be judged lawful, as long as what it is, is clearly indicated.

The easiest way to respond to these objections might be to rely on a serious and scientifically complete analysis, to be integrated with the above-mentioned evaluations. However, as has been previously pointed out, the question has remained unresolved by the experts, giving rise to an aspect that seen in a broader vision, refers to dimensions and limits ranging from real to virtual. Virtuality and reality: two dimensions that are in contrast, two worlds which can, however, explain something about each other and open themselves to multiple interpretations.

If we talk about virtuality, our first thought is of the Internet, whose contents are able to influence and to question the choices we make in our real everyday life, because the virtual dimension of the network and its power can influence our tastes.

According to some, the influence of the media – in particular social networks – in our lives, makes it difficult for us to understand what it is we really like: the desirable object can become a tedious cliché in a very short time. And, in conclusion, how do we keep in mind that the world of the media also puts before us a problem of authenticity and, therefore, the inability to distinguish the genuine from the reproduction?

Yet, as Pope Francis wrote in his Encyclical of 2015 in N.103, dedicated – as is known – to the "care of our common home", the *Laudatosi*: «Technoscience, when well directed, can produce important means of improving the quality of human life, from

useful domestic appliances to great transportation systems, bridges, buildings and public spaces. It can also produce art and enable men and women immersed in the material world to “leap” into the world of beauty. Who can deny the beauty of an aircraft or a skyscraper? Valuable works of art and music now make use of new technologies. So, in the beauty intended by the one who uses new technical instruments and in the contemplation of such beauty, a quantum leap occurs, resulting in a fulfillment which is uniquely human».