

# The I and the self

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Reviewed: Pierre Guenancia, *L'homme sans moi. Essai sur l'identité* (Man without Self: An Essay on Identity), Paris, Puf, 368 p., 26 €.

Faced with the risk of losing man to the self, Pierre Guenancia proposes, in his new book, to abandon the self to rediscover man. *L'homme sans moi* (Man without self) wagers that identity can be saved by distinguishing it from interiority--opening oneself to others rather than focusing on oneself--turning a murderous form of identity into a salutary one. To do so, grammar itself must be rethought: the "I" is never separate from the "we" and the singular and the universal are united. What does this conclusion mean? And how is it achieved? By returning to Cartesian metaphysics and reconnecting with the idea of substance, it is possible, according Guenancia, to rethink identity and embrace a more human political philosophy.

## **Deterritorializing the self**

In defining man, modern anthropology begins with the self, the center of everything--a self that, in Hobbes' account, is agitated by passions and guided by the desire for power: a centripetal self, which sees itself as everything and everyone else as an obstacle. To the anthropological theory founded on the self, Guenancia opposes

a "philosophical and metaphysical conception" (p. 14) founded on the I--that is, the knowing subject and its capacity for understanding.

Quests for identity that end with the self find themselves in possession of an unstable object: a collection of disparate elements on the brink of dissolving into pure phenomenality. To succeed, this quest must seek *substance*--that is, something permanent and simple. Cartesian metaphysics makes it possible to find this permanent and simple something in the soul, characterized by thought, its main attribute. Inspired by Cartesian metaphysics, Guenancia borrows its key concepts while redefining them, notably to avoid modern critiques of the idea of substance. For Guenancia, substance is not simply an "extension or common foundation of different properties or qualities" (p. 47), which would make it potentially unknowable. Rather, substance is, consistent with Hegel's formulation, first and foremost "subject" (p. 47), which in this instance means the ability to initiate actions that are not prefigured in reality.

The quest for identity thus consists in finding a substance--that is, a subject--and thus "becoming an I" (chapter 1). "I" does not refer to an object that can be observed alongside the self, as if every man consisted of two different people. The I occurs through a modification of consciousness, which allows it to gain a full perspective on itself, from whence it can observe its past, judge its present, and imagine its future. To become a subject is to become an "impartial [and] disinterested spectator" (p. 28) of oneself. It means talking about memories not as one's exclusive property, with which one is completely identified and which serve to mark one's difference, but in ways that present childhood roles as belonging to a "permanent set of possibilities" (p. 68).

The I thus means defamiliarizing oneself with one's world. It leads man to extract himself from the milieu comprised by his self. Next, Guenancia proposes a Deleuzian interpretation of Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy*. In the second meditation, the experience of the cogito, through which the individual becomes a subject, is described as an experience of "deterritorialization"--that is, an experience through which the individual becomes a stranger in his world and to what he had believed was his self (i.e., his body and his senses), whose existence he now doubts. This experience is followed in the fourth meditation by a "reterritorialization," in which the I is eclipsed by the self. Descartes rediscovers this self in concrete man, in whom body and soul are intimately connected. But "this reterritorialized self remembers that it is possible to see oneself as another" (p. 287).

It all comes down to one's point of view: "becoming an I" means deterritorializing the self, replacing a "geocentric self" that aspires to be the center of the universe with a "Galilean self" (p. 312) that understands that it lives among an infinity of other beings.

## **Rethinking a shared humanity**

Why deterritorialize the self and emphasize the philosophy of the I? Guenancia's approach seeks not only to be speculative, but also practical--that is, political. Its target is not just the modern self, but also identity-based ideologies, which, according to Guenancia, "borrow the form of the self--that of a whole--and filling it with ethnicity, race, religion, or a human totality" (p. 17). The I-self relationship is thus transposed from an intrasubjective plane to an intersubjective one, as a way of rethinking the "we" (chapter 2)--i.e., community--and "man" (chapter 3).

Guenancia stands the traditional communitarian critique on its head. This critique contends that individuals in modern societies are isolated atoms, detached from all communities of belonging. In fact, the thought of identity ideologists is, in Guenancia's view, analogous to that of the individualists he opposes: they understand the we to be an expanded self with the "characteristics of totality" (p. 191), with each community constituting an isolated whole alongside other communities, conceived as fundamentally different from one another and condemned to conflictual relations.

Both forms of thought have forgotten the philosophical idea of the substantial soul, which makes it possible to conceive of a we that is shared and not differential. If one starts anew from the Cartesian conception of substance revealed through the individual experience of the cogito, only individuals are substantive. Yet this does not mean that they are isolated substances, incapable of getting outside themselves. In fact, they are always already connected by substantive bonds. Guenancia, in this way, adopts a bold intellectualist position, which he first states in his introduction: "the human bond is not in the first place a conscious feeling of solidarity with every living and future human being. It is an intellectual bond ... " (p. 25). Men are first united intellectually, even before they are united emotionally.

What *is* this substantive bond? To grasp what is at stake, we must return to Descartes' second meditation. When Descartes moves from "I think, I am" (*ego sum, ego*

*existo*) to "I am a thinking thing" (*sum res cogitans*<sup>4</sup>), the term "thing" marks the irruption of universality into personal existence. Through thought, the I tears itself from the self and becomes aware that it is one individual amid a multiplicity of individuals, who share thought as a common property (p. 51-52). By "becoming an I"--that is, a spectator of oneself--the intersubjective emerges from within the intrasubjective: one discovers the other within oneself and, within substance (i.e., the thinking soul), the existence of a connection to others.

The realm of the "shared" is thus not secondary. It precedes the realm of "one's own"--or, rather, it is given at the same time as "one's own": "'one's own' does not constitute the shared realm, nor does the shared realm constitute 'one's own'; it is the relationship between them that engenders and commutes both poles" (p. 189). Put differently, the shared realm is essentially relative and, unlike "community," does not refer to a substantial collective. Just as, for Descartes, the union of body and soul is a substantive union that does not create a third substance, so the union of individuals is a substantive union that also does not create a third substance--that is, a "closed in," identity-based we. For instance, in romantic relationships, Guenancia argues, love might be thought of as the encounter between an I--that is, a self capable of being its own spectator--and an other who actualizes a virtual existence that existed implicitly in the I. In this case, love does not mean the fusion of two selves in a "we" that is greater than both, but the intensification of individual existence through an other, in which each individuality must be cultivated for this intensification to occur.

The I is thus a first person that in fact encompasses a plurality. If the I proves to be multiple, does this also mean that it becomes impersonal? Is the singular rooted in the universal, so that each individual's thought is simply a mode of general thought? No. Such claims overlook the fact that the I refers to a form of consciousness that is always tied to a self. At this juncture, Guenancia shifts from metaphysics to problems of historical epistemology (chapter 4). Is man part of nature? Unlike Spinozism, which sees individual human beings as sucked into the substantive totalities of God or nature, Guenancia's Cartesian perspective sees the only true substance--the soul--as inseparable from the individual. Man is no more dissolved into a totality that transcends him than he is an entity enclosed on itself: he is singular without being isolated, as he contains within himself an intersubjective dimension. Cartesian metaphysics makes it possible to reconcile individualism and humanism, since by becoming an I, each individual also accedes to the substantive bond that ensures that he is always already linked to others.

## From metaphysics to politics

It is difficult to find mistakes in Guenancia's analyses, given the skill with which he acknowledges his conceptual debts to earlier philosophers, particularly Descartes, and the interpretations he freely makes of them, as seen in his definition of substance. Guenancia is precise, rigorous, and careful with distinctions, notably that between the I and the self. Sometimes, this leads him to push the envelope in conceptualizing ideal types, but his use of the latter is always justified by their explanatory power. The analytical method that begins with the I and then rises to the we and man makes for a clear and effective demonstration, while also being non-exclusive in the more synthetic perspective adopted in the book's conclusion, when Guenancia reflects on the question of the relationship between man and nature ("Is man nature's master?," p. 320).

If the significance of this metaphysical study is evident, since it answers the question of the condition of possibility of communication between individuals, one wonders if the shift from metaphysics to more political analyses is not over-ambitious. Guenancia insists on the importance, when confronting defenders of differentialist conception of identity, of emphasizing the "critical function of the I [and] the critical and dissociative power of thought" (p. 372). But can the political problem of identity be resolved simply by adopting a different point of view?

Even so, Guenancia achieves his goals perfectly. The concept of identity must not be abandoned but rethought, by rejecting the facile temptation of equating it with difference and particularity and grasping identity's paradoxical character, which blends singularity and universality. A man without a self is not a man without identity who has renounced self-knowledge--to the contrary, he is a man who knows himself so well that he can fully accept his singularity even as he forges an open and shared world.

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