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An Analysis of Al-Djurjani's Definition of Identity – *huwiyya*: The then and Now

Abstract

Purpose - This paper aims to answer in what ways such an early account of *huwiyya* may overlap or have similarities with some of the modern, yet ambiguous depictions of the term.

Design/methodology/approach - The research design is descriptive-qualitative research. The data gained are written words and sentences from the al-Djurjani's works.

Findings - Literature today acknowledges more progressive interpretations of identity, wherein the phrase has been used in ambiguous ways, categorizing the individual in existential, contextual, perceptual terms attempting to understand the inner and outer workings of the Self. Most definitions of identity in social sciences assume the phrase to be a unit of analysis; a challenging task when the phrase is so heterogenous. The point of departure in this article is Al-Djurjani's two layered live wire definition that connotes a binary reading. While the first layer of this - one of the earliest - Muslim philosophical definitions is existentialist, the second layer merits a reading that is modestly contextual.

Originality/value - The point of departure in this article is Al-Djurjani's two layered live wire definition that connotes a binary reading. While the first layer of this - one of the earliest - Muslim philosophical definitions is existentialist, the second layer merits a reading that is modestly contextual.

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Introduction

If the pursuit to understand oneself was to define the phrase *identity*, then this pursuit would qualify to be a lifetime undertaking, inhabiting the human mind for massive amounts of time. It is for this reason exceedingly fortunate that past as well as new scholars have paid their dues to scrutinize identity to grasp some understanding of the social action. One such

depiction is one of the earliest definitions of, a Muslim scholar Al-Djurjani whose full name was Abū Bakr ‘Abd al-Ḳāhir b. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān (d. 471/1078)((K. Abu Deeb), n.d.), and to the best of our knowledge lived in the twelfth century. Al-Djurjani wrote a concise but a very potent definition of the phrase *huwiyya*. The first part of this article translates the original Arabic entry of the phrase *huwiyya* in the lexicon Al-Ta’rifaat. The second part of the article then compares some principal characteristics of the well-known definitions in the social sciences and analyses these by using socio-contextual, existential and/or perceptual categories.

Findings and Discussion

Origins of the Term ‘Identity’: *Huwiyya*

Ismail Lala gives an extensive account of the work of Al-Tahanawi on the term ‘identity’ also *huwiyya* indexed in his great lexicon *Kashshaf istilahat al-funun wa’l-‘ulum al-islamiyya*.(Lala 2017, 15–34) This analysis of Lala of Al-Tahanawi’s reading of *huwiyya* is exciting as both Al-Djurjani and Al-Tahanawi, six centuries apart from each other, are virtually alike in their existentialist understanding of the phrase *huwiyya*. Lala refers in his analysis to a binary distinction between the existentialist, an internal versus an ‘external existence’ of something that has come to possess an individuality. This individuality is on itself unique and features a critical selfhood. This internal or the existentialist component for Lala may also be referred as an ‘intellectual existence’.(Lala 2017, 25) This intellectual existence is a classification that points to the inner rather than the external self, which when modern definitions taken into consideration can be accounted for as belief systems that generate crucial meanings for those who are equipped to contain and sustain beliefs as core value in their essence.(Taylor 1989a)

The advent of studying *huwiyya* by Muslim philosophers takes place around the ninth century and features an unambiguous philosophical and an *existential* approach. However, this doesn't mean there is a lack of a contextual dimension in the definition of Al-Djurjani.¹

According to the information available, it was Fârâbî who for the first time referred to the Arabic personal pronoun هو '*huwa*', what was later going to become *al huwiyya* – الهوية – in the ninth century.² For the very early Muslim philosophers *Huwa* (هو) formed the base root, the pronoun that extended into the grammatical infinitive, to point to the 'thing' that was existent in the outer realm. The root of the term *al huwiyya* therefore was derived from this personal pronoun *huwa*. To Fârâbî *huwa* referred to *unity* and existence.³

Literature also refers to Fârâbî, as the earliest philosopher who logged the question '*ma huwa?*' 'what is it?' and '*ma hiya?*' 'what is it?' in its feminine form?' The latter, when the two separate words are fused together, they form the phrase *mâhiyyat* meaning '*content*'. Whereas '*huwa*' is the infinitive that forms the term *huwiyya* that has come to mean '*identity*'. The term *mâhiyyat* meaning *content* refers to the existence of something on a conceptual level, whereas *identity* refers to the existence in the outer world possessing distinguishing features. According to Fârâbî *huwiyya* refers to the oneness, the personality (as in Lala's *individuality*), characteristics and the individual existence that belongs to the personal pronoun 'He' (هو).⁴

Definition of Al-Djurjani

¹ <https://islamansiklopedisi.org.tr/mahiyet> (Accessed: 5/2/2017)

² Abu Nasr Al-Farabi, *Kitâbü'l-Ĥurûf*. (Bibliotheca Alexandria). No. 42. P. 111-112

³ Abu Nasr Al-Farabi, *Kitâbü'l-Ĥurûf*. (Bibliotheca Alexandria). No. 42. P. 112-115

⁴ a.g.e., s. 61-62; Atay, Fârâbî ve İbn Sina'ya Göre Yaratma, s. 15 الهوية

Al-Djurjânî describes *haqiqa* as the reality of something referring to this reality as ‘*the thing that makes that thing*’.⁵ In other words, reality is the *essence* of the ‘what’ that makes the object. According to Al-Djurjânî, the answer to the question ‘what is this?’, should be the *content mâhiyyat* of the object. The reality of an object is, that it has acquired existence in the outer realm where some of its necessary associations and affiliations point to its *personhood*, distinguishing it from others. It is this chain of steps that define the phrase identity.⁶ The Arabic version of the definition of the phrase *huwiyya* by Al-Djurjani (or *Al Hawiyya*) in his lexicon is as follows:

الحقيقة المطلقة المشتملة على الحقائق اشتمال النواة على الشجرة في الغيب المطلق.
الهوية السارية في جميع الموجودات: ما اذا أخذ حقيقة الوجود لا بشرط شيء ولا بشرط لا شيء.
(٢١٦,١٤١٣)

In this definition Al-Djurjani uses two separate sentences or provides two separate layers that are interlinked with each other. As an academic translation I was able to find the translation of M. Amin as translated in his doctoral thesis. This translation is as follows:

Al-Hawiyah (1126) PHIL. (identity): the absolute reality which includes the realities as the seed includes the tree in absolute potentiality. It is which infused in all beings as long as the reality of the existence has been taken without condition of things or conditions of nothing.(Amin and International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (Kuala Lumpur 2005, 395)

Yet, this translation poses some serious issues. The first part of this definition holds a narrative that is translated by Amin as ‘*The absolute reality which includes the realities*’ whereas from an Arabic lexicological view Al-Djurjani’s definition preferably should be

⁵ Et-Ta’rifât, “Haḳīkatü’ş-Şey” (al-Gurgani 1985)

⁶ a.g.e., “el-mâhiyye” md.

translated as *'The all-encompassing absolute truth'* as each of the three words, 'truth', 'absolute' and 'include' contain the grammatical article 'Al', suggesting that these words grammatically and meaningfully belong together and refer to the subject, which in this case refers to Allah. Therefore, *the absolute truth* in this definition is the absolute, all-knowing and all-powerful and all-encompassing one God. The term absolute refers from an Islamic theological perspective to the only creator who is Allah. Lala also refers in this respect to Al-Tahanawi's definition where 'he' is God. (Lala 2017, 29)

Al-Djurjani's definition then resumes as, 'The all-encompassing absolute truth', following the predicate *على* which may be translated as 'on' or 'upon' followed by the second part of the first sentence which is, 'the truths encompassing the seed on the tree in the absolute concealed'. The word Al Gayb in Amin's definition is translated as 'potential', whereas the word Al Gayb traditionally refers to the 'unseen', 'the hidden from the naked eye', 'the invisible' or better 'the concealed' from the naked eye. The same word reference can be seen in Lala's analysis. (Lala 2017, 32) Therefore, the first part of Al-Djurjani's definition may be translated as:

'The all-encompassing absolute truth upon (on) the truths encompassing (including) the seed (على) on the tree (في) in the absolute concealed'

The second part of Al-Djurjani's definition starts with the word *huwiyya* 'identity', therefore, *(الساوية)* 'The legitimate identity in the whole creation (existence): whether he (it) took true (physical) presence without by condition of something or without by condition of anything'.

As a whole Al-Djurjani's definition sounds as follows: *'The all-encompassing absolute truth upon (on) the truths encompassing (including) the seed (على) on the tree (في) in the*

absolute concealed. The legitimate (السكرية) identity in the whole creation (existence): whether he (it) took true (physical) presence without (by) condition of something or without (by) condition of anything'.

Consequently, it can be stated that Al-Djurjani's definition has two distinct layers. One where identity is perceived as a concealed existence to the human eye and secondly, as a physical presence as the consequence of the absolute truth; the identity that is represented as existence within time and space with specific and distinguishing characteristics. Therefore, identity that has acquired shape as an existing object is out in the social plane holding characteristics that separate 'it' from others. That is why according to Ibn Rushd the study of identity is the study of the object itself and the study of the most fundamental characteristics of that object, which is ontology.⁷

This second layer of Al-Djurjani's definition is completely contextual and is about the physical existence of objects in the outside world of *beings* perceived as a truth '*haqiqat*'.⁸ When this physical presence *haqiqat* acquires characteristics in the social existence such as in a social group, it is called *al huwiyya*. Thus, something is to have an identity when it represents an existing object that is considered outside the mind, which means it to be included in the space of '*maqulât*' '*possibilities*' by its representation of the '*mahiyya*' (content), and because it shows the characteristics that separates it from others, it is considered fixed and thus real.⁹

To summarize Al-Djurjani's definition, it may be said that these two layered definitions contains a conceptual-existential as well as in the minimal sense a contextual-situational reading. Identity in this context refers to the 'existent' and thus is associated with the word

⁷ Ibn Rüşd, Tefsîru Mâ Ba'de't-tabî'a, I, 298).

⁸ <https://islamansiklopedisi.org.tr/hakikat> (Accessed: 5/2/2017)

⁹ (al-Gurgani 1985) "el-Mâhiyye", "el-Hüviyye" and *Şerhu'l-Mevâkıf*, III, 17-18; Ebü'l-Bekâ, p. 961.

'truth', 'content', or 'essence'; therefore, in Al-Djurjani's definition identity is the reflection of the absolute truth.

Modern Definitions of Identity: Existential versus Contextual and Perceptual

Brubaker and Cooper once wrote that 'social sciences and humanities have surrendered to the word "Identity"'.(Brubaker and Cooper 2000, 1) Literature today presents a much more amorphic interpretations of identity. There where Al-Djurjani's definition remains predominantly existentialist with reference to his binary approach of the *inner* and the *outer* existence of the individual, contemporary scholars is under heavy scrutiny that the phrase is ill fit as a unit of analysis due to its lack of singularity and ambiguity.

On the other side there are scholars such as Farid Essack, whose main focus in relation to identity lie in the meaning of the attached words, such as *Muslim* identity. It is such characteristics and affiliated words that define and provide content to the term 'identity'. These characteristics even suggest that individuals may naturally be part of larger *social groups*.(Esack 1999a, 137–38) Esack's description of identity becomes very much existentialist with the affiliated word. Yet, Esack also manages to remain contextual in his approach and ties this religious affiliation to a social context. For Essack identities are both existential and contextual, as they may be innately reciprocal, interacting mutually in multiple layers, and in an endless transformation.(Esack 1999b, 137)

For Tariq Ramadan the social group is the *Umma*, which socially contains the identity of the Muslim as its member, belonging to a larger social group. This social existence contains inherently natural distinguishing features and separates the individual from other existing social groups. Ramadan too perceives identity as a form of belonging in terms of its membership to a religion. Furthermore, the concept of identity for Ramadan characterizes

mainly an existentialist view that is connected to the social existence (Ramadan 2003, 76). In addition to this, Ramadan brings in the notion of *Shahada*, which is a principal bond that institutes the divine with the social practice of the individual. For Ramadan the *shahada* is a profound inner meaning, a declaration of the divine together with social salience as the outer existence. It is therefore a belonging and a connection between the inner and the outer. This connection for Ramadan is not inhibited by the *clichés* of identity such as race, ethnicity or gender.

Henri Tajfel refers to the term *identity* as a 'belonging to a social group' where one shares values and norms and legitimizes its security to be able to venture into the world with confidence. This definition compared to Al-Djurjani is predominantly socio-contextual. (Huddy 2001) For Tajfel 'religious identity is a part of a person's social identity, therefore it is also a part of an individual's self-understanding'.¹⁰ This self-definition comes from the individual's own awareness of its membership to an in-group; along with the core values and emotional importance that are attained to that membership' (Tajfel, Henri 1981, 255). In Tajfel's theory individuals are attributed the ability of self-sufficiency in learning, attaining social-religious as well as necessary values and associations. (Abu-Rayya, Abu-Rayya, and Khalil 2009) For Turner and Tajfel belonging and ownership are essential that by means of membership of social groups lead to recognition and approval. On a level further, social membership stimulates and contributes to the self-understanding and improving the self-esteem.

The term identity has become a widely used technical term in literature and popularized in social analysis, yet for Brubaker identity still remains too obscure. (Brubaker and Cooper 2000, 2) This ambiguity of the term poses threats for the analytical power of the term in social sciences.

¹⁰ Tajfel, Henri, 'The Social Identity Theory of Intergroup Behaviour'. International Social Sciences Council. (Cambridge University Press, 1974). Pp. 65 - 93

For Hogg and Abrams identity is 'people's concepts of who they are, of what sort of people they are, and how they relate to others' (Abrams and Hogg 1988). In this description, identity is more perceptual as well as contextual. In this view, individuals and groups are defined by their own perceptions and social locations, but they are also defined by others.

For constructivists such as Wendt identities are "relatively stable, role-specific understandings and expectations about the self". (Wendt 1999, 397) For Wendt identities are social and inherently sets of meanings that actors attribute to themselves while taking the perspective of others. Wendt labels these as social identities that construct cognitive schemas that enable actors to socially determine 'who they are'. This constructivist reading of identity is a situational and a perceptual category bound by the social role that is shared and expected.

Sheldon Stryker perceives identity '...to be multiple and existing on various layers'. (Stryker and Burke 2000, 285) It is about the question of how an individual perceives oneself in relation to its *beliefs, rituals, ideology, group involvement and specific attitudes*. For Stryker these features are interrelated by these multiple layers that constitute identity. This stacking up of the various layers may be cognitive, behavioural and affective.¹¹

For Mahmood Monshipouri identity is perceptual and requires self-awareness, where one has self-understanding that is associated with the self that makes the individual unique. Identity therefore is the set of characteristics or traits that are recognizable and what makes a person distinguish itself from others. These characteristics are the core values, beliefs and convictions and provide stability and harmony to the members of these social groups. These features or characteristics are crucial in personality construction of individuals. This is where

¹¹ (Stryker, 1977; Stryker and Serpe, 1982; Brewer and Crano, 1994).

personal or individual identity meets with meaning of acquired values and beliefs connecting to 'self-understanding' in relation to interactions with others.(Monshipouri 2009, 3–4)

For Charles Taylor the term identity is a package of beliefs, habits and values that construct a frame to work from and from this construction an individual is able to work out the best choice and decision to act upon in daily life.(Taylor 1989a, 27) For Taylor this socially constructed frame of reference is the culmination of his famous 'essential self'.¹² It is therefore impossible for an individual to become unattached from its essential self. The reason is that this essential-self is inherently in a continuous self-conception, a constant interaction with the outside world acquainting the self with others in the public space revealing its own identity to the outer world: this is how individuals understand the Self but also of the others. Therefore, identity chains the inner world (personal) to the social realm.(Monshipouri 2009, 4). In this respect Taylor's definition shows similarity with Al-Djurjani's binary approach.

For Taylor identity is a frame of reference to translate the individual's self-conception and how this constructs its self-esteem. The individual's self-esteem then reflects back to how others know, judge and value the perceptions and behaviour of that individual. It is this 'essential self' that Taylor associates with the notion of *human agent*; this human agent is for Taylor the 'selfhood'.(Taylor 1989b, 3) For Taylor this selfhood must be good, wise and prudent.

Taylor stresses in his narrative how the '*good*' is being pictured through this identity. For Taylor this identity grows into that '*good*' as perceived by others. In this sense Taylor categorizes identity as a *moral* category making his approach in a way existentialist where the '*meaning of life*' is questioned. For Taylor identity is a moral matter at hand that has much

¹² Charles Taylor, '*Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*'. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press). 177.

implications for the person as well as the society as a whole. For Taylor this *selfhood* is not merely an inner thing that belongs to the personal characteristics, but is a determining factor shaping the perception of both self and the society.

Page | 213

It is in this society where Taylor's '*politics of recognition*' comes into view.(Taylor 1989b, 150) The consequence of selfhood is the existence of a group that is unique and morally deserves a good life. In order to preserve this continuation and existence it ought to be able to have the space to manifest itself. The contrary image where such a unique group doesn't get this chance is immoral. Unique identities are to be acknowledged, accepted, and celebrated.

For Siobhán McPhee identity is structured through individual's reception of the social sphere. To have an identity in this respect has a functional utility; it is about the group membership and its provided benefits. The group provides *security* from within the social group, as the group is a base where the member individual is provided the space to cultivate assurance that enables the individual to move into the wider society.¹³ For Yuval-Davis the emphasis of identity should be about *belonging*, which is an essential and an invisible social bond.(Yuval-Davis 2011, 10) One may observe in new minority groups that gravitate towards group, language, culture. She states that religion as a dominant affiliation for Muslim minorities today is very much visible and has global connecting features.(Yuval-Davis 2011, 10)

Conclusion

This article has translated and translated one of the oldest definitions of *huwiyya* written by Al-Djurjani in his famous lexicon *Mua'djem Al-Ta'rifaat*. The main purpose was to analyse the definition to categorize whether the definitions would fit in the existential, socio-

¹³ (McPhee 2005) No.34

contextual and/or perceptual categories. The definition of Al-Djurjani presents us a two layered description of the phrase *huwiyya*.

The first part of the definition points to the inner reflection of what Al-Djurjani describes as the absolute truth, while the second part of the definition points to the outer and external presence of the object. In this sense Al-Djurjani's definition of *huwiyya* befits primarily the existential but also reaches out to a minimal understanding in contextual sense. The lexicological translation of the Arabic version shows that there is a binary connection between the inner, pure and essential self and the outer existence in the external realm.

On the other side, definitions of identity in literature today have a strong variation; these definitions are heterogenous and indicate much ambiguity. The complexity is that the phrase *identity* lends itself to a variety of existential, contextual and perceptual approaches. The phrase lends itself to communalities of the inner and outer world, yet it can also lend itself to focus on differences and infringements. This may also lead to trade-offs between the existential, contextual and perceptual categories. Yet, it is evident that the social sciences has moved on from primarily existential definitions to diverse, contextual and perceptual definitions.

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Page | 216

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