
The Nature of Identity

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*When sentient, mortal beings die on Theros,
they pass into the Underworld with the aid of the god Athreos, the River Guide.
They dwell in this eternally gray realm without sun or night under the watch of Erebos, god of the Underworld.
But over the centuries, many denizens of the Underworld have escaped and returned to the sunlit realm of the living.
They are called the Returned.*

—Excerpt from the book, *Observations and Metaphysics*

*When a dead person escapes the Underworld,
that person loses all identity and becomes one of the faceless Returned.
But in this process of severing the physical body from the “soul,” an eidolon is also created.
An eidolon is the spectral embodiment of the lost identity, but without its body, it has no agency.
Unlike the Returned, it has no sense of what it lost.
The Returned and its severed eidolon are never reunited, nor are they aware of one another’s existence.*

—Excerpt from the book, *Observations and Metaphysics*

“What is identity? What makes us who we are?” Perisophia’s voice mixed with the sounds of the breeze and the birds. “Is that all we are?”

She stood before her students, who sat on wooden benches in a semicircle around her. It was a beautiful day and, in that moment, the terrible fear of war had disappeared, replaced only by the fascination of learning and discovery. Perisophia could see that plainly in their young faces and felt an upwelling of emotion. It surprised her, and she allowed it to blossom and fade as she looked with deep affection at her class. She could only hope her students would grow and thrive so as to carry on the torch of logic, reason, and science in an age of madness and superstition.

“Take for instance the leonin cub who is raised by wolves. His identity has been shifted, influenced by his adopted culture. Is he a leonin or is he a wolf or is he something else?”



Art by Raymond Swanland

“He is still a leonin, but his mannerisms and actions will be that of a wolf,” Kyrios said, half stating and half-questioning.

“So you say that it is his physical body that defines his identity,” Perisophia said, her eyebrow raised. “But what of his mind?”

Samia said, “Isn’t his mind more capable than a wolf’s? His capacity to understand is greater, therefore he will always be different in kind to a wolf. He’s a leonin.”

Students then began to volunteer answers one way or the other, some saying, “Leonin, definitely.” Some saying, “No, his mind is a wolf’s and the mind is primary in defining who we are. He’s a wolf by that definition.”

Perisophia spoke. “Wait, wait. Don’t always be so quick to try and answer the question. Dwell in the mystery for a bit and see what arises. We are always so eager to know, to label it and move on to the next thing without really looking. Just be with it. Put your desire of knowing aside and just observe the problem without wanting it known.”

The students sat and Perisophia watched them wrestle with their own internal struggles, the mind’s desire to know and not think it through. It was an irrational impulse within people, especially so-called philosophers, to kill the mystery with a hastily come-to answer and pass it off as truth. Setessans used arrows. Akroans used swords. Meletians used their minds. Each polis killed truth in its own way.

Rhytho spoke. “He is neither wolf nor leonin. If identity is who we are and that is known only to ourselves, then it cannot be given to us by an outside observer. It cannot be given to us by the *status quo*.”

“Interesting,” Perisophia said. “Are you saying that identity can’t be known by someone outside? That our identity is our own possession?”

Rhytho thought a bit while the other students looked on. “Yes. I believe so.”

“Let’s move from there. If you cannot get your true identity from another—whether it be an individual or a group—then can you know yourself? Or is your identity unknown even to you?”

Melia raised her hand and Perisophia nodded. Melia said, “Phelos states that identity is the condition of being oneself, of remaining the same over time.”

“That is the surface logic,” Perisophia replied, “but I am interested in something deeper. Can you know yourself? Can your identity be an object of knowledge, or is it something entirely different?”

The sun was moving higher in the sky, toward its zenith. The breeze had shifted slightly and carried with it the sounds of the fountain and the distant marketplace. People moved around the forum and the smells of the bakers and cooks began to permeate the air as the midday break approached. Perisophia took a deep breath and inhaled the life all around her. She opened her eyes and absorbed the light, the images, the movement. It was a beautiful sight. People tended to good when left in peace, when freed from stress and worry and turmoil. She could sense the goodness, the rightness in them, as they smiled at one another in passing. They took pride in their crafts, made their buildings strong, made their bread wholesome. Their work carried and reflected their joy. She also could sense the storm on the horizon, the seed of Mogis lurking in every living soul, just waiting to erupt and take over. Only through awareness could his darkness be held back and, perhaps, dissolved entirely.

She sensed a student’s question as it bubbled up to the surface.

“Master Perisophia,” Samia said. “What about the Returned and the eidolons? Their identity is claimed to be destroyed, so that would imply that their identity exists as some kind of object otherwise it could not be erased.”



Art by Seb McKinnon

“Ah, you have read Dekatia’s *Observations* . Let us look at that.”

Perisophia looked up at the sky. They were under the hypostyle of the Forum, shaded from the sun’s growing heat, but Perisophia was known to gaze up at the sun and the sky from time to time. Her students soon learned that she was always listening and aware even if she appeared to be disengaged or distracted. They waited for her like hungry cats waited for a saucer of milk.

At last, she said, “Have you watched water boil from a pot? Some might say that the water is destroyed and is gone forever. If one looks more closely, it becomes evident that the water is transmuted into vapor and is not destroyed. It would appear that the Returned and the idolons lack the capacity for an identity. Similar to the wolf, they have sunk below human intellect and act from a rudimentary cluster of memories. Unlike the leonin cub, they cannot become aware of themselves.”

“It makes me think of the story of Matatios, who met himself,” Salis said.



Art by Winona Nelson

Perisophia laughed. “Indeed. His overwhelming infatuation with himself manifested wholly. Let that be a lesson of the power of your own mind and intention. But be careful in drawing that parallel, Salis. Matatios did not become *aware* of himself, he only met himself. Matatios was just as ignorant after meeting himself as he was before, and the meeting taught him little of the nature of his identity.”

“So, what is the nature of identity?” Rhytho asked.

The sun had reached its zenith. Perisophia reached over and collected her book and staff. The students knew that the lesson was coming to a close. She looked at them and smiled.

“It is something that I cannot tell you. It is something that I cannot give you. Perhaps it is something we cannot know. Identity is not in the past, nor does it dwell in the future. It lives in the moment. This moment. And you are the architect of this moment. Your actions, your speech, your deeds, all speak to your identity, but ultimately, it would seem that it is elusive to the mind. It is one of the great mysteries, and it is up to you in every moment that you become aware to figure out what your identity will be.”

linebreak



Art by Wesley Burt

Perisophia's body slept but she was very much awake.

"How is my city?" The voice of Ephara echoed into the void.

"Meletis is filled with goodness. People do your works, even if they are not aware of it, the weaving of their fabric is strong and firm." Perisophia sat under a tree in a field that floated within a sea of stars.

"War is coming. A tyrant tears at the threshold of our world and yours, and he will bring out the worst in people's hearts. You have done much to shore up the tide of fear that swells within humanity, Perisophia, but your work has only just begun."

Perisophia looked at the leaves of the tree as they shimmered with an internal light in the airless netherworld. Perisophia turned and looked at the face of the god and gazed into her eyes.

"With my dying breath I will speak only words that uplift the human mind and soul. How could I do anything less?"

