

# Identity Crutches: Identity Crisis

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Everyone probably knows that fairy tale scene with the princess at the top of the stairs in the palace, wearing a beautiful gown and an exquisite masquerade mask, when everyone in the ballroom stops and turns their heads in amazement. Well, that's me. But instead of the palace stairs, I'm at the top of a ramp, instead of a beautiful gown, I'm wearing a dull beige Ace bandage, and instead of an exquisite mask, I have a pair of metal crutches.

Entering my freshman year of college, I never planned on spending over a month of my new, exciting life hopping around campus on a pair of unforgiving metal crutches. I never foresaw taking that fall during that game of Frisbee, and I never expected to tear several tendons in my knee, requiring a series of surgeries, and consequently needing to spend six weeks on these damned things. But I did. And now, here I am. The effect this has had on my outlook, my image, and my identity has been drastic, and, honestly, rather enlightening.

Before, in my two-legged era, I thought identity was concrete: we are who we are from the first day of our lives to the last. I was Mel before crutches, and I'm Mel now, so why do I feel different? It turns out there's more to identity than a name. My time as "crutches girl" has allowed me to see how the way we present ourselves to the world plays into the people we are. It's clear to me now that individual identity is far from the concrete label it appears to be; it is dynamic, constantly changing and reshaping.

It really hit me that I was "crutches girl" when I overheard a conversation between a couple of girls walking behind me on campus a little while ago.

"It's really an art. I was on crutches once—it's pretty hard!"

"Yeah, she's good at it, though!"

They candidly discussed and admired my mastery of the crutches, failing to realize (until the end of their conversation) that I could hear the whole thing.

"Wow, yeah, she looks like she's got the hang of it."

"Still, looks rough."

"Hey wait—she probably heard us talking this whole time! Hahaha!"

“Oh, well!”

They didn't bother starting conversation *with* me, just *about* me. They didn't see me as someone worth striking up a conversation with; to them, I am merely “the girl on crutches.” If I weren't on crutches, they might not have noticed me at all, or at least not more than anyone else. Now, they see me—not for me, but for my crutches. I went immediately from blending in, being contentedly unseen and unnoticed, to being noticed by everyone, standing out like a needle in a haystack, or like a couple of crutches on a campus full of walking legs.

The crutches are my masquerade mask as I hobble down the ramp into the metaphorical royal ball. Everyone notices them, therefore noticing me. But they don't really see *me*, and they wouldn't have noticed at all or turned their heads to look if it weren't for these crutches. Now I am seen—seen for something I don't see myself as, seen for something that I'm not. But if we take a step back and consider it from an outsider's perspective, it might just be something I am.

The concept of metaphysical identity is a tricky thing to grasp. Confusing questions arise when we consider identity. What makes one person the same over time (Singer)? Does a person stay the same over time at all? Will a thing that is the same as itself at one moment in time always be that same thing, even at later moments in time (Singer)? For example, let's consider the philosophical prompt, “the ship of Theseus” (Yanofsky). Theseus is said to be a king of ancient Greece, and the Athenian people are said to have left a ship, the legendary ship of Theseus, in the naval port in honor of Theseus' great leadership (Yanofsky). The theoretical question is as follows: if each plank of wood from the ship is replaced, one at a time, over the course of several years, when the ship is eventually comprised of all new planks of wood, is it still the same ship (Yanofsky)? What this thought experiment encourages us to reconsider is the permanence of identity and what makes identity change over time, if it does at all. The consistency of the ship's identity is in question, as is that of my own identity while I'm on crutches. The prompt asks if the ship is still the ship of Theseus, but I am redirecting this thought back to my point and asking this: am I still the same person I was before the crutches?

“The girl on crutches” is only my temporary identity. Don't be confused when I refer to identity as temporary. I'll elaborate. While my label, name, biological makeup, and

personality may stay static during this transition in my life, the outside world's image of me is changing. And the way we portray ourselves to the world, the way we are represented to the public, factors into our identity, whether we like it or not. Since the public's impressions of us at any given moment is temporary, we too, by transitive property, are temporary.

Identity is defined by several factors, and individuals don't have the power to decide those all for themselves. Outside factors that we cannot change, like others' impressions of us, exist plainly and clearly and are part of who we are. A person's identity can be different depending on the people he or she is with or where in the world he or she is; it is contextual. For example, in the context of my campus, I exist as the student who had her writing class rescheduled to a handicap-accessible building, but in the context of my doctor's office, I exist as the patient with the cool leg wound that everyone wants to see. My interactions with my peers and doctors, and the labels I wear in front of both of these groups, respectively, play a role in my life and help establish what I am. We learn about our identity through interactions and experiences that involve other people; therefore, identity, in part, is *dependent* on other people ("Identity").

The idea that one's identity changes throughout her life as her experiences accumulate supports the theory that identity is dynamic and fluid, instead of concrete and static. I don't mean to say that there is no aspect of identity that can remain the same over time. Some aspects are indeed permanent. For example, we cannot change the color of our skin. If someone's skin is white, it will be white from the day they are born to the day they die, regardless of any make-up they may wear. Race is part of the permanent physical identity, which lasts and is resistant to effects of time and experience ("Identity"). On the other hand, citizenship is a different story. I was born in and live in America, but I could easily move to another country, say Kenya, start a life there, become a Kenyan citizen, and call myself Kenyan. In this way, my nationality and that aspect of my identity can change from American to Kenyan in the snap of a finger. Of course, more realistically, it would be over the span of several years and piles of government paperwork. But nonetheless, it would change. I recognize that there would be more going on with the social and cultural aspects of this scenario and that people who were born and raised in Kenya may not consider me a true Kenyan, but my point is, I technically would have changed my nationality.

It's easy for us to slip into the mindset that we have concrete and static identities. This is because we live in a "system of fixed identities" (Dimitrov and Kopra). It's simply easier to control and keep track of people with fixed identities than it is people who are changing by the minute (Dimitrov and Kopra). For conventional purposes, we need to have constant identities. Take our DNA, for example. Each man's metaphysical identity has changed since he was born, but his DNA and genes are the same, so biologically, he is unchanged. His DNA or his fingerprint can allow the police and government, or anyone with the necessary technology, to trace him back to his name and body, but throughout life, as real time passes and as real interpersonal interactions happen, his identity adapts; it is ever changing.

The fluidity of identity can be attributed to the fact that everyone and everything only exists in context (Singer). I exhibited this earlier using my own life as an example. By context, I mean time, place, and social surroundings. This means that each of our identities partially depends on the existence, judgments, and perceptions of other people. Because of that, we must "[understand] how we fit in (or don't) with other groups of people" before we can "[understand] our [identities]" ("Identity"). Clearly, the history of the world has shown time and again that we humans are social beings, and we need to recognize this before we can make any statements about identity. If we neglect the social quality of our lives and our natural need for social interaction, we will miss a huge part of what comprises our identities – our social interactions and others' impressions of us – and will not be able to evaluate them realistically. While what we think of ourselves does play an important role, it isn't the only thing that makes us who we are.

"The way we were born is only a part of who we are," because the experiences we undergo throughout our lives shape our identities and add to them ("Identity"). Recall the example I discussed earlier, about race versus nationality, and how one is constant but the other is a matter of choice and has the ability to be changed. The same concept applies here. We are "socially constructed," so how we portray ourselves to others plays a huge role in who we are ("Identity"). Here's an example of this concept in action. Think about how I come off to others when I hobble down the sidewalk at a rate ten times slower than everyone passing me. I look desperate and sad, by no means of my own effort or intention.

These crutches make a statement in which I don't have a say. They trigger something in the people around me, the strangers that pass me. They make me pitied when I don't want

to be. They make me noticed and attended to when I only want to blend in again. They make me dependent when I wish I were capable on my own, like I used to be. I want to open doors for myself and carry my coffee for myself. But I no longer have that choice—I am dependent now. That is part of who I am; the crutches are part of who I am. This new dependence governs my daily life, it is the way I am portrayed to the public, and it is a part of my identity—well, my *current* identity.

Here's where it gets a little tricky: when we examine current and past self and discuss the relationship between physical existence and metaphysical being. I still exist, but not as the same person I was before. "When [I] speak of remaining the same person or of becoming a different person, [I] mean remaining or ceasing to be the *sort* of person [I am]," (Olson) so in this case, I have ceased to be independent and unnoticed, and I have become a person to the contrary. Let me make this point a little more clear. When something has changed a person in some important way, internally, externally, or even seemingly, they still exist, just with a slightly varied identity (Olson). No matter what aspect of one's identity has changed, it affects the existence of his or her identity as a whole, so that person has changed.

To reiterate my point, our identities have only a temporary definition at any given moment. They are vulnerable to the changes that come as time passes. As a professor at Stanford University puts it, "we are collections of mental states or events: 'bundles of perceptions'" (Olson). This means that as human beings who constantly live through new experiences, we are simply what we make of those experiences.

My newfound understanding is in line with this idea; I agree that we are a collection of perceptions. Clearly, this theory supports my point that identity is ever changing. My identity is comprised of my perceptions, my perceptions are dependent on my being, and my being is dependent on my experiences. We arrive back at this resolution: each experience through which we live shapes our identities. Every minute during which we exist has an impact on our being. We are dynamic.

Anything and everything has the potential to change the people we are, and as much as I might wish otherwise, "*I*" am not up to me. So here I stand, at the top of the cement ramp, wearing my sloppily wrapped Ace bandage, holding these two bulky, metal poles at my sides. Heads turn to look up at me. Everyone proceeds to notice and stare. And I can no longer deny it. It's not what I want, but it's out of my hands: I am crutches girl.

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