

# THE ONTOLOGY OF ETHNIC IDENTITY

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## Abstract

*Ethnic identity is a crucial aspect of social existence, deeply embedded in names, cultural heritage and psychological processes. The paper explores the ontology of ethnic identity, analyzing how names serve as discernible markers that shape interpersonal and societal interactions. Drawing from philosophical, naturalist and psycho-social perspectives, it examines the foundational elements that sustain ethnic identity. The paper argues that ethnic identity is not merely a social construct but has deep metaphysical roots grounded on relationality-the interconnectedness that define human experiences. It concludes that for ethnic identity to remain relevant and meaningful, it must be understood within a metaphysical framework that preserves its essence beyond social and historical contingencies.*

**Keywords:** Identity, ethnicity, ontology, names, metaphysics, naturalism, morality.

## Introduction

The paper attempts to present an ontological status of ethnic identity. It is discovered that there are certain theories and explanations concerning the phenomenon of ethnic identity. Some possible ways in which the phenomenon can be seen are *via* names (referential), naturalism, and psycho-socialism. And so, this paper discovered that there is scarce literature on the ontological perspective of ethnic identity which this study attempts to provide. Ethnic identity on a personal level is a socio-psychological process that gives one a sense of belonging. This sense of belonging further results in a sense of identity. And so, ethnic identity is a state in which persons on account of their ethnic origin locate themselves psychologically in relation to certain values, beliefs, and social systems by which they perceive others as locating them in relation to those systems. This factor of ethnic origin is enhanced by some social practices and external behaviors that manifest the internal psychological states of a person or group. In this way, self-definition and bonding or feeling are built. Furthermore, there are ways in which we can understand ethnic identity among others which are the internal and external approaches. On the level of the external, observable behaviours and patterns are obvious and may include speaking an ethnic language and practicing ethnic traditions, participation in ethnic networks such as family and friendships, belonging to institutions within the ethnic group such as churches, schools, enterprises and media, involvement in voluntary associations like clubs, societies

and youth organization and participation in other related ethnic activities. On the internal aspects, one considers ideas, attitudes, and feelings. The internal approach to understanding ethnic identity manifests more in cognition, moral judgment and the affective. In all these, persons in a group, geography or location who share certain values and belief systems identify and are obligated towards themselves by exhibiting certain character traits. This paper therefore aims to present some perspectives of understanding ethnic identity from a metaphysical angle that grounds practically *some if not all* phenomena of ethnicity in general and ethnic identity in particular.

### Understanding Ethnic Identity

In this section, certain perspectives that provide a feeling of belongingness and identity within an environment or among people are significant. Characteristic of the human person is the ability to categorize objects and events in an orderly scheme. These categorizations are enhanced by names. Apart from objects and events, humans likewise categorize people. The tendency to categorize informs identity and paves the way for people to see names as one way through which ethnic identity can be understood.

### A Referential Account of Ethnic Identity<sup>1</sup>

In the twentieth century, there are significant themes that were central to the discourse of philosophy of language. These among others include meaning, names, truth and identity. The starting point for modern discussions of names is usually John Stuart Mill's account in *A System of Logic* published (1867). Mill's view of proper names conforms to several commonplace assumptions about names.

Proper names seem quite arbitrarily connected to objects: no doubt there are social conventions governing the kinds of names (words) appropriate for different kinds of objects (people, places, pets, pop groups, and so on), but a proper name is not determined for an object by any properties of the object. According to Mill, proper names are not connotative: they 'imply an attribute', they convey information and they have meaning.<sup>2</sup>

Gottlob Frege poses the following problem for Mill's theory of names. It is the problem of how there can be informative/meaningful identity sentences. Suppose that, as Mill claims, the meaning of a name consists solely of whatever unique object it picks out. It follows that two names that pick out the same object will have the same meaning.<sup>3</sup> This puzzle concerning the meaning of identity led Gottlob Frege to propose the hypothesis that names, and other semantically relevant components of sentences, must have both a sense and a reference.<sup>4</sup> In his early work, he took identity to be a relation between signs but later

<sup>1</sup>Breman, A.A. "Identity". *Concise Encyclopedia of Philosophy of Language*. New York: Pergamon, 1997. 265. Identity is, technically, a congruence relation, that is, a relation that each thing has to itself and to nothing else.

<sup>2</sup>P. V. Lamarque, 'Names and Descriptions'. *Concise Encyclopedia of Philosophy of Language*. New York: Pergamon, 1997. 226.

<sup>3</sup>Daly C. *Philosophy of Language: An Introduction*. UK: Bloomsbury, 15.

<sup>4</sup>Breman, A.A. "Identity". 266.

realized that in sentences such as: The morning star is the evening star, the identity in question is of one and the same celestial body with itself. What makes the statement informative, according to Frege, is that the expressions on either side of the 'is' of identity differ in sense even though they both name the planet Venus. Some philosophers, like Strawson and Lockwood, have argued that one role of identity statements is to enable speakers to collapse separate files of information held of an object into one larger file.<sup>5</sup> To that extent, 'identity' is, technically, a congruence relation that each thing has to itself and to nothing else.<sup>6</sup> The derivation from the foregoing understanding in relation to name and ethnic identity is that a group of people sharing common ancestry, language, cultural symbols and possibly the same territory are seen technically as identical despite the diverse personality that each person has. A naturalist position regarding language as containing linguistic items (words) which serve as an obvious identity of one group against the other is that of Alexander Von Humboldt. He posits that:

Language is the outer appearance of the mentalities of people; their language is their mentality and their mentality their language. One can hardly overemphasize their identity. People who share a common language develop a similar subjectivity, a Weltanschauung (worldview).<sup>7</sup>

The foregoing ideals present the claim that, in a historically ancestral group of people, there is a sense of identity that is assumed to be qualitative that members of an ethnic group share. This sort of identity is easily found in the personal names of people who are of that origin. To this extent, personal names can be used to ascribe populations to an ethnic, cultural and linguistic group. Name taxonomies are valuable classifications that reveal some hidden values, processes, conditions, beliefs, and ideals in the population. When the term 'names' is used, it refers not only to forenames but also to surnames. For instance, surnames are held to be family names or last names which normally correspond to the components of a person's name inherited from his or her family. Forenames stand for an individual's first name, given name or Christian name. This represents the proper name given to a person usually at birth. Identity with respect to name is reflexive of the population and tells a lot about them. When individuals from the same ancestral origin and history locate themselves in a different place, they identify themselves easily by surnames. When one sees names such as Adewale, Adeyemi, Opeyemi, Adewumi, and Adegbite, the first ethnic group that comes to mind is the Yoruba. Uchechukwu, Nnachi, Eze, Egwu and Too-chukwu instantly call up the Igbo Ethnic groups. Effiong, Okon, Akpan and Umoh direct one's mind to the Efik and Ibibio ethnic groups. And, this goes on to say a lot concerning the African worldview wherein surnames are most times a pointer to one's clan or kin. It shows also whether one is a slave or not as believed in some communities. In addition, it shows if one is of a royal family or not. Names are vital aspects of human lives and are cherished practically in all cultures. For purpose of emphasis, therefore, the discourse of philosophy of language shows that names have meaning and those names do refer to either objects or persons and these names are connected to such an ethnic group's origin, belief system, values and condition of living.

<sup>5</sup>Breman, A.A. "Identity". 267.

<sup>6</sup>Breman, A.A. "Identity". 265

<sup>7</sup>Trimble, J. Ethnic Identity. *ResearchGate*. Accessed 28/1/2025. From:: <file:///C:/Users/PROF.%20E.%20UKPOKOLO/Downloads/DefinitionsOfEthnicGlossIdentity.pdf> Jan. 2005: 416

### A Naturalist Account of Ethnic Identity

Materialism and naturalism are related concerning the nature and existence of physical things. As a method, naturalism holds that “human behaviour should be studied as proceeding from, caused by or monitored by natural law”.<sup>8</sup> As a philosophical position, it holds that only the law of nature guides the actions of men and occurrences in nature. Nature is therefore the ultimate reality. There is a perspective of naturalism with respect to physical things and there is also the positivist form of naturalism. However, this paper relies on biological naturalism and some philosophical basis to show that ethnic identity can be understood within this context. Biological naturalism, as a theory of man is drawn from the work of Charles Darwin and others. It explains that the evolution of man and animals is a single process. It dismisses or pays little attention to the nonphysical or spiritual nature of man, emphasizing that man's nature is the heritage he has received from his ancestors.<sup>9</sup> On this basis, it traces many similarities between human and animal behaviour and between one culture or group from another. Biological naturalism contends that all the processes of 'Nature' and the entire existence of the universe cannot be explained in terms of mechanical and physical processes, because in the biological world, evolution is a more important phenomenon. All living beings have an instinct to live and for this reason, life evolves from lower forms to higher and more complex ones. One can find all the characteristics of evolution in man's life. At the animal level, the process of evolution stops at the material or physical level, but in the case of human beings, it manifests in the mental, moral and spiritual levels. This instinctive evolution is found not only in individual human beings but also in groups of human beings because these groups also evolve to a stage of greater complexity. In this process of evolution, the principles of struggle for existence and survival of the fittest have been considered as the most important by Charles Darwin, because in his opinion the principle of self-preservation is the strongest law of nature.<sup>10</sup> Apart from the biological science thesis concerning the natural origin of man, tribal groups and relations, naturalism has a long tradition in philosophy. Naturalism has its origin in many intellectual traditions including Euro-Western thoughts. In Western thought, the early Greek thinkers offered explanations for things in the world (not excluding ethnic identity) without any reference to some reality that is nonphysical in nature. However, Anaximenes posited indeterminate boundless and Parmenides the unity of 'being' as 'One' to oppose the naturalist thesis. With regards to ethnic identity, how does naturalism enable us to understand ethnic identity? Ethnic attachments and allegiances are natural. This can take support from the Aristotelian claim that 'man is a social animal'.<sup>11</sup> This natural tendency can further be captured in the thesis of Ubuntu of 'we are therefore, I think'.<sup>12</sup> The natural identity of a people stems from not only their giving to and emphasis on blood or biological evolution but also their ability over time to adapt to a particular environment, their economic values and orientations, technological advancement and innovations and their historical interactions are key natural factors. Furthermore, less or no

<sup>8</sup>Obot, M.I. *Philosophy of Education: Introduction*. Calabar: University of Calabar Press, 2015. 59.

<sup>9</sup>Kneller, G. *Introduction to the Philosophy of Education 2nd edition*. New York: Macmillan, 1971. 12.

<sup>10</sup>Kneller, G. *Introduction to the Philosophy of Education*. 13.

<sup>11</sup>Aristotle, *Politics*. Book 1: 1253a4.

<sup>12</sup>Mukadi, M. Screening the African Cogito Ergo Sum: A Challenging Socio-Epistemological Question. *International Journal of Science and Research*. April, 2022. 1273.

attention is paid to the nonphysical conditions that inform this behaviour or outcome that describe a group. Apart from the natural tendency and disposition of humans to belong or be categorized into a group, there exists some understandings by an anthropologist and sociologists in support of this position. A “primordial” understanding of ethnic identity suggests that it exists naturally, due to common heritage, and is basically an extension of blood ties.<sup>13</sup> Also, Pierre van den Berghe thinks that much of ethnic identity is predetermined at birth, and is not actively chosen or acquired over one's lifetime.<sup>14</sup> Blood which is a biological natural element of human life and being born into a community, group or people by birth inform naturalism as an explanation for ethnic identity. Moreso, the biological naturalist proposes existence and self-preservation as the principles that guide the nature of man. This goes to show that ethnic groups do not only strive to exist and defend these identities with names as in the account above but portend to preserve their image by appealing to some belief systems informed by the some ancestral, language and historical conditions. As Berghe and Geertz contend, blood ties and the fact that persons are born into a group which they do not choose based on some rational decisions and judgments appeal to naturalism as a belief and method for understanding ethnic identity. An assumption concerning naturalism by Max Weber is that ethnicity would decline with the emergence and development of modernity, which he predicted as marked by the “rationalization of human action and organization”.<sup>15</sup> To that extent, ethnic attachments were for him “communal” and were not expected to thrive in modern societies, which would gradually displace such traditional relationships.<sup>16</sup> In addition, many recent analysts of ethnicity argued that ethnic identity has no natural or objective existence as such, and so stressed that it is socially constructed rather than primordial or natural.<sup>17</sup> This response further assumes that the naturalist tendency proposes a culturally essentialist view of ethnic groups and their identity thereby considering cultures as static and unchanging.<sup>18</sup> This limitation provides the opportunity to consider a psycho-social or a socialist account of ethnic identity.

### **A Psycho-social Reality of Ethnic Identity**

Individuals locate themselves in one group or another internally by states of mind, feelings and attitudes which manifest in behaviour externally. According to this theory, images, ideas, attitudes and feelings are interconnected with external behaviour.<sup>19</sup> Here, an individual is abreast with his or her group's heritage and historical past. The case is that the

13Ethnic Identities: Choices and Constraints. Accessed 20/1/2025. From: [https://www.blackwellpublishing.com/content/bpl\\_images/content\\_store/sample\\_chapter/9780631151524/SON\\_G\\_001.pdf](https://www.blackwellpublishing.com/content/bpl_images/content_store/sample_chapter/9780631151524/SON_G_001.pdf). 7.

14Ethnic Identities: Choices and Constraints. Accessed 20/1/2025. From: [https://www.blackwellpublishing.com/content/bpl\\_images/content\\_store/sample\\_chapter/9780631151524/SON\\_G\\_001.pdf](https://www.blackwellpublishing.com/content/bpl_images/content_store/sample_chapter/9780631151524/SON_G_001.pdf). 7.

15Ethnic Identities: Choices and Constraints. 7.

16Ethnic Identities: Choices and Constraints. 8.

17The works of the following attempt this position: Barth 1969; O. Patterson 1975; Wallman 1978; Hein 1994; Lal 2001.

18Ethnic Identities: Choices and Constraints. 7.

19Wsevolod W.I. Definition and Dimensions of Ethnic: A Theoretical Framework. Challenges of Measuring an Ethnic World: Science, Politics and Reality: Proceedings of the Joint Canada-United States Conference on the Measurement of Ethnicity. April 1-3, 1992. 8.

knowledge one has of his ethnic group that defines his or her identity may be objective or sentimental. And so, psycho-social ethnic identity is the belief that identity is a process by which an individual is bound to his social group to realize his or her social self. This social self is realized by participation in various social, cultural and religious institutions of an ethnic group. This theory takes support from the human tendency to categorize and form concepts. Sometimes, this categorization derives from hearsay, fantasy and emotion. And so, this process of social categorization provides the ground for the formation of an in-group and out-group.<sup>20</sup> The In-group is the ethnic group which one belongs and the out-group is that which an individual defines himself or herself in relation to. This psycho-social understanding of how ethnic groups distinguish themselves from others brings about another factor of ethnic identity in terms of boundary and geographical location. These factors to some obvious degree identify and distinguish one ethnic group from another. A consequence of this theory is that it provides the ground for ethnocentrism which is advantageous since it comes with some form of security, sympathy and a feeling of association.

The foregoing theories do not exhaust our understanding of ethnic identity. There is also a situational account among others. Accordingly, situational theorists of ethnic identity claim that ethnic solidarity and ethnic attachments are not constant or guaranteed, because they can fluctuate over time.<sup>21</sup> Ethnic identity can be activated in particular times and situations by a combination of material factors and other interests; that is, people can use their ethnic affiliations and ties as resources in a variety of contexts, in response to current needs, or in terms of competition with outside groups.<sup>22</sup> In this way, we easily consider minority or majority of an ethnic group demanding political opportunities and recognition. And so, some minor ethnic groups align with another to gain some voice within a larger community. The next section will attempt an understanding of self-consciousness as the basis for self-identity with regards to ethnic identity.

### Self-Consciousness

Consciousness is generally understood as a state of inner mental life or "interiority" and involves the act of awareness.<sup>23</sup> It is an individual's awareness of his unique thoughts, memories, feelings, sensations, and environments. Primarily, it is concerned with the external and internal awareness of something. An individual's awareness is subjective and unique to such a person. If you can describe something you are experiencing in words, then it is part of your consciousness. However, one's conscious experiences are constantly shifting and changing. An altered type of consciousness is therefore coma and perhaps confusion. And so, when we get hold of something *in* consciousness it is thought, feeling, image, tune or sound, but these are derived from perception such as tastes and smells including sights and sounds. These, however, inform us of ourselves and the world around

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<sup>20</sup>Pablo M. An Ontology of Ethnicity Based Upon Personal Names: With Implications For Neighbourhood Profiling. *Thesis*. Department of Geography, University College London. 2007. 59.

<sup>21</sup>Ethnic Identities: Choices and Constraints. 10.

<sup>22</sup>Ethnic Identities: Choices and Constraints. 7..

<sup>23</sup>Lonergan B. *Insight: a study of human understanding*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press. 2005. 345.

us. Furthermore, we are alert to threat and danger, the passing of time and, a feeling of pity and sympathy for others, which speak a lot of our conscious lives. The question is, which methods best get at the phenomena of conscious experience and give us insights into its nature? An answer to this question poses a challenge in an attempt to understand the nature of consciousness.<sup>24</sup> This is so because, it is a search for the necessary and sufficient conditions for understanding consciousness. The problem regarding the nature of consciousness does not constitute a focus for this paper. Rather it is how individuals who are members of larger and smaller societies are conscious of ethnic identity factors such as common ancestry (whether putative or real), memories of a shared past, and a cultural focus on one or more symbolic elements which define the group's identity, such as kinship, religion, language, shared territory, nationality or physical appearance.<sup>25</sup> From the foregoing, self-consciousness here is the tendency to be aware of and associate oneself with a group or ethnic tribe. This sort of identity with a group, can be influenced by psycho-social awareness, situational conditions and affiliations, attachment to names and similar phenomena as well as the natural feeling of belongingness.

### The Theory of Reality

Metaphysics is concerned with the nature of reality. It seeks to discover general normative principles for what is real and how that differs from what may seem to be real but is not. It presupposes that “some facts are more fundamental or 'real' than others; and metaphysics, on this conception, attempts to characterize the most fundamental facts which are the 'ground' for the other facts or from which they somehow derive”.<sup>26</sup> Metaphysics as a branch of philosophy in Euro-western thought started with the pre-Socratic Milesian philosophers of the 6<sup>th</sup> century. They speculated on the basic reality underlying the changing temporal world.<sup>27</sup> Considered as first philosophy, metaphysics is seen as the foundation for all the other areas of philosophy. The origin of the term in philosophy emerged when Andronicus of Rhodos was arranging Aristotle's works after his death. Some works were arranged according to their focus on nature while others were arranged based on their focus on things 'after nature'. *Meta* implies 'after' and *physica* implies 'nature'. Thus, the word metaphysics has not only an etymological sense but a chronological sense from the arrangement of Aristotle's works. Moreso, the word metaphysics entered the linguistic world of philosophy when the early Greek philosophical writings were entitled “*Concerning Nature*” (the Greek term for “nature” being “physics”). These works usually dealt with what we would now consider as physical sciences.

In modern times, metaphysics attempts to distinguish appearance from reality. This presupposition is evident in the metaphysical discourse of Parmenides, Plato, Spinoza,

<sup>24</sup>Barry S. Consciousness: What is it Like? Ted Honderich on Consciousness, Determinism, and Humanity, *Philosophers in Depth*. G.D. Caruso Editor. New York: Palgrave, 2018. 89-91.

<sup>25</sup>Ethnic Identities: Choices and Constraints. 6-7.

<sup>26</sup>Kit Fine. What is metaphysics? *ResearchGate*. Accessed 28/1/2025. From: DOI: 10.1017/CBO9780511732256.003. Published Dec. 2011. 10.

<sup>27</sup>David Stewart and Gene Blocker. *Fundamentals of Philosophy*, Second Edition. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company. 1987. 95.

Hegel, and Bradley. If we depend on appearance, we can never understand reality because experience shows that appearance often deceives and misleads one away from reality.<sup>28</sup> Hence metaphysics deals with the essence of things, not their attributes. The central issue of distinguishing appearance from reality led to the emergence of two theories of reality among others. On one hand, we have materialism and on the other idealism. Materialism claims that the ultimate reality is matter while idealism emphasizes idea to be the basic reality of the universe. Apart from these, there is also a questionable distinction between ontology and metaphysics:

Literally, the word ontology means the science of Being or the study of Being as Being. The term was coined by Scholastic writers in the seventeenth century. Some philosophers (for example Christian Wolf) used it as a synonym for metaphysics while others (like Kant) used it as an aspect of metaphysics. In this century Martin Heidegger whose whole philosophy was focused on Being as distinct from beings revived the use of this term and saw himself primarily as an ontologist, a phenomenological ontologist. He tells us in his book, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, that the coinage of the word "ontology" in the seventeenth century marked the development of the doctrine of Being into a branch of philosophy, a branch which endeavours to make Being manifest itself. However, some metaphysician (Collingwood for example) who do not see the possibility of treating Being as an object of study, distinct from beings, reject ontology and exclude it from metaphysics. We for our part take ontology to be part of metaphysics, and that is the way it is seen and treated in this work. We see ontology as the core of metaphysics, and inseparable from it<sup>29</sup>

Taking a cue from the above representation, ontology as a branch of metaphysics and the study of being seeks the core of a phenomenon, object or thing. It is on this basis that this paper seeks to show the reality of and core of ethnic identity.

### **Concluding remarks: The Ontology of Ethnic Identity**

The perspective of philosophy of language, draws on the meaning of names, to understand ethnic identity. The naturalist account suggests that ethnic attachments are natural, stemming from common heritage and blood ties. And so, humans have an instinct to belong and that ethnic groups strive to preserve their identities and beliefs. Also, the psycho-social account focuses on the internal states of mind, feelings, and attitudes that manifest in external behaviours; seeing ethnic identity as a process through which individuals connect with their social groups, realizing their social self and personal identity through participation in various ethnic institutions. Finally, ethnic identity is not static but can be activated in specific situations. It can be influenced by material factors, interests, and needs. In all these, an ontological basis is needed. What this study predicates as the basis is relationality. It rests on relationship and interconnectedness. Relationality describes the phenomenon of interactive bodies and forces. It acknowledges and offers a wholistic and

<sup>28</sup> Omoregbe, J.I. *Metaphysics. Philosophy for all Disciplines*. Edited by Unah, Jim. Lagos: Panaf Press, 1998. 75-6.

<sup>29</sup> Omoregbe, J.I. *Metaphysics*. 76-77.

interconnected framework that recognizes the parts. Relationality captures the essence of interactive dynamics—how actions and behaviours of individuals within an ethnic group impact themselves and those outside the group. It promotes an understanding of ethnic identity as a fundamentally human experience characterized by meaningful connections. Such relationships should foster respect for human dignity, highlighting the value of interrelated beliefs, histories, and kinship bonds that ultimately strengthen group identity in relation to, and with the good non-members. And so, relationality is characteristically a human condition for a quality and meaningful relationship. This quality and meaningful relationship ought to thrive in manners that retains the basis of human society. One of such is human dignity. Relationality as emphasized here is a condition, a state and a quality in any relationship, behaviour and actions. And so, the core of ethnic identity with particular reference to ontology as a branch of metaphysics is relationality as it manifests in mutual interaction that upholds human values and promotes common good.

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