Between Identity and Ambiguity – Some Conceptual Considerations on Diversity[1]

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"Do I contradict myself?
Very well then I contradict myself,
(I am large, I contain multitudes.)"
Walt Whitman, *Song of Myself*

Abstract: Diversity matters – theoretically and practically, within philosophy and beyond. It is less clear, however, how we are to conceive of diversity. In current debates it is quite common to discuss diversity as a diversity of social identities. In this paper, I will raise five major concerns with regard to this approach from a philosophical perspective. All of them cast doubt on the flexibility and openness to ambiguity of identity-based concepts of diversity. Contrary to an identity-based concept of diversity, I will propose a perspective that stresses ambiguity and fluidity. In pursuing my argument, I will, after an introduction in §1, outline in §2 how the term 'diversity' is commonly used and how social identities come into the picture. In §3, I describe the dangers of an identity-based diversity concept. In my critique I will build on Adorno's thoughts on the formation of concepts and on Appiah's reflections on identity. I will illustrate my critique with examples from a growing field of Applied Ethics, data ethics. In §4, I will sketch an alternative understanding of human diversity, taking up considerations by Thomas Bauer on ambiguity and ambiguity tolerance.

Keywords: ambiguity, diversity, essentialism, social identity.

1. Introduction

People are different. We have different tastes and interests. We have different mentalities and temperaments. We come in different shapes and sizes. So far, so trivial, one might think. In recent years, however, diversity has become a topic of immense interest: academia as well as the wider public have seen an enormous

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rise in publications on diversity and diversity-related topics. This new interest cannot be called trivial in any way. One of the main reasons for the current awareness with regard to diversity has been the success of political campaigns by women, people of color, LGBTIQ-communities, as well as age and disability-based movements formulating "respective calls for an end to discrimination, for equality of treatment, more positive images, respect of rights and symbolic recognition" (Vertovec 2015, 19). The call for more diversity in institutions and organizations, here, is based on ethical considerations.

In addition to these political and social demands for diversity, business administration and management theory in particular have also discovered diversity as a topic: the so-called "business case for diversity" (see e.g. Mensi-Klarbach 2012) states that companies are more successful if their workforce is diverse. In contrast to less diverse companies, they can draw on a wider range of perspectives, competencies and experiences. Here, the call for more diversity is not based on ethical considerations, but rather on the instrumental value of diversity: diversity is valued because it contributes to an improved performance record.[2]

In philosophy, despite the fact that the concept of diversity in its own right has not been treated extensively,[3] debates that refer to diversity are widespread and vivid. There are, for instance, thorough debates on difference, on moral relativism, on political and cultural pluralism, and on symbolic recognition and recognition of rights of various societal groups, and in epistemology we have witnessed a rise in publications on the role of diverse backgrounds on our philosophical intuitions.[4]

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[2] "How-to textbooks for 'diversity'-management and practice have proliferated greatly over the past twenty years. The American Institute for Managing Diversity provides an annotated bibliography of over 75 books in English on diversity management (www.aimd.org), while the International Society for Diversity Management lists a further 37 books in German" (Vertovec 2012, 294).

[3] A few examples: There is no entry on diversity in the *Encyclopedia of Ethics* (Becker/Becker 1992). It is, however, listed in the index (diversity: Lao Tzu, liberalism, toleration; cultural diversity: moral realism, property, the Sophists). None of the texts in *The Oxford Handbook of Practical Ethics* (LaFollette 2003) discusses diversity. It can be found in the Index, though (diversity feminists). None of the texts in *Angewandte Ethik. Bereichsethiken und ihre theoretische Fundierung* (Nida-Rümelin 2005) discusses diversity. There is no entry in *The Oxford Handbook of Ethical Theory* (Copp 2006). There it can be found in the index (perfectionist egoism, Rossian deontology, of species). In *Lexikon der Ethik* (Wils/Hübenthal 2006) no entry. No entry in *Handbuch Ethik* (Düwell/Hübenthal 2006), also not in the Index. In *Ethics. History, Theory and Contemporary Issues* (Cahn/Markie 2006): no entry. *Encyclopedia of applied Ethics* (Chadwick/Callahan/Singer 2011) no entry, but listed in the index (affirmative action debate, ecological definition).

[4] It is impossible to retrace all these debates here. To name but a few examples and for further literature in these topics see: Appiah (2005), Benhabib (2004), Buckwalter & Stich (2014), Carens (2000), Forst (2003), Hildt (2016), Kristeva (1988), Kymlicka (1995), Nussbaum

Diversity matters – theoretically and practically, within philosophy and beyond. It is less clear, however, how we are to conceive of diversity. In current debates – first and foremost in the wider public but also within philosophy – it is quite common to conceive of diversity as a diversity of social identities. In this paper, I will raise five major concerns with regard to this approach from a philosophical perspective. They will revolve around essentialism, the problems of a numerical understanding of diversity, the normative force of typicality, what has been called the Medusa syndrome, and problems that arise from conceptualizing categories. All five concerns cast doubt on the flexibility and openness to ambiguity of identity-based concepts of diversity. Contrary to an identity-based concept, I will propose a perspective on diversity that stresses ambiguity and fluidity.

In what follows, I will, in §2, outline how the term 'diversity' is commonly used and how social identities come into the picture when we talk about diversity. After that, I will go on to describe the dangers of an identity-based diversity concept in §3. In my critique of an identity-based concept, in § 3.1, I will draw on Theodor W. Adorno's thoughts on the formation of concepts (Adorno 1966) and on Kwame Anthony Appiah's reflections on identity (Appiah 2005; 2018). Though their main concern is not diversity, I will relate their ideas to the diversity discourse and apply them to the problems at hand here. I will also add further points, e.g. worries about a numerical understanding of diversity, that neither draw on Adorno nor Appiah. In §3.2 I will discuss two objections one might want to raise against my critique and debunk them. In §3.3, I will illustrate my critique with examples from a growing field within Applied Ethics, namely data ethics. Then, in §4, I will sketch an alternative perspective on human diversity and what it would entail. In formulating this alternative, I will take up some considerations formulated by Thomas Bauer on ambiguity and ambiguity tolerance (Bauer 2011; 2018) and apply them to the question at hand. I will conclude the paper, in §5, with a summary and some more general remarks on the concept of diversity.

2. What we talk about when we talk about diversity

The concept of diversity alludes to difference: where there is no difference, there is no diversity. Difference in itself, however, is not sufficient for diversity. First of all, because diversity is an attribute of groups – and not of individuals or pairs – and secondly, with regard to what is referred to as *human diversity* the difference in question has to be meaningful in a particular way. This meaning often stems from the reference to social identities. I will elaborate this point in more detail in a moment, but let's have a closer look at the term 'diversity' first. The term first and foremost refers to any variety of things or persons that differ in at least one

(1999), Okin (1979, 1989), Rawls (1993), Rorty (1991), Taylor (1992), Stich (2013), Young (1990), Zack (2015, 2016).

characteristic. This is, for instance, how the notion of diversity is used in the well-known concept of biodiversity. Biodiversity refers to the number of genetic or visible variants of any occurring species in a given ecosystem, habitat or other geographically limited area (Faith 2007, cf. Gaston 1996). The concept of diversity that is employed here is descriptive and numerical: it refers to a number of genetic or visible variants.

So much for plants and animals – but how do we use the term with regard to humans: what do we talk about when we talk about diversity in the discourses mentioned in the introduction? In his study *"Diversity" and the Social Imaginary* (2012), Vertovec analyzed a wide range of publications, scientific and non-scientific, that employ notions of diversity to see what the term is usually taken to refer to. According to this study, the term 'diversity' refers to a wide range of categories, namely "race, gender, ethnicity, culture, social class, religious belief, sexual orientation, mental ability, physical ability, psychological ability, veteran or military status, marital status, place of residence, nationality, perspectives, insights, background, experience, age, education level, cultural and personal perspectives, viewpoints and opinions" (Vertovec 2015, 2; cf. Vertovec 2012, 295f.; cf. Bendel/Eberherr/Mensi-Klarbach 2012, 11).

As varied as this list may seem, what is apparent is that many of the categories we find in here are what are often called social identities. The term 'social identity' commonly refers to our belonging to a group of people with whom we share certain features as part of our understanding of our distinctiveness. Gender, ethnicity, and social class are common examples for social identities.[5]

Social identities – unlike the number of variants of any occurring species in a given ecosystem – are the product of social processes of construction and reconstruction. That social identities 'are made up', as it were, does not, however, entail that individuals can pick and choose their social identities as they like. Social identities evolve in a complex interplay of ascription by others and self-ascription: the way others refer to us and treat us will have an effect on our understanding of ourselves – and our understanding of ourselves might have an impact on the way others treat us. Others might refer to me as 'female' and this in turn might lead to my understanding of myself as female, or of what it means to be female and so on. What is more, the self-ascribed aspects might be in accord with the ascriptions of others, they might overlap with them to some extent, or they might contradict them.[6] Others might identify me as female, but I

[5] The subtitle of Appiah's book on identities *The Lies That Bind. Rethinking Identity* (2018), for instance, names "creed, country, colour, class, culture". Appiah also reminds us right at the beginning of his book that this understanding of the term 'identity' is relatively new. According to Appiah, it only occurred after the middle of the 20th Century. Up until then a person's identity was understood as "utterly particular and personal" (Appiah 2018, 3).

[6] The ascription of certain features in virtue of our social identities is, of course, more noticeable to us when we disagree with that ascription.

might or might not identify myself that way. In any case, even the process of *self*-attribution is intersubjectively shaped.

I use the term 'ascription' here to point out that in referring to social identities we are not merely describing persons with facts about themselves. That is to say, social identities are not merely factual, *and* they are not merely individual. Let me unpack that a little. I was born in 1986. That is a fact. Whether that makes me young or old, or a member of one generation or another – these are questions of social construction of age groups and what we believe they look like. Social identities are not merely about facts. They are also about what qualities, features, characteristics others and I ascribe to me – often starting from facts about me, but certainly not stopping there. They also refer to socially constructed *groups* of people. Being a member of a generation, for instance, only makes sense if there are others that form that generation with me. In that way, our social identities always relate us to others.[7]

Historically, the emergence of diversity-awareness was closely linked with identity politics that put social identity at its center. The term 'identity politics' was coined in the 1970s by the Black feminist Combahee River Collective.[8] It has since been taken to refer to a variety of political activities as well as theories. The basic idea, however, is that the members of certain societal groups share experiences of injustice. The corresponding political aim was formulated as follows: "to secure the political freedom of a specific constituency marginalized within its larger context. Members of that constituency assert or reclaim ways of understanding their distinctiveness that challenge dominant characterizations, with the goal of greater self-determination" (Heyes 2020). Though, in more recent years, identity politics has in many places taken a different turn with regard to its political leaning,[9] what is crucial for our purposes here is to bear in mind that the discourses on diversity and the discourses on (social) identity have been intertwined for the past decades.

What is important to note is that social identities are also often, if not always, prescriptive: social identities come with certain expectations on how we are to behave – either because they give us reason to do certain things in a

[7] To give an example: I was born in Leipzig in the 1980s. That is a fact. That I am a child of the East German transformation, however, is one of my social identities. It relates me to others who where born roughly at the same time in the German Democratic Republic, having had what feels to us as a specific upbringing under specific historical conditions that shaped us in a particular way. Arguably, if it were the case that *ceteris paribus* nobody – or nobody else but me – recognized that experience as being particular, it would not constitute a *social* identity (cf. Appiah 2018, 9).

[8] It was first used in a 1977 statement by that group that was later published in *Capitalist Patriarchy and the Case for Socialist Feminism* (1979).

[9] One example is the current right-wing identitarian movements in Austria and Germany.

certain way, or because others think that we should or should not behave in a particular way and, therefore, limit our options.[10]

I have said above that many of the categories in Vertovec's list are social identities and seem to form, therefore, the basic unit of the prevalent understanding of human diversity. Anyhow, if we look at the list again, we can see that although most categories can be called social identities, some do not seem to fall under this heading: what about age? Or place of residence? One might want to say that these are facts – not identities.

Taken by themselves this is probably correct, but with regard to the diversity discourse that we are concerned with, they often – if not always – refer to social groups, or function as proxies for social identities. Take for instance age: if a group is composed of people born in 1983, 1984 and 1985, it will usually not be regarded as age-diverse. Though the age of the group members is different, they do not belong to different age-groups. Difference by itself is not sufficient for diversity. Only in reference to a group and its identity, as in its distinctiveness, does the difference become relevant for the diversity discourse. In other cases, categories by themselves do not explicitly name a social group, but the category functions as a proxy for social identity. This is, for instance, the case with "place of residence": having different zip-codes does not by itself make a group more diverse, it is rather the correlation of zip-codes with other features of a person, namely their connection to differing social backgrounds and identities. Depending on how residentially segregated a society is, a zip-code can function as a proxy for race, or class, or other things.[11] So even the categories that do not refer explicitly to social identities are often indirectly linked to them.

What I want to stress here is that the idea of social identity is widespread in the discourse on diversity – often explicitly so and where it is not referred to directly, we can often still find traces of an identity-based understanding of diversity in the categories that are applied. Social identities, though they are not the only approach to conceiving diversity, are prevalent in the current discourse on diversity. A group is regarded as diverse, first and foremost, if its members have a variety of social identities. Thus, what we talk about when we talk about diversity in the discourses mentioned in the introduction is primarily a diversity of social identities.

3. What are the dangers of conceiving diversity in terms of identity?

When we discuss diversity we often refer to social identities like gender, class or social background, or ethnicity – and why shouldn't we? Why shouldn't we

[10] Appiah summarizes the workings of social identities as follows: "identities come, first, with labels and ideas about why and to who they should be applied. Second, your identity shapes your thoughts about how you should behave; and, third, it affects the way other people treat you. Finally, all these dimensions of identity are contestable" (Appiah 2018, 12). This is all well researched for instance in gender studies and I will not expand on that here.

[11] On proxies and their effects see Heesen, Reinhardt & Schelenz (forthcoming).

conceive diversity in terms of identity? After all, the call for diversity was and is often related to calls for recognition, representation, anti-discrimination, and affirmative action. In other words: legitimate claims for justice. And if we want to determine who ought to be the beneficiaries of the policies that make good on these legitimate claims, we need to determine who belongs to the groups in question – and who does not. While there are legitimate reasons to proceed this way, there are also reasons that speak against this approach. In what follows I want to discuss some of them: the danger of – as it were 'traditional' – essentialism, the problems of a numerical understanding of diversity, the normative force of typicality, the Medusa syndrome, and general considerations about conceptualizing categories. In my critique of an identity-based concept of diversity I will take up considerations on concept formation by Adorno (1966) and on identity by Appiah (2005; 2018). I will apply their ideas to the diversity discourse and I will add further points, e.g. worries about a numerical understanding of diversity, that draw on neither Adorno nor Appiah.

3.1 Five Concerns

3.1.1 Identity and Essentialism

Talk of someone's social 'identity' suggests that they have a relatively fixed 'kernel', a core of features and characteristics that we can list and thereby determine who belongs to a certain social group and who does not. By listing core features of persons, we can – so it appears under this perspective – determine who belongs to the same social group qua having the same features. After all, the word 'identity' stems from the Latin word *idem*, the same. While this might seem harmless, it invites an essentialist reading, according to which an entity has a set of characteristics or elements that are necessary and sufficient not merely for categorizing it but for defining that entity, that is, for its being the very entity that it is. Thus conceiving of diversity in terms of social identity suggests not merely that persons are members of a given social group, but that their membership of that group is part of their essence.

While I am not arguing, here, against essentialism, one problem with essentializing diversity dimensions is, however, that the attributes and features that a person has in virtue of her identity are, from an essentialist perspective on identity, perceived as fixed and unchanging. A person is believed to behave and act in accordance with her identity because she couldn't behave or act differently, since that behavior flows from her essence – thus leaving little room for variations and change.[12]

[12] This has all been well discussed and criticized within vivid debates on gender essentialism and I do not want to repeat these arguments here. For discussions of gender essentialism see for instance de Beauvoir [1949], Butler (1988), Grosz (1995). For an overview of the current debate from an interdisciplinary perspective see Bauer, Ammicht Quinn & Hotz-Davies (2018).

To be sure: conceptually, identity is not necessarily connected to essentialism. Contrary to an essentialist understanding of social identities, one can conceive of them, as I have mentioned above, as constructed, as 'made up', and thus open to change. But talking about diversity in terms of identity often, in practice, invites essentialist ideas. The very word *identity,* as I said, refers to 'the same': something remaining 'the same', that is unchanging. Essentialist ideas about identity – and, as I have said, we are easily tempted to form them – thus limit the actual diversity of humans to a list of relatively clear-cut, fixed identities.

3.1.2 Numerical understanding of diversity

Talking about diversity in terms of identities alludes also to a numerical understanding of diversity, similar to the concept of biodiversity that I mentioned earlier: people are ascribed identity categories and then the diversity of a group is determined by counting the number of categories, along a number of set dimensions, that are represented within the group. A group, then, seems to be more diverse when a higher number of different social identities is represented in this group. One problem of this approach is that it might lead to partial blindness to diversity problems: A group that is relatively diverse, according to this approach, along the ethnicity dimension might still be completely homogenous on another dimension, say gender. Thus, we might be content too quickly with the diversity of a group that we supposedly achieved. Of course, we can mitigate this problem by adding more dimensions to list, but we can never fully overcome it. The lack of diversity might function as an indicator that 'something is wrong' on a deeper level, but the supposed diversity is never an indicator that 'everything is all right'.

3.1.3 The normativity of typicality

Of course, we do not need to perceive identities as fixed, we could in fact pursue a form of 'strategic essentialism', a term coined by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988). To use essentialism 'strategically', according to Spivak, is to only provisionally accept identities and their essentialist foundations in order to promote certain political ends via the idea of collective representation – while knowing that there is no such thing as a collective identity with clear-cut features.[13] However, even if we do not understand identities as fixed, as traditional essentialism would, social identities come with certain ideas of who meets their defining characteristics and how it is decided whether somebody meets them or not. This in turn leads to a complication: identity categories tend

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For a short historiography of race essentialism see Appiah (2018, 105-134). For a defense of a different kind of essentialism, namely a human and historical sensitive one, see, for instance, Nussbaum (1992).

[13] Spivak has since then repudiated the concept of strategic essentialism because of the many ways in which it was misused (Spivak 1989). See also Spivak (2008, 260).

to lead to a homogenous understanding of groups.[14] And even if people are aware that groups are rarely monolithic, there is another problem: "Once identities exist, people tend to form a picture of a typical member of that group. Stereotypes develop" (Appiah 2018, 12). This seems to hold, even if members of the societal group in question only acted in a strategic manner 'as if' they would have a collective identity. Even if we do not perceive identities as innate and fixed as traditional essentialism has it, ideas of a 'typical' member will still develop. One problem here is: typicality is often mistaken for normativity or develops its own normativity, as Steffen Mau suggests: "Even very broad and multi-dimensionally defined standards exert a uniformity pressure on those which they do not cover or not adequately or which are regarded as 'deviating' or 'deficient'" (Mau 2017, 227f.; my translation). And one might want to add: the uniformity pressure Mau talks about is also exerted on those who are in fact covered by a particular category. Others and I will form ideas about what I should and should not do to prove myself as a member in good standing of a particular social group.[15] Atypicality is then, in turn, often perceived as deviance from the norm and when that happens, diverging from the standard gets more difficult – psychologically, because it is not in line with my social identity and my ideas about how I am supposed to behave, and socially, because others might, for instance, limit my options or sanction my diverging behavior, in line with their ideas of what I am supposed to act like in accordance with my ascribed identity. That is one reason why social identities are so powerful – and it is one additional reason why we should be careful when applying them to policies, which brings us to the next concern: the Medusa Syndrome.

3.1.4 Identity and the Medusa Syndrome

In Greek mythology, Medusa was a Gorgon, a dreadful creature, usually depicted as a winged human female with snakes in place of hair. The interesting thing about Medusa, for our purposes here, is that everyone who looks her in the face turns to stone, according to the myth. Appiah refers to this feature when formulating what he has called the "Medusa syndrome". In his critique of Charles Taylor's "politics of recognition" (1992), Appiah turns the perspective of Medusa's gaze around, so that it is Medusa's gaze that turns its object to stone: "We know that acts of recognition, and the civil apparatus of such recognition, can sometimes ossify the identities that are their object. Because here a gaze can turn to stone, we can call this the Medusa Syndrome" (2005, 110). Appiah's point is that by – especially political – recognition of certain identities, these identities

[14] For literature on this topic see Hofmann (2012, 31).

[15] Deviance, therefore, also relates to ideas on "who needs to change", as Beebee noted (2013): The person who deviates from the image of a typical member of a group is supposed to be the one who needs to change, because of the supposed normativity of the typicality. The processes that generate and perpetuate a certain typicality are rarely discussed or criticized – sometimes people are not even aware of them being processes open to alteration.

lose their fluidity and become a defining feature of a person. So, "politics of difference" (Young 1990) or "politics of recognition" (Taylor 1992), while setting out to rectify situations in society that we deem unjust – and rightly so – might turn out to magnify injustice by entrenching and amplifying the relevance of categories that we originally wanted to overcome: we are trying to take something into account but by our very attempt, we manifest, solidify, ossify the categories that we use to take diversity into account in the first place – thereby turning the conceptualization into a limitation. These limitations might in turn have negative, or even oppressive side-effects for some. So, there is, on the one hand, the danger of essentialism, that we might perceive diversity categories as a given, never changing essence of something or someone. On the other hand, even if we don't essentialize diversity dimensions, that is even if we are aware that they have to do with processes of social ascription and construction, that they are fluid and ever-changing, through a politics of recognition – or by embedding diversity dimensions into technical infrastructures as I will discuss in the next section – we ossify them; we turn them to stone.

3.1.5 Conceptualizing Identities

If we conceive diversity in terms of identities, we tend to lose fluidity – and often also ambiguity: conceptualizing identities entails a rigid determination of who belongs who does not belong. This process tends to involve the eradication of ambiguities. To get working concepts we have a need to make them less ambiguous, sometimes even unambiguous – thus losing the contradictions, the unsortable, the in-betweens. To conceptualize something means to make it distinguishable from other things (cf. Adorno 1966, 21ff.).[16] That also implies that by conceptualizing, we lose what "is suppressed, ignored and discarded" (Adorno 1966, 21) by these concepts. This is not simply a problem of a poorly conceived concept that could be remedied by a better concept. Conceptualizing anything, and also social identities, always, and necessarily so, leaves things out of the picture (cf. also Heesen, Reinhardt & Schelenz, forthcoming). Concepts are not identical with their objects – by definition they cannot capture the manifold, the fullness of life, that is e.g. the diversity of people.

[16] The perception of something as *per se* unclassifiable is of course often the source of intellectual discomfort. A discomfort that Bauman described powerfully in *Modernity and Ambivalence*: The unclassifiables "do not question just one opposition here and now; they question oppositions as such, the very principle of the opposition, the plausibility of dichotomy it suggests and feasibility of separation it demands. They unmask the brittle artificiality of division. They destroy the world. They stretch the temporary inconvenience of 'not knowing how to go on' into a terminal paralysis. They must be tabooed, disarmed, suppressed, exiled physically or mentally – or the world may perish" (Bauman 1991, 58f.).

3.2 Two Objections

I would like to discuss two objections that one might want to raise at this point. Firstly, one might want to argue that we can fix the problems discussed above by adding more categories. After all, if the problem (or at least part of it) is that existing categories do not fully capture the richness of diversity, or fail to appropriately classify the in-betweens and the unsortables, then perhaps we simply need a more finely-grained system of classification. Moreover, if we are *defining* diversity in terms of social identities, it would seem that enriching our classification with a more fine-grained set of social identities, will increase diversity itself.

This in many ways is the approach taken, for instance, by Facebook in adding more gender options (cf. Heine 2014; William 2014). And there is a legitimacy to this approach: finding ways for taking the apparent plurality into account is, as one might want to argue, better than just ignoring it. In this way, this approach can be understood as an act of symbolic recognition. With regard to increasing diversity, the basic idea behind this approach is: if we have more categories to choose from, or boxes to tick, we will not only have a more adequate picture of a group's diversity, but we will also increase diversity. However, the contrary seems to be the case: boxes in fact reduce diversity. Concepts, as we have seen, always limit ambiguity and diversity. So, if we add more boxes to tick, what we get are more boxes to tick, but not necessarily more diversity. In fact, the opposite is more likely to be the case, because of the inherent uniformity pressure of categorization and standardization mentioned above. Thus, this approach does not solve the underlying (conceptual) problems. The above-mentioned problems cannot be solved by more options. Or, in the words of Thomas Bauer: "The attempt to create unambiguity in an ambiguous world at least by sorting the diversity in the world as precisely as possible into boxes within which there is the greatest possible unambiguity is more likely to displace diversity than to promote it" (Bauer 2018: 81, my translation). All the problems I have raised above would still apply to the amended – though more refined – categorization.

Secondly, one might think that identities are more flexible than I have portrayed them. Maybe we cannot capture the diversity of human life with more categories, but couldn't we acknowledge that we can remake and unmake identities performatively (cf. West/Zimmerman 1987, Butler 1988)? Identities are, as has been argued, institutionalized and re-enacted in daily routines. Therefore, they are not stable and unchangeable – and I would agree with that. However, as these authors have pointed out as well, social identities are also intersubjectively validated and reaffirmed (West/Zimmerman 1987, 131). Their emergence – and change – is in a complex way contextually and intersubjectively shaped and not solely a matter of a person's volition, as we have seen above. Therefore, the unmaking and remaking of social identities has to work with and relate to the meaning and understanding of certain identities, for instance

gender, that we encounter in various societal realms. We can change and shift meanings, but we have to start in a given context. Social identities are not *creationes ex nihilo.*

The problems of an identity-based concept become quite apparent, for instance, in a growing subfield of applied ethics. To illustrate what I have said so far, I would like to turn to data ethics and its take on diversity for a moment.

3.3 Diversity in Data Ethics

Despite the obvious diversity of humans, technology in general and digital solutions in particular still struggle to take diversity into account. Thus, diversity here poses not only an ethical but also a computational challenge. Computer scientists and developers are more and more aware of this problem and try to tackle it by developing the engineering methodologies, algorithms and social interaction protocols to empower diversity-aware machine mediated interactions between people.[17] But what kind of diversity is presupposed here?

A diversity concept that is mainly built on relatively fixed social identities in many ways fits the constraints of computerization more easily: computerization has to deal with a trade-off between over-complexity and over-simplification. To yield usable results, computerization needs to minimize complexity. Therefore, it employs labelling processes by defining relatively fixed categories, target variables, and class labels. What is more: "Digital signals differ from analogue signals in that they consist of individual values, not a continuum" (Lenzen 2020, 15; my translation). This means that in order to work digitally I have to break down reality into individual signals. So if I want to digitally capture and represent the diversity of people, I have to make it digitally readable accordingly, i.e. break it down into digitally processable individual values: A diversity understanding that is based on distinct social identities that people ascribe to themselves – as in the list of gender options Facebook offers its users – instead of, for instance, multidimensional overlapping spectra and continua, fits this approach quite well.

These categories and labels based on social identities used in the models and users profiles do not – necessarily – presuppose an essentialist world view. Still, by embedding them into the technical infrastructure of, say, a social platform, they become part of the fabric of the inner workings of that technical entity. In that way, very similar to the effects of the Medusa Syndrome described above, they get ossified. At best, this approach leads to a merely numerical, and therefore limited, understanding of human diversity: the more boxes I can check for a given group, the more diverse this group is supposed to be, while in fact a whole lot of options and possibilities are excluded via the conceptualization and operationalization. The compatibility of the above-mentioned approach with

[17] One example is the current EU-Horizon 2020 project "WeNet – The internet of us": https://www.internetofus.eu/, accessed April 28 2020.

computerization, however, might also come at a much higher cost: when you work with prefixed labels, statistical discrimination and the reenforcement of stereotypes are usually afoot (cf. Heesen, Reinhardt & Schelenz, forthcoming), thus, perpetuating and increasing societal discrimination.

Contrary to algorithmic computerized decisions, in machine learning these labels and their criteria are not prefixed, but emerge in the training process. At first glance, this might seem, therefore, advantageous. After all, the categories are not pre-fixed, but learned. Here, however, we run into a different problem: machine learning systems usually work with data that originate from the daily routines of people or databases in science, industry, and administration. These data contain biases. If a machine is trained on biased data, it will 'learn' the biases from the data set and reproduce them in the decision-making process. To give an example from picture analysis and image search: In 2016, a tweet by Karbir Alli about the outcome of a search for "three black teenagers" in Google Images led to a storm of protest (Beuth 2016), because this search led to a series of mugshots. A search for "three white kids" in contrast showed mostly pictures of happy white kids as a result (cf. Zuiderveen Borgesius 2018, 16). Google's response was that these search results merely reflected the portrayal of the respective subpopulation across the web and the frequency of that portrayal (York 2016) – and thus the demonstrated unwillingness to acknowledge that reproducing these biases is not a neutral position, it is a choice. What is often missed when this case is discussed, but was also explained by York, is the fact that this frequency also has to do with the market situation for stock photos. It is also a question about demand and supply, market access and purchasing power: there are more pictures of happy white kids on the internet than of happy black kids, because the market for images of happy white kids is much bigger than for images of happy black kids. That is why more stock pictures that are assumed to fit the first label are found on the web. This, in turn, is one reason why when you search for "three black teenagers", this search inquiry is less likely to be matched with pictures of three happy black kids, whereas when you search "three white kids", pictures of happy white kids come up as search results more frequently in Google Images (cf. York 2016). The internet is full of the latter, because they sell – in turn normalizing what 'happy kids' look like.

So, because of a particular labelling process alongside a biased data set, namely the web, we have a search result which many people will – consciously or subconsciously – take for an accurate, or nearly accurate depiction of the world and how it works, though in many ways it only reflects purchasing power and problematic purchasing preferences. The pattern that the Google Images search made apparent does not presuppose a fixed correlation, but even though the ascribed categories are not perceived as fixed by the system, they ossify in the process of their application – and might in the end be (mis)taken as features of the group in question by the end user. Other different, but similar, examples can be found for mortgage applications (Bartlett et al. 2019), or predictive

policing (Lum/Isaac 2016), and many other cases where we deal with computerized decision-making procedures that are informed by machine learning, or algorithmic models.

What does this have to do with diversity? Well, patterns, like concepts – or prefixed categories – reduce ambiguity and focus on the typical, thereby often cutting off the edges and ignoring the margins – while not even realizing that edges and margins are created by defining a core or kernel or a set of necessary features. What is more, machine learning does not start from a neutral place. By working with massive amounts of data, it reproduces the labels we use, the stereotypes and biases we have, and it mirrors and possibly amplifies the injustices in our respective societies.

To sum up: a diversity concept that is based on identities invites essentialist approaches and ideas about typicality, which often turn identities into a rather limiting concept. Even without an essentialist grounding, a diversity concept that is identity-based is in danger of facilitating the ossification of its categories, leaving many things and especially the unsortable and the ambiguous out of the picture. If we believe that we can fix these problems by simply coming up with better concepts and more precise categories, we are mistaken. This isn't simply a problem of poorly conceived categories that could be remedied by creating better categories or better labels. It is a problem of rigidly categorizing people – as conceiving diversity in terms of social identities does. Though the meaning and significance of social identities can be shifted and changed, they cannot capture the whole of human diversity.

A diversity understanding that uses (relatively) fixed categories like social identities and buys into their correlation with other features and characteristics is, in many ways, compatible with the needs of computerized systems, but the danger of essentialism and the Medusa Syndrome can only be mitigated by an understanding of diversity that does not fixate categories, no matter how many and how nuanced they are. If we want to paint an adequate picture of human diversity, making up more and more nuanced categories won't help. What we need instead is an approach that allows for dynamic solutions that leave room for fluidity and ambiguity.

4. Where should we go from here? Diversity, ambiguity and ambiguity tolerance

Where should we go from here? Up to now I have talked about the dangers of an identity-based concept of diversity that I suppose to be currently predominant. In order to avoid the pitfalls of an identity-based concept of diversity, what might an alternative understanding of diversity look like?

My criticism of an identity-based understanding of diversity of course already suggested some of the elements and aspects of the alternative that I would favor. In the following I will, therefore, in a first step summarize the points that have already been addressed and then build on them to formulate a

tentative sketch of an alternative understanding. A central term for the understanding of diversity that I will propose is 'ambiguity': In formulating this alternative, I will in a second step take up considerations of Bauer on cultural ambiguity and apply them to our question of how to conceive of diversity. To make this alternative understanding of diversity effective in practice, however, we need something called 'ambiguity tolerance', a term Bauer borrows from psychology, that I will elaborate in a third step. In a fourth, and final, step, I will take up this concept and outline what an ambiguity tolerance-based policy, for example in Human Resources, could entail.

4.1 What do we have so far?

Though diversity is often talked about in terms of identities, it does not need to be understood in this way. An alternative perspective on diversity would "accept the contradictory, the vague, the ambiguous, the unsortable, the inexplicable as the normal case of human existence – at least respect it, perhaps even endorse it" (Bauer 2018, 79, my translation). It would not try to sort the manifold of human diversity into clear-cut boxes and would thus avoid many of the pitfalls of an identity-based concept. Appiah closes his book on social identities *The Lies that Bind* with a quote from Publius Terentius Afer: "Homo sum, humani nihil a me alienum puto. I am human, I think nothing human alien to me" (2018, 219). If we take humanity in its manifold, contradicting and ambiguous dimensions as the basic unit of our understanding, we will probably gain a much richer understanding of what human diversity entails.

By not conceptualizing social identities as its basic units, an alternative understanding of diversity would avoid eradicating ambiguities and it would not invite the essentialization and ossification of identities. What is more, it would avoid the formation of ideas about typical members of certain social groups and their accompanying prescriptive side-effects. In that way, it would get much closer to a proper understanding of the fullness of human life and, therefore, of human diversity – with its in-betweens, its fluidity and the astonishing manifold individuality of humans.

The diversity of humans is, as we have seen, multidimensional and multilayered and not easily pinned down to a number of fixed categories. In many ways it is unsortable and unfathomable. A proper understanding of human diversity furthermore needs to be aware that aspects of persons change their meaning and relevance to others and themselves depending on the context: aspects of me have different connotations in different contexts. Their meaning also might change over time. This might be due to societal changes in the perception of these aspects, but also to changes on an individual level: my self-understanding changes over time simply because I live my life and make new experiences, gain new insights, err. It might not form a clear picture. It might even be contradictory, for instance in the way that Walt Whitman described in *Song of Myself* (see epigraph). A proper diversity understanding thus has to

acknowledge, as we have seen, the flexibility and fluidity of human self-understanding and its often contradictory character. A further point that became especially relevant when we were discussing data ethics is that, contrary to the requirements of digital processing, human diversity is not laid out in distinct, individual values. As an element of the analogue world, human diversity comes in spectra and continua. Since human diversity does not come along in clearly defined and distinct categories, it cannot be counted. It is non-numerical. This of course raises the question of how we are to measure diversity at all, then, if not via some categories. I will turn to the question of how the radical conceptional shift that I am proposing here would play out in practice, but first I would like to elaborate the concepts of ambiguity and ambiguity tolerance a bit further.

4.2 Ambiguity

The term ambiguity has already come up several times throughout this paper, but what does it mean? The term was originally used in linguistics. Here, it is commonly understood as a property of expressions of natural language – a word, a phrase, a statement – which allows for several plausible interpretations. Bauer takes the concept of ambiguity familiar from linguistics and applies it to entire epochs, cultures and societies. Bauer argues that we should broaden our understanding of ambiguity to cover all cases where people create or are confronted with ambiguity (cf. Bauer 2011, 26f.). He defines cultural ambiguity, therefore, as follows: "A phenomenon of cultural ambiguity exists when, over a long period of time, a term, a mode of action or an object is simultaneously assigned two opposing or at least two competing, distinctly different meanings, when a social group draws norms and assignments of meaning for individual areas of life simultaneously from opposing or strongly divergent discourses, or when different interpretations of a phenomenon are accepted simultaneously in a group, whereby none of these interpretations can claim exclusive validity" (Bauer 2011, 27; my translation). Bauer's wide understanding of ambiguity does not only refer to linguistic phenomena and, thus, can be easily applied to various questions that arise in human action and interaction.

As Bauer puts it, ambiguity is simply everywhere: "People are constantly exposed to sensations and experiences that allow different interpretations, appear unclear, make no conclusive sense, seem to contradict each other, trigger contradictory feelings, seem to suggest contradictory actions" (Bauer 2018, 12). Human diversity is, as Bauer would argue, one of these experiences that have this effect: It allows for different interpretations, it appears unclear, it does not make unambiguous sense, it seems to be self-contradicting at times, it might trigger contradictory feelings, might seem to suggest contradictory actions. Human diversity is, thus, exactly that: a highly ambiguous phenomenon. How people react and deal with ambiguous phenomena is a subject of the research on ambiguity tolerance.

4.3 Ambiguity tolerance

A diversity understanding that puts ambiguity at its centre requires, in practice, something that in psychology has been called ambiguity tolerance: the ability to endure and cope with ambiguities, insoluble contradictions and uncertainties (cf. Frenkel-Brunswik 1949). "An ambiguous situation may be defined," as Budner put it, "as one which cannot be adequately structured or categorized by the individual because of lack of sufficient cues" (Budner 1962, 30). Persons with a high level of ambiguity tolerance "(a) seek out ambiguity, (b) enjoy ambiguity, and (c) excel in the performance of ambiguous tasks" (Mac Donald 1970, 791).

Ambiguity tolerance helps us to live with the fact that human diversity is not readily pinned down to a number of categories – even if there are more and more of them; that human diversity comes with a lot of uncertainties, contradictions and often with "a lack of sufficient cues". Instead of domesticating these ambiguities – for instance by sorting them into predefined diversity categories – we would gratefully accept and even embrace them (cf. Bauer 2011, 13).

4.3 Ambiguity and ambiguity tolerance in practice

How would the conceptual shift that I am proposing here play out in practice? One might think that the main problem lies in the categorization of social identities. Couldn't we just stick to the same categories that we are used to, but simply not consider them as identities? Instead, we could still deploy them, but conceive of them as mere categories as it were. After all, we do need some categories, if we want to measure diversity, don't we?

An approach like that might mitigate some of the worries about an identity-based concept, but it wouldn't solve all of them. Many of the problems discussed above apply to categories as such, or at least to their application to humans. Very much like social identities, categories applied to humans in general are often mistaken to convey something essential about a person who is supposed to fit the category. They also tend to develop normative power and ideas about a typical member of that category. They leave out the margins and are relatively static. So the concerns and worries raised above also apply, after all, to categorizing people not only in terms of social identities, but to social categorization simpliciter. In this way, conceiving diversity as a matter of membership of social categories at all, whether or not we conceive of those categories in terms of social identities, appears problematic from this point of view.

That does not make them irrelevant: The use of categories like gender can help uncover discrimination structures and patterns. A Human Resources equal opportunities monitoring or audit, for instance, might look at the numbers of men and women in a company or a university department and see that they differ hugely, or might correlate gender to payment and thus uncover a gender

pay gap. Categories can, thus, help to identify who is missing, who is not present in a department, a working group, or the management floor. They can help to uncover disadvantages, such as systematically lower pay or a higher workload for the same pay. In these cases comes into play, what Mau has called the "emancipatory potential of numericality [Zahlenhaftigkeit]" (Mau 2017, 19): through categories and their quantification, disadvantages can be uncovered. In this way, the lack of identity-based diversity can function as an indicator of discrimination and injustice. Through the enormous power of numbers in our world these days, these numbers, thus, can lead in turn to concrete action and important structural changes.

However, notwithstanding the usefulness of categories in cases like that, what they measure is not human diversity. In fact, the quantifications that go hand in hand with categorizations in these examples lead, as pointed out above, to a reduction of a multilayered and ambiguous reality (cf. also Mau 2017, 227) and, thus, often counteract diversity through their inherent basic functioning, the various misinterpretations of categories, and their tendency to live a life of their own in developing their own normativity.

So, if we don't deploy categories, then, neither understood as social identities nor as mere categories, how do we ensure diversity, in for instance a company, without them? The answer to this question has various levels. Firstly, there is the familiar freedom from discrimination. This freedom of course is only the very baseline that needs to be met. Maybe it might turn out to be useful to employ sociodemographics and quantifications here in monitoring processes. My suspicion is, however, that one should not rely too heavily on quantitative research methods but also employ qualitative methods. The presence or absence of a sociodemographic group by and in itself, as mentioned above, might be an indicator of discrimination, even an important one, but it is not the only factor to be taken into account.[18] And it surely does not work the other way around: even if all the groups that we usually think of as being discriminated against, and if correlated data show no sign of disadvantage, it might nevertheless be the case that people are discriminated against, but have developed, for instance, coping mechanisms to counterbalance the negative effects of discriminatory structures and behavior.

Accessibility understood broadly could be a second level: Terkessidis, for instance, has formulated a broad understanding of accessibility. It leaves "ideas such as norm and deviation, identity and difference" behind and takes the individual "as a bundle of differences" as the starting point (Terkessidis 2010, 126; my translation). Accessibility thus understood does apply to everybody in their individuality – "as a bundle of differences".

[18] On the question of the extent to which diversity can be analyzed without immediately running the risk of establishing precisely these identifying factors, and on the implementation of appropriate organizational structures, see for instance Hanappi-Egger (2012).

Furthermore – and this is the third level I want to hint at here – ambiguity tolerance seems to be something that we can practice. How this works, and whether there are methods that could be applied to HR, is still under-researched, but I think it would be worthwhile pursuing these questions further. If we understand better how ambiguity tolerance works and how it can be learned and practised, we might also be able to tell what would endorse ambiguity tolerance in the workplace and how we can bring about an ambiguity-tolerant and therefore diversity-welcoming work environment.

5. Conclusions

In the diversity discourse, an identity-based understanding of diversity is prevalent. Though it has many strategic and political advantages, it is also unfortunate in many ways. In any case, it does not paint an adequate picture of the diversity of humans. Therefore, I have argued for an alternative way of approaching the subject matter at hand, one that stresses the unsortable, the contradictory, and the ambiguous aspects of our (human) existence. I have argued that if we want to do justice to human diversity, we need to understand it not in terms of a finely structured system of different branches with even more subbranches, adding more and more nuanced categories. We should rather try to conceive of human diversity as a fluid and ambiguous phenomenon: something that calls for ambiguity tolerance rather than for yet another category.

Does that mean that we should get rid of the talk about the social identities that people so passionately fight about? On the contrary. Social identities are a way for people to make sense of themselves and others, they fulfill important functions in societies, they can help to describe problems at hand and point to injustices suffered. We can use them as a shorthand for a complex phenomenon, or, strategically in political debates. We should not, however, give them too much power over ourselves – and should try to limit them in their tendency to live a life of their own.

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