

Introduction: The Anatomy of Belonging

A Modern Theme?

Belonging is an idea that is fundamental to our social existence, both as individuals and as collectives. It is an idea that enables our interpersonal relations, shapes our communal imaginations, and inspires in us feelings of solidarity. At the same time, the idea of belonging also motivates us and situates us within the chaotic networks of meanings and social spaces.

As many commentators note, the endeavor to define and conceptualize the idea of belonging is a relatively modern trend, reliant on the presumption that a sense of belonging to other individuals or groups is crucial to our distinctiveness, identity, and meaningfulness. Nonetheless, belonging as a theme that is central to the human existence is certainly not a new one. The problem of belonging is one of the most ancient themes to trouble the human mind.

Human belonging has been approached and valued differently in different times. While in modern times the idea of belonging is deemed a crucial condition for the development and socialization of the individual and a mechanism that enables social interactions and integration, in premodern times it was conceived as an organizational idea by which the social order was described, maintained, and controlled.

Throughout the twentieth century, the idea of belonging was one of the key topics that attracted the attention of psychologists, sociologists, political theorists, and scholars of law and ethics. Belonging was acknowledged from the 1930s as a significant component of the healthy development and functioning of mature persons. At first, it was declared a crucial quality for the development of the individual's capacity to integrate in social affairs.¹ Later on, belonging was defined as one the fundamental human needs² or as a necessary condition for

¹ Alfred Adler's theory suggested that individuals' sociability is conditioned on the "experience of belonging" through three ties: to place, society, and marriage. Adler also presumed that childhood antecedents were critical to experiencing belonging in adulthood. See Ferguson, "Adler's Innovative Contributions."

² Abraham Maslow (*Theory of Human Motivation*) placed belonging as a midlevel fundamental need equal to love in his hierarchy of human motivation, arguing that once the human physiological needs of food, shelter, and sex are fulfilled, the psychological needs of belonging

well-being and healthy development.³ Feminist psychology introduced observations and theories about connections between various forms of belonging and gender biases.⁴ Finally, with the rise of global migration toward the end of the twentieth century, alongside the newly emerged discourse of belonging politics, the idea of belonging captured the interests of sociologists, political theorists,⁵ and scholars of environmental studies.⁶

Some writers argue that beyond the modern focus on belonging as a crucial precondition for human sociability, the emerging senses of place and space⁷ have vastly changed the traditional meanings and modes of belonging.⁸ Conversely, others stress that modernity, or perhaps postmodernity, is marked not only by novel senses of belonging but also by absence of belonging or the experience of losing one's sense of belonging.⁹

As a result of these approaches, belonging came to be perceived as subject to moral and political reasoning, and hence a vital theme to be treated in the fields of law, ethics, and political theory. Yet despite the vast discussions of belonging as a multidisciplinary theme, it is difficult to escape the impression that the idea of belonging continues to suffer from conceptual vagueness and a dearth of

and love take primacy in a person's motivation. Once belonging and love have been satisfied, the human need for self-actualization becomes primary, followed by self-transcendence.

³ Santokh Anant ("Need to Belong," 21) suggested that a sense of belongingness was crucial for human well-being and healthy social, emotional, and mental growth. He emphasized the interdependency between the personal experience of belonging and social identification, the former being dependent on the latter.

⁴ Baumeister and Sommer ("What Do Men Want?") found that women were oriented toward close forms of dyadic relationships as a means of fulfilling sociality and belonging, whereas men pursued attachments through a greater number of acquaintance-level groups and relationships.

⁵ Yuval-Davis ("Belonging") proposed that belonging should be viewed not as a "fixed state of being" but as a dynamic state of affairs. She suggested that belonging varied according to three factors: the individual's social location, attachment to collectives, and attachment to ethical and political value systems.

⁶ Linn Maree Miller ("Being and Belonging") argued that belonging-identity relations are dependent on congruence between three connections: to a social community, to historical ancestors, and to locality.

⁷ These senses are experienced and designed by modern phenomena, such as visions of globalization, mass migration, worldwide cyberspace, international trade, and climate change. All of these deeply challenge our traditional senses of belonging, which were based on territoriality, nationality, or religious affiliation.

⁸ "Movement has become fundamental to modern identity, and an experience of non-place (beyond 'territory' and 'society') an essential component of everyday life. . . . Exile, emigration, banishment, labor migrancy, tourism, urbanization and counter-urbanization are the central motifs of modern culture, while being rootless, displaced between worlds, living between a lost past and a fluid present, are perhaps the most fitting metaphors for the journeying modern consciousness" (Rappport and Dawson, *Migrants of Identity*, 5–6, 23).

⁹ Such writers characterize modern human experience as one of "homelessness." Some stress the emergence of the "homeless mind" (Peter L. Berger, Brigitte Berger, and Kellner, *The Homeless Mind*, 138), some observe homelessness as "coming to be the destiny of the world" (Heidegger, "Letter on Humanism," 219), and others emphasize the imaginative aspects of the idea of belonging and describe "being at home" as fictional nostalgia: "This homeless mind is hard to bear, and there is widespread nostalgia for a condition of being 'at home' in society, with oneself and with the universe: for homes of the past that were socially homogeneous, communal, peaceful, safe and secure" (Rappport and Dawson, *Migrants of Identity*, 31).

satisfying accounts.¹⁰ This discontent is indeed troubling, and it is an explicit motive behind the studies presented in this book.

A point of departure for our attempt to better understand belonging is the observation that most contemporary discussions overlook the historical and cultural backdrops against which ideas of belonging developed and tend to approach belonging as a universal, metacontextual idea. Nevertheless, the semantic baggage of previous perceptions of belonging clearly, if often unconsciously, underlies and fuels contemporary discourses of belonging. Therefore, we choose to integrate the conceptual analysis of belonging with historical, or genealogical, investigations.

The studies in this volume trace cases where ideas of belonging were reflected, contended, or modified through legal changes or exegetical accounts, by intellectual endeavors, polemics, or seismic shifts in worldviews. Each section of the book addresses a discrete context in which belonging is a pivotal component – the familial, the legal, and the political – and focuses on important moments of grappling with ideas and expressions of belonging. Among these are moments of change from substance to structure, from materialism to mentalism, from personal to spatial, from theosophy to legality, and from collectivity to individuality.

The cases range across different historical periods, cultural contexts, and religious traditions, from eleventh-century Mediterranean theological legal debates to twentieth-century statist liberalism in Western societies. They address independent discursive contexts (or in Foucauldian terminology, ways of speaking) that are in no way continuous or intertwined, and no pretense is made of a link between them. Each case is an independent demonstration of a distinct effort to contend with the theme of belonging in a different setting, driven by that setting's particular concerns and challenges. The methodology thus is not only that of a conceptual genealogy that looks at continuities or transitions of a singular idea, concept, or term.¹¹ The focus is on cases and discourses that construct independent chapters of the conceptual history of the meanings of belonging.

Two major observations arise from the analysis of these unconnected cases. The first of these concerns the character of the search for the foundations of belonging. It is a search governed by opposing trends: an inclination to ground belonging in tangible facts and a contrary acknowledgment that belonging is in fact predicated a product of the human imagination. The former trend represents the tendency to view the idea of belonging in essentialized terms; the

¹⁰ Floya Anthias, "Belongings in a Globalising and Unequal World"; Marco, Antonsich, "Searching for Belonging"; Kathleen Mee and Sarah Wright, "Geographies of Belonging."

¹¹ One might distinguish between Nietzschean genealogical methodology and the archeological method of Foucault. While the former traces the developmental wriggles and twists of a term, idea, or concept, the latter develops an attentiveness to the complexities and the inner dynamic and relationships in distinct discursive frameworks.

latter sounds the call to de-essentialize belonging and to view it through a pragmatic lens.

The second observation is about the elusiveness of belonging as a concept. The presumption that belonging is a fixed, universal, and metacontextual idea is misleading. As we closely read different appearances of the idea of belonging and treatments of it, we come to recognize how differentiated it truly is. In different contexts, through different semantic networks, the idea of belonging is associated with various other ideas, and accordingly changes form, disperses, or dilates. The anatomy of belonging thus further requires a treatment of adjacent ideas and the semantic borderlines between *us* and *them*. A salient example of one common confusion is the tendency to commingle ideas of belonging with the idea of identity. In the following discussion, we will provide a brief conceptual exposition of these two observations.

Conceptual Foundations

Being and Longing

The concept of belonging is multidimensional and multifunctional. It regulates and organizes the relationship between an individual and other individuals or groups. It is a concept that proclaims our existence beyond our corporal borders and subjective experiences. With the concept of belonging, we conceive our existence as social beings, and with it we situate ourselves within the social spaces that surround us. The concept confirms the connection between our internal atomistic consciousness and the external social order in which we dwell. It is the device that enables our sociability: the interaction between our subjectivity and the intersubjectivity that surrounds us.

As a concept, belonging contains an inner semantic connection between two modalities: a given aspect and an aspirational one. This delicate ambiguity is well demonstrated by the term, which simultaneously implies that belonging is about *being* part of something and about *longing* to be part of something. The concept of belonging thus discloses a restlessness, or persistent motion, inherent to human existence that is captured between belonging that is and belonging that is wished, or imagined, or ought to be.

The being–longing dialectic explains how the concept of belonging prescribes, and not only describes,¹² and how belonging has become in various contexts a thing to be regulated, an object of enforcement, and a source of morality that legitimizes rights and imposes duties. The same dialectic exposes the fact that belonging is about relating to, or being related to, something. Hence the familiar vocabulary of belonging and its use of terms such as *engagement*, *partaking*, and *membership*.

¹² The dialectic tension embodied in the concept of belonging traverses some of the most commonplace dichotomies and linguistic taxonomies, such as descriptive–normative, objective–subjective, real–imagined, and given–aspired.

Yet on what grounds is the concept of belonging, whether as being or as longing, intelligible? The plain answer to this question rests on the presumption that belonging is based on sharing something or having something in common. Belonging therefore is founded on an assumption of factual or aspirational mutual sameness.

Belonging as Sameness

The earliest expressions of the concept of belonging appear in the context of the problem of human solitude, where belonging is proposed as an answer. Reflections about human belonging can be traced to the rootstocks of Western civilization, where it captured the imagination of ancient mythical thought as well as philosophical accounts. In both instances, belonging was perceived as a relation between objects that have common or identical traits, belonging as sameness: One individual belongs to another if both share, or have in common, one or more traits. Similarly, an individual belongs to a set or group if the individual and the group have certain traits or properties that are the same.

Notably, the earliest mythical accounts of belonging as sameness appear in attempts to explain the human inclination to pair, or to couple, with another human being. In the ancient myths at the foundation of the Western tradition, the idea of belonging as sameness appears as a solution for the predicament of human solitude.¹³ The core idea with which this manifestation of belonging appears is the separation–individuation template, according to which existence as an individual is a result of a preceding separation. The concept of belonging is thus grounded in the unity that preceded the separation. The same sense is shared by the being–longing dialectic: a combined act of reminiscence of and aspiration to a presumed sameness or unity.

The view of human pairing as an elementary paradigm of belonging is a vital perspective entrenched in the Western mind since ancient times. The roots of this perspective independently appeared in the traditions that emerged from the Hebrew Bible as well as the Greek world. In both cases, myths that grapple with human solitude and the origins of the inclination to pair with other human beings emphasize the delusionary aspect of self-sufficient human existence. Both traditions share the view that despite human physical separateness, solitude and autonomous being do not reflect the true nature of human beings. The concern of belonging is thus deeply associated with discomfort with the idea of human solitude, which is resolved through coupling and belonging.

The protest of the Bible against the idea, or ideal, of human solitude is a demonstration of how the idea of belonging serves as a response to the

¹³ In various ancient contexts, human existence was equated to existence in a social framework, as with the famous Aristotelian definition of the human being as *homo politicus*. In ancient Latin, *to live* and *to be among men* are expressed the same way (*inter homines esse*), as are *to die* and *to cease to be among men* (*inter homines esse desinere*). See Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 7–8.

human solitude. The Bible narrates the predicament of human solitude as a fundamental problem that is intimately connected to the divine creation, and it does so in two versions, both from the divine point of view.

According to the first version, solitary human existence never was an option for humankind, which was from the beginning created as including two sexes.¹⁴ The second version, however, is more ambivalent. It expresses the possibility of human solitary as a more complex problem, narrating the creation of humankind as an experimental process of trial and error, or as a process of divine intents and regrets:

And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed. . . . Then the Lord God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him." So out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every beast of the field; but for the man there was not found a helper fit for him. So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh; and the rib which the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said, "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man." Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh.¹⁵

These verses depict the initial creation of humankind as solitary creatures as the original divine plan, which God ultimately deemed one that was "not good," or a failure.¹⁶ The scriptural description is clear about the deficiency of solitary human existence. The terminology of the latter part of the same verse – "I will make a helper fit for him" – seems to indicate that this was taken as a functional or operative disadvantage. Divine action then tried to resolve this fundamental deficit. The first attempt to rescue humankind from solitariness was by the creation of other beings: "So out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the air." This was found to be useless. In the second attempt, liberation from human solitude was achieved not by introducing an external thing "fit" for the human being but by dividing the human into two separate, yet deeply connected, beings.

This biblical narrative portrays human belonging as an amendment to the creation of human beings as solitary creatures. This mythical account illustrates that the human inclination to pair is reliant on the idea of belonging as

¹⁴ Genesis 5:2. Bible translations are those of the Revised Standard Version (RSV) unless otherwise noted.

¹⁵ Genesis 2:8, 18–24.

¹⁶ This statement resonates with the descriptions in the previous chapter, which depict all of creation as "good" and satisfactory (Gen. 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31). The discrepant account of the creation of humankind as solitary beings as "not good" designates it a failure.

sameness: individual human beings mutually belong because they are parts of the same entity. This notion is well expressed in the terminology that Adam is described as using to describe Eve: “bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh.” As we will see below, the notion of belonging as sameness and the separation–individuation template dictated the constructions of belonging in Jewish and Christian traditions throughout the Middle Ages.

The notion of belonging as sameness also predominated in ancient Greek thought, both in mythical representation and in philosophical articulation. The myth of androgyny, an account on the origins of sexual desires and human coupling, classifies three types of human pairing: male–male, female–female, and female–male.¹⁷ This approach too is about belonging as sameness. The three types of pairs, illustrating three genders, originally exist as three unseparated spherical creatures, each composed of one of these three pairs. This myth too identifies the human desire to pair with another human individual as an outcome of a failure, here not the failure of the divine creator, but that of primordial creatures who tried to defy the gods. As a result of the intervention of Zeus, the spherical bodies were cut into halves, and each half yearns for its mate. Human eros and the desire to pair originated in a unified existence, which reflects the aspiration to recover a lost unity that preceded separation. Here again, the existence of separated individuals does not reflect an essential detachment or solitude. Here again, the affinity between two matching individuals and their mutual belongingness result from their being parts of the same original entity.¹⁸

The embrace of belonging as sameness is a leitmotif in ancient Greek philosophy. The Platonic metaphysics of the participation¹⁹ of physical objects in eternal concepts or objects is a salient display of the notion of belonging as sameness; likewise, the relation between the parts and the whole in Aristotelian logic is a reflection of the same notion.²⁰ Despite the differences between Platonic and Aristotelian metaphysics, they agree that physical objects share the same properties as their corresponding concepts and the particulars participate in the whole.

Aristotelian thought associates the idea of selfness as well with the notion of belonging as sameness, and hence the Aristotelian conception of relatives and

¹⁷ Plato, *Symposium*, 189e–191e.

¹⁸ While both mythical frameworks embrace the notion of belonging as sameness, their overall orientations are at odds. While in the biblical context, human pairing is portrayed as deliberate divine design, in the Greek context it is a natural force consequential to divine intervention in the prior formation of human existence.

¹⁹ “When we say change is the same as itself, we speak in this way because of its participation in the same in relation to itself [*pros heautên*]” (*Sophist*, 256a–b). See Allen, “Participation and Predication,” 43–60; Nehamas, “Participation and Predication,” 343–374.

²⁰ The ontology of the whole and the parts also claims for the primacy and superiority of the whole upon its parts and that the whole is the cause of its parts: “in all things which have a plurality of parts, and which are not a total aggregate but a whole of some sort distinct from the parts, there is some cause” (Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 8.1045a).

friends as second selves. Aristotle objected to the equation of the ideal of self-sufficiency (αυτάρκεια) with solitude by claiming that friendship does not contradict or exclude self-sufficiency because a friend is in fact “another self” (ετερον αυτον).²¹

Aristotle proposal of kin belonging in terms of extended selfness is yet another expression of the notion of belonging as sameness – one that we will later see was pivotal to the constructions of kin belonging in medieval Karaite legal thought. Aristotle thus states that parenthood and siblinghood should be understood as the extended selfness of an individual:

Parents, then, love their children as themselves (for their issue are by virtue of their separate existence a sort of other selves) . . . and brothers love each other as being born of the same parents; for their identity with them makes them identical with each other (which is the reason why people talk of “the same blood”, “the same stock”, and so on). They are, therefore, in a sense the same thing, though in separate individuals.²²

Children are the “second selves” of their parents; by the same notion of belonging as sameness, siblings are “the same thing, though in separate individuals.” This idea is not only consistent with the organic metaphysics of the parts and the whole, but also an implementation of the latter. Accordingly, *to belong is to take part or to participate* in a broader organic order – a whole or self.

These Aristotelian concepts also indicate that the paradigmatic form of belonging may contain asymmetric causal relations. This is an important dimension of the idea of belonging as associated with two further relations – namely, authorship and ownership. For Aristotle, viewing the child as the parent’s “second self” is not unrelated to the fact that filial relations give the parent-producer ownership of the child-product, since “the product belongs to the producer.”²³ This conceptual link of belonging and ownership fueled and enhanced patriarchal patterns that endowed individuals perceived as original self with oppressive powers. Thus in Roman law, all women, children, and slaves of the *familia* were perceived as the extended self of the *paterfamilia* and hence his property and subject to his will. The linking of belonging and ownership was a major cause for the long heavy-handed history of patriarch-

²¹ “It is also disputed whether the happy person will need friends or not. It is said that those who are supremely happy and self-sufficient have no need of friends; for they have the things that are good, and therefore being self-sufficient they need nothing further, while a friend, being another self, furnished what a person cannot provide by her own effort; whence the saying, ‘When fortune is kind, what need of friends?’ But it seems strange, when one assigns all good things to a happy person, not to assign friends, who are thought the greatest of external goods” (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1169b1–5).

²² Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 8.12.1161b–1162a.

²³ “The originator feels his offspring to be his own more than the offspring do their begetter; for the product belongs to the producer (e.g., a tooth or hair or anything else to him whose it is), but the producer does not belong to the product, or belongs in a less degree” (*ibid.*).

alism, and one can only imagine how Western civilization would look if this conceptual link had been dismissed or a different pattern preferred. Be that as it may, the notion of belonging as sameness also molded the imagination of social and political orders and the modes of affiliation with them. Thus religious belonging, whether passive or active,²⁴ was construed in terms of being or becoming “members of a body” (μέλη τοῦ σώματος)²⁵ or “individually members one of another” (καθ’ εἰς ἀλλήλων μέλη).²⁶

Overall, the notion of belonging as sameness is deeply rooted in a comprehensive perspective of the parts and the whole, with ontological, ethical, political, and sociological aspects. Belonging is portrayed as an essential trait that is commonly marked by tangible signifiers, such as blood, semen, bone, and body. To a great extent, this essentialist notion of belonging as sameness predominated in Western traditions, where its Hellenic precursors found expressions in practice and theory. This is not to say, however, that deviation or dismantling of this notion is a modern phenomenon. One spectacular alternative to the essentialist understanding of belonging as sameness was introduced and developed in the social thought of Ibn Khaldun.

Imagined Sameness

Centuries after the passing of the ancient Greek philosophers, the great Arab thinker Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406) introduced an innovative, de-essentialized version of the notion of belonging as sameness. Instead of viewing the idea of belonging in terms of being and longing for some past unity, he suggested a functionalist and behaviorist view that takes its cue from metaphysics and the separation–individuation template. To Ibn Khaldun, the notion of belonging as sameness is not rooted in fundamental ontology. Instead, it comes from human imagination and motivation.

Ibn Khaldun’s model of belonging is found in his famous treatment of the concept of *‘asabiyyah*,²⁷ commonly translated as “group feeling,” “solidarity,” or “esprit de corps.”²⁸ Ibn Khaldun equates various types of belonging – kin ties, sponsorship, alliance, and neighborhood – to support his claim that the idea of belonging is an efficient imagination or in his words a “useful illusion” (*fayidat al-wahm*) that effects human feelings and motivates solidarity with others.

²⁴ The Eucharist is an act of belonging by which the believers partake in Christ and become parts of him: “The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a participation (κοινωνία) in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a participation (κοινωνία) in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake (μετέχομεν) of the one bread” (1 Cor. 10:16–17).

²⁵ 1 Corinthians 12:12; Ephesians 5:30. ²⁶ Romans 12:5.

²⁷ The term is derived from *‘asabah*, which denotes the male relatives in the male line, who are thus called because they strengthen and defend the person.

²⁸ See Halim et al., “Theory of *‘Asabiyyah*.”

Belonging, according to Ibn Khaldun, is to be understood in terms of imagination, emotivism, and operational efficiency. Belonging is merely a hypothesis that constructs an imagination which consequently stimulates feelings and emotions, and these last eventually lead to action. Ibn Khaldun illustrates his approach by reference to the meaning and the value of pedigrees, which do represent not an existing belonging but only a potential trigger for an action:

Pedigrees are useful only in so far as they imply the close contact that is a consequence of blood ties and that eventually leads to mutual help and affection. Anything beyond that is superfluous. For a pedigree is something imaginary and devoid of reality. Its usefulness consists only in the resulting connection and close contact. . . . In this sense, one must understand the remark, “Genealogy is something that is of no use to know and that it does no harm not to know.” This means that when common descent is no longer clear and has become a matter of scientific knowledge, it can no longer move the imagination and is denied the affection caused by group feeling. It has become useless.²⁹

This constructivist account of social cohesion is striking in contrast to post-modernist approaches and attitudes. More striking is that Ibn Khaldun’s emotivism concerns not only social institutions, such as sponsorship and alliance, but also what are commonly taken as the prelegal and presocial relations of blood ties (*silat al-rahim*) and kinship (*qurbaa*).

The presentation of the notion of belonging as sameness is thus detached from the ontological structure of the world. It is a concept not of factual sameness but of imaginary mindfulness. It is not a given and stable trait, but a fluid and goal-dependent organization created by human beings. Such a notion of belonging has been embraced by modern structuralist and constructivist trends that claimed to de-universalize and de-essentialize traditional categories of belonging.

It would be wrong to state that essentialized versions of belonging pushed aside the constructivist notions over the years. Despite modern structuralist tendencies, essentialist notions of belonging as sameness are widespread and accepted in modern times, in which they sustain discourses about various types of affiliations, belonging, and identity, such as those of nation, race, and gender. Essentialist notions of belonging are supported by modern genetic science, which represents anew the relativeness of individuals as a complex fact that is the outcome of encoded data.³⁰ At the same time, de-essentialized notions of belonging too are widely accepted, and widely absorbed and projected onto contemporary public debates. These notions of belonging encourage and enhance approaches to identity and belonging as fluid and interest-dependent ideas, as can be seen in identity politics.³¹

²⁹ Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah*, 98–99. ³⁰ See Franklin, “From Blood to Genes?”

³¹ Identity politics is defined as a type of political discourse typified by exclusive identity-based alliances. In such political discourse, identity is an organizing tool with which political claims, ideologies, and interests are framed. See Appiah, *The Lies That Bind*.