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IDENTITY AND LIBERAL POLITICS

THE LIES THAT BIND
RETHINKING IDENTITY
A PRÉCIS

BY

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A Précis

Kwame Anthony Appiah

Introduction

The Lies that Bind originated with a series of four lectures that I gave for radio broadcast by the BBC, both in Britain and, through the World Service, around the globe. The lectures were recorded in front of four audiences: first, in London, at the London School of Economics, two of whose four founders were my great-great-aunt, Beatrice Webb, and her husband Sidney; in Glasgow University, home to Adam Smith, one of my intellectual heroes; in Accra, the capital of the country where I grew up; and in New York on the campus of my own university.

As you can see, these talks were meant to be addressed to an audience that was neither academic nor local. That was one reason that the book, like the lectures, seeks to elucidate general ideas through narratives, fictional and historical, from many nations, and draws quite often on individual lives – and on moments in those lives – in which identities of one sort or another played a decisive

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role. Half a century of writing philosophy has persuaded me that stories often communicate ideas better than explicit discursive exposition.

I set myself two aims. First, to offer to a broad audience a general account of social identities, informed, to varying degrees, by philosophy, history, literature, and the social sciences; and second, to explore four such identities, in particular, religion, nationality, race, and culture. For the book I added a discussion of class, which struck me as an obvious lacuna, and prefaced the argument with a general discussion of how social identities work, a theoretical picture that lay behind the explorations in the lectures. Another source of identity, gender, weaves its way through the book, beginning with the first chapter, where various forms of gender identity – male and female, cis and trans, gay and straight – provide model cases for the general theory.

That, I think, is inevitable in any contemporary work on identity, because the most comprehensive and significant body of work on the subject has been the work of modern feminist philosophy, which was taking off when I was a young student of philosophy and has continued with increasing depth and sophistication ever since. The first central insight of that body of work, of course, was that we should make some sort of distinction between bodily differences, which arise from the approximate sexual dimorphism that our species shares with most other vertebrates, on the one hand, and the superstructure of consequences that societies build upon that corporeal infrastructure. Simone de Beauvoir wrote famously: "On ne naît pas femme: on le devient" (de Beauvoir 1949, 13). Whatever, exactly, she meant by that, the recognition that there are dimensions of being-a-woman that are not given by nature – in-born – but made in culture, through becoming, has taken hold outside the academy.

There are endless debates, of course, about how to make a sex-gender distinction and in what ways it depends on genetic or other biological differences associated, say, with the absence, in most males, of a second X chromosome. Still, however you draw the lines – and even if, as some would prefer, you deny that there are lines to be drawn (because the binary opposition is itself an artefact imposed on a reality that has no sharp boundaries) – it seems to me that this basic idea is enormously important.

For philosophers, at least in the traditions I grew up in, one instinctive response to an insight such as this, is to seek to generalize it: and that is one of the things the first chapter of the book, on classification, tries to do. In every identity, I argued, there was some set of properties, real or imagined, of human beings that plays the role that sex plays in the sex-gender analysis. It sets the ways in which people assign the labels that I claim are central to the way identities work. This idea – that labels are central, so that the correct account of any identity, will be, in some sense, nominalist – comes more from sociology (from what sociologists call "labelling theory") than from philosophy.[1] And it suggests two questions about any identity that sociologists have explored in meticulous detail: First, what do people do when they think of themselves under a label, when they think of themselves as, for example, cis, gay, male, American, post-Christian, Anglo-Ghanaian, upper middle class? (That would be me.) What is it, in short, to *identify* as a person of some kind? And the second, equally natural, question is: How do people respond to the labels they assign to others? What forms of *treatment* follow from our identities?

As far as identification is concerned, there are things I do and don't do because, in some sense, I have a masculine body, things I

[1] One very influential source of the modern theory of labelling is Becker 1963.

might have done even if I didn't have the concept "male." Notably, I can't, and so don't, give birth. (Many women can't do that either, of course. But for women having a male-sexed body is a less common reason.) But there are other things I do and don't do because I *think* of myself as male, things I do *as* a man. I dress as a man, which means I shop for my clothes as a man. I walk like a man, as I was raised to do, so that I have what Pierre Bourdieu dubbed a man's "bodily hexis"; "a durable way of standing, speaking, walking, and thereby of feeling and thinking," as he says in a passage I quoted in the book. And then, on the treatment side, there are things that people do to me because they identify me as a man … most straight men I know greet me with a handshake, while greeting the women they know as well as they know me with a kiss on the cheek. These habits of response are part of what Bourdieu called our "*habitus*: a set of dispositions to respond more or less spontaneously to the world in particular ways, without much thought" (Bourdieu 69-70). Identity, we can say, is central to the shaping of habitus, both through the ways in which *we* act as people of such-and-such identities and in the way our identity-inflected *treatment* by others shapes our acting-as.

At the start of this book, then, I set out three conceptual features that identities share.

The first was a set of labels and the rules for ascribing them to people. The second: the label had meaning for those who bear it, so that it sometimes shaped their behavior and their feelings, in ways they might or might not be aware of. And the third: the label had significance for the way its bearers were treated by others. (That's why identity has both a subjective and an objective dimension.)

But I also insisted immediately that "[i]n all three domains – labeling, norms, treatment – there can be contest and contention, …" (Appiah 2018, 141).

One consequence of all that disputation is that there are risks associated with making remarks about what "we" think about identities. The meaning of an identity for each of its bearers will be inflected by their other identities – this point is now routinely recorded by using Kimberlé Crenshaw's word "intersectionality." (Crenshaw 1991). But it can also be shaped by individual choices as well. For me, my British-inflected English is part of my way of being American; it reflects my thought that my country is a country of immigrants and has and needs no standard dialect of the language. There is, notoriously, the possibility of many kinds of politics of identity: "[J]ust as there's usually contest or conflict about the boundaries of the group, about who's in and who's out, there's almost always disagreement about what normative significance an identity has" (Appiah 2018, 10). When someone says "we" there is often some identity loitering in the background, especially in writing, where the indexicality of "us" in speech – the identification of speaker and hearers not by their identity but by their co-presence – cannot do its work. And if the audience and the writer don't agree in their account of that implicit identity, they may take themselves to be speaking about different groups of people.

The general theory at the start of the book includes not just this analysis of identity, but also some insights drawn from social psychology about how identities are generated. I point out, for example, that children start out naturally essentialist, in the psychologist's sense of that term. The developmental psychologist Susan Gelman once expressed that idea like this: "Essentialism is the view that certain categories have an underlying reality or true nature that one cannot observe directly, but that gives an object its identity, and is responsible for other similarities that category members share" (Gelman 2004). This feature of our natural modes of thought is captured as well, as I also point out, in the way in which generics are, as Sarah-Jane Leslie has argued our default

mode of generalization (Leslie 2008). And generics – observations like "Tigers eat people" – have a very odd semantics.

> "Tigers eat people" doesn't mean that *most* tigers eat people. In fact, as my friend the philosopher Sarah-Jane Leslie has pointed out, an epidemiologist can sincerely say, "Mosquitoes carry the West Nile virus" … while knowing that 99 percent of them *don't* carry it (Appiah 2018, 27).

Other psychological insights that I have found helpful are laid out in that first chapter, one of which is that labelling is pretty easy to get going. Another is that there is a pattern to the psychology of in-groups and out-groups:

> There's a commonsense way of talking about all this. We're *clannish* creatures. We don't just belong to human kinds; we prefer our own kind and we're easily persuaded to take against outsiders (Appiah 2018, 31).

That, then, is a brief overview of what I say about identities in general before turning to the five forms of identity that take up the main chapters. As I said in the preface to the book: "My main message about the five forms of identity that take us from Chapter Two to Chapter Six is, in effect, that we are living with the legacies of ways of thinking that took their modern shape in the nineteenth century, and that it is high time to subject them to the best thinking of the twenty-first" (*ibid.*, xiv). In calling the book *The Lies that Bind,* I wanted to insist on the role of mistaken beliefs – the BBC lectures had been entitled *Mistaken Identities* – in shaping social categories, while at the same time insisting that they bind us together into

groups of shared fate, despite the errors. It was a central part of the argument of my last book, *As If,* that useful theories are very generally strictly speaking false, so that we must ask whether falsehoods are, nevertheless, useful for some purpose before abandoning them. Here, too, it seems to me that sometimes a lie can be true enough. But another lesson of the book, I hope, is that identities are different, and that to get to understand and evaluate them, it is useful to have an historical sense of how they came to have the shape they currently do. So let me say a little about each of the cases now.

I began with religion, in a chapter entitled Creed. That title, unlike the chapter itself, suggests that religious identities are centrally about belief. (That is one problem with having decided to give all the chapters a title beginning with C!) One reason I began the lectures with religion was because it seemed to me that a lot of religious discord in the contemporary world circulated around questions of gender, and this allowed me to explore that strand of identity issues as well.

Every religion can be said to have three dimensions. Sure, there is a body of belief. But there's also what you do – call that practice. And then, as well, there's who you do it with – call that community, or fellowship. The trouble is that we've tended to emphasize the details of belief over the shared practices and the moral communities that buttress religious life. Our English word "orthodoxy" comes from a Greek word that means correct belief. But there's a less familiar word, "orthopraxy" that, comes from another Greek word, πρᾶξις (*praxis)*, which means action. Orthopraxy is a matter not of *believing* right but of *acting* right (*ibid.*, 36).

That focus on the ways in which religion functions as an identity in shaping groups, their behavior, and their treatment, follows, of course, from the general picture of identities. But there are

problems about the way I suspected many in my global audience would have thought about religion that are specific to this particular class of identities. One, that I explore in some detail, is a tendency to what I called "scriptural determinism, which, in its simplest version, involves the claim that our religious beliefs repose in our sacred texts – that to be a believer is to believe what's in the scriptures, as if one could decant from them, like wine from an urn, the unchanging nature of a religion and its adherents" (*ibid.*, 44).[2] One consequence of the arguments against scriptural determinism is that some regular claims about religious traditions – that Islam must treat women as inferior to men, or that Christianity cannot countenance homosexuality – are applications of an idea about scriptural interpretation that is regularly contested within the practices of all the so-called world religions. And there is a more general problem here, which is that this form of determinism ignores the ways in which traditions are constantly being reinterpreted. As I put it at the end of the chapter, after discussing some pre-colonial religious traditions of my Asante homeland:

> Our ancestors grip us in ways we scarcely realize. But as I poured the schnapps on the ancient family altars, I found myself reflecting that in the ethical realm – whether civic or religious – we have to recognize that one day we, too, shall be ancestors. We do not merely follow traditions; we create them (Appiah 2018, 67).

[2] I borrowed the term from Robert Wright's illuminating *The Evolution of God* (Wright 2009), which describes "scriptural determinists" as "people who think that scripture exerts overwhelming influence on the religious thought of believers, and that their social and political circumstances matter little if at all."

That is famously also true of nations, which I discussed next in the chapter on Country: there is a vigorous literature in modern historical writing on the invention of traditions in the shaping of nations.[3] And the major error about nationality – about the nation as a source of identity – that I went on to explore was that the role of modern states in shaping nations is routinely ignored, not in the historical literature, but in so many everyday discussions. The nineteenth-century growth of a form of nationalism developed in Europe led to the idea that there were national groups – what the Germans called *Völke*r – out there waiting for the states they needed to carry out their purposes. As Hegel put it: "In the existence of a *people* [*Volk*] the substantial purpose is to be a state and to maintain itself as such; a people without state-formation (a *nation* as such) has no real history …".[4]

As I argued, through thinking about the case of the great Italian modernist novelist, Italo Svevo, national belonging can be very complicated and always results from historical processes that include decisions by states about how to label people and about what significance to assign to those labels. In the chapter I look at a range of cases: Svevo, born in the Austrian empire, dying an Italian, without ever leaving home; Ghana, created when I was two; Singapore, a self-consciously multiracial nation, which was born in my teens; Scotland, whose status as British or as European is at the center of contemporary political arguments in the city of Glasgow where I gave the lecture. They are interestingly different in the ways in which they represent the complexity of national identities, in ways I tried to draw out.

[3] See, e.g., Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983.

[4] *"In dem Dasein eines* Volkes *ist der substantielle Zweck, ein Staat zu sein und als solche sich zu erhalten; ein Volk ohne Staatsbildung (ein* Nation *als solche) hat eigentlich keine Geschichte ..."* (Hegel 1830, § 549.

In the next chapter, on Color, I explored both the history and the present of racial classification. Beginning with the extraordinary story – which it was delightful to be able to tell an audience in Ghana – of the arrival in the early eighteenth century of a black child from what was then known as the Gold Coast at the princely court of Anton Ulrich, Duke of Brunswick-Wolfenbüttel. Anton Wilhelm Amo, as he came to be known, was the Duke's godson (though he may have started out as his legal property) and, after an education that the family supported, he ended up as a philosopher and a teacher of philosophy. The experiment that was his life took place as ideas about race were shifting in the direction that left the North Atlantic world dominated by a particularly virulent form of racism that shaped both the system of enslavement in the New World and the age of European empires in Africa and Asia that followed. The focus of the chapter is not so much on arguing against biological essentialism about races – though I do that, of course – but on showing both how hugely influential that picture was in shaping the intellectual life of many fields and many practices by the turn of the twentieth century, and how wide a range of political processes around the world remain shaped by these earlier ideas about race.

In the chapter on Class, which follows, I pursue two distinct lines of inquiry. One is about how three rather different dimensions of capital – social, economic, and cultural – determine the workings of social class in the contemporary world. Marxists taught us to think that the economic dimension of social interactions – our relation, as they said, to the means of production – was determinative, at least in the heyday of industrial capitalism. But today it is clear that it is not just our place in the system of production, as workers who make things or serve to others, or as managers or owners of tools and workplace, but other things, such as our education (and, especially, the distinguishing features of

habitus that come with more education) and the connections that our families, schools and workplaces make for us, that determine our life-chances. There are also dimensions of status that are separable from cultural and social capital; and these relate to, but are independent of, the income and wealth that determine our financial situations. There is not one social ladder of class, there are several, though you almost always find the same people at the top – and a different same set of people at the bottom – of each.

The second strand of argument has to do with the idea of meritocracy. The significant inequalities in wealth and in esteem that are a feature of contemporary societies, democratic or not, have come to be seen by many as justified to the extent that access to positions of advantage is earned rather than inherited. This has the consequence that the lowest ranks of our social hierarchies of money, esteem, education, and the rest are seen, on the same picture, as occupied by people who lack either the talent or the will to rise through the ranks. But, as Michael Young, who invented the very word "meritocracy," anticipated, at the start of the rise of this ideology of merit, there are two great problems with the picture that now dominates such thinking about inequality.

The first is the result of the fact that, as Young put it, "nearly all parents are going to try to gain unfair advantages for their offspring" (Young 1958, 25). And so, once we permit significant inequalities or wealth or status or education or connections to develop, people who have the most of these goods will use them to secure positions of advantage for their children. It will then be simply false that where you end up depends mostly on your talents and your willingness to work. As I argued, "There is nothing wrong with cherishing your children. But a decent society governed by the ideal of merit would have to limit the extent to which this natural impulse permits people to undermine that ideal" (Appiah 2018,

172). We have not done that, I argue, and so the first thing to say about meritocracy is that we are nowhere near achieving it.

This is a familiar claim now, though not everyone accepts it; nor is there enough discussion in my country or in most countries over what we should do about this fact. But there is a second, and, I think more interesting point, which is that in focusing on the question of access to wealth and other advantages, on whether we have proper equality of opportunity, we risk losing track of the question how much inequality there should be at all, however it comes about. A society that has significant inequalities of wealth and of esteem is very likely to end up being a society in which those who fail both have less of these goods and are also deprived of respect and self-respect. The central problem of class, I argue, is not inequality in goods, as such, but the consequent denial of the dignity to those at the bottom of the various social ladders.

I say in the book – and this is, I suppose, the book's darkest message – that, though I can see how to make our society more genuinely meritocratic, I do not know how to solve this second of meritocracy's challenges.

There is one more chapter, discussing Culture, which shows up in identities like "Western" or "Confucian" or "Muslim," used as names for vast groups of people who, though they are enormously diverse in their languages, dress, and practices of everyday life, are nevertheless thought of as having something deep in common. Essentialism here shows up in the idea that Westerners are all naturally prone to individualism or democracy or some such; and it shows up in a different way in the thought that certain valuable cultural products – Shakespeare's sonnets, Mozart's music, Nabokov's novels, Plato's philosophy – are things on which Westerners have a natural claim, in the way that any Chinese person has a claim on the *I Ching,* or any Japanese person on Basho.

This picture derives, I believe, from ways of thinking about culture – both in the ethnographer's sense of social-transmitted values, beliefs, and practices and in Matthew Arnold's sense of the arts – that developed in the later nineteenth century in Europe but have spread and been taken up elsewhere. Two elements of this package strike me as worth stressing: the idea that cultures belong to peoples (and not to individual persons) and the idea that they are organic wholes, so that the music and the literature and the cuisine are somehow interconnected. Together these mistakes conduce to thinking of people of a single culture as naturally fundamentally alike and fundamentally in solidarity with one another for that reason. It is one of the lessons of the book, I hope, that within all the major social identities – not just these so-called cultural groups – there is a wide diversity of belief and practice, and that sharing ideas and values with people of other identities is profoundly rewarding.

As I say towards the end of that chapter:

> Values aren't a birthright: you need to keep caring about them. Living in the West, however you define it – being Western, however you define *that* – provides no guarantee that you will care about Western Civ. The values that European humanists like to espouse belong as much to an African or an Asian who takes them up with enthusiasm as to a European. By that very logic, they *don't* belong to a European who hasn't taken the trouble to understand and absorb them. The same is true, naturally, of what we term non-Western cultures (Appiah 2018, 211).

In the Coda I make a few final general observations about how we can work with them to improve the human world. There I stress the fact that identities work in ways that are the result of complex

social negotiations. This has one obvious consequence: you cannot do identity-work all by yourself. As I say:

> There is a liberal fantasy in which identities are merely chosen, so we are all free to be what we choose to be. But identities without demands would be useless to us. Identities work only because, once they get their grip on us, they command us, speaking to us as an inner voice; and because others, seeing who they think we are, call on us, too. If you do not care for the shapes your identities have taken, you cannot simply refuse them; they are not yours alone. You have to work with others inside and outside the labeled group in order to reframe them so they fit you better; and you can only do that collective work if you recognize that the results must serve others as well. (*ibid.*, 217-218).

I insist, too, that identities "can become forms of confinement, conceptual mistakes underwriting moral ones," while, at the same time "they can also give contours to our freedom" (*ibid.*, 218). And, finally, I argue that there is a common humanity – we can dispute whether or not it is, or is yet, an identity – that we need to build on as we negotiate with one another with and through our various identities.

My aim in this introduction has been to say enough to frame the essays that follow, which engage my book so thoughtfully, and to allow them to be read with profit by people who have not themselves read *The Lies that Bind*. Though I hope, of course, that you will feel tempted, as you read on, to do what these colleagues of mine have done: which is to read the book itself with a care and attention that I doubt I deserve.

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IDENTITY AND LIBERAL POLITICS

AUTONOMY, IDENTITY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

APPIAH'S *THE LIES THAT BIND*

A REVIEW

BY

SALLY HASLANGER

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Autonomy, Identity, and Social Justice
Appiah's *The Lies That Bind*
A Review

Sally Haslanger

The Lies that Bind is a moving and humbling book. It demonstrates incredible erudition, depth of insight, and command of narrative. Its philosophical points are powerful and subtle, but it also speaks to a broad public about the challenges of identity, social inclusion, and social conflict.

The strategy of the book is to offer a general account of social identity, situated within a history that explains the growing importance of identity; it then uses this account to question a kind of essentialism about five forms of identity: creed (religion), country (nationality), color (race), class, and culture. The project is ambivalent about identity: identity is necessary for us as social beings, but at least these particular identities are confused, mistaken, even incoherent (Appiah 2018, xvi) By the end, it is tempting to wonder what identities would be sufficient to situate us each in society and also be free of such confusions.

What is a social identity, then? Appiah's account rightly combines a first-personal dimension, an individual commitment, and a third-personal dimension, a way of reading the individual as

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having the identity and being subject to its norms. Identities, on Appiah's view, have three things in common:

> In sum, identities come, first, with labels and ideas about why and to whom 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, always up for dispute: who's in, what they're like, how they should behave and be treated (*ibid.*, 12).

It is important that both the personal and interpersonal dimensions of identities are subject to contestation. We must each negotiate our individual relationship to identities, yet "the fact that they need interpreting and negotiating does not mean that each of us can do with them whatever we will. For these labels belong to communities; they are a social possession" (*ibid.*, 217). We are fundamentally social beings, so by collectively shaping and reshaping identities, we simultaneously constitute ourselves and society.

Bernard Williams similarly suggests that identities attempt to solve two problems at once:

> One is a political problem, of finding a basis for a shared life which will be neither too oppressively coercive (the requirement of freedom) nor dependent on mythical legitimations (the requirement of enlightenment). The other is a personal problem, of stabilizing the self into a form that will indeed fit with these political and social ideas, but which can at the same time create a life that presents itself to a reflective individual as worth living; in particular, one that does so by reinventing in a more reflective and

> demystified world assurances that were taken in an earlier time (or so we imagine) as matters of necessity (Williams 2004, 201).

As Williams sees it, to form a self is to find a way to interpret and edit one's moment by moment experience to determine what is real, what is important, what is "truly me." This situates experience within a narrative of one's life. I'm in my office, rushing to finish a lecture. The phone rings and I'm frustrated by the interruption. I answer it with an angry tone. But it is a student calling. I take hold of myself. The anger is misplaced: I am not the sort of professor who is rude to her students, or so I think. I work to maintain "who I am" and change my tone immediately. To stabilize myself as myself, I shift my attention and correct my reactions. But stability is not enough if it leaves us illegible to others. Humans cannot survive without cooperation, without being part of a community. In order to be part of a community one must stand in social relationships, occupy a social position in a network of possibilities and constraints. "Who I am" must be someone others can recognize as such: a professor, a neighbor, a friend, a parent,… an affluent, White, American, woman.

There are at least two sorts of injustice that can emerge in this project of self-formation. (See also Haslanger 2014a.) A person might be unjustly limited to a narrow range of experiences so that even a full integration of them does not do justice to what they could be; another is that the framework available to understand their experience provides only limited or distorted resources for forming a socially situated self. In one's efforts to craft a socially intelligible self, the responses of others may lead one to a self-interpretation that is distorted or socially stigmatized. For example, homosexual desire tentatively expressed in a homophobic context may prompt seemingly authoritative responses that represent such

desire as shameful, and the shame may be internalized. Intellectual aspirations expressed by a Black girl in a racist context may meet with ridicule, thus quashing her dream. In such cases, one might be left with an unstable self; perhaps there is no way to be legible both to oneself and others. Or one may shrink to fit the permitted role. An individual's experiments with selfhood that reach beyond the roles assigned to them will be registered as failures. Such encounters are a form of injustice, but the prejudice encoded in the replies is hidden, cloaked by an air of moral and epistemic authority.

The broader worry here is that in a social hierarchy, collective understandings are structured to favor those in power. The selves we become are significantly a product of the social relations we enter into. Society could force us into the social roles considered apt. But it is easier for everyone if through a process of socialization, or discipline, we adopt the roles and conform to their norms voluntarily. As Althusser (2014) says, good subjects work "all by themselves." But the threat of coercion, even violence, is always in the background. We are hailed into speaking our native tongue by having it spoken to us; we are hailed into the role of student by being sent to school and responding to the teacher as an authority (nudged by coercion); we are hailed into adulthood by having to pay the rent (with threat of eviction hanging over us). We then develop ways of being and thinking so that we are fluent English, Spanish, or Igbo speakers, fluent students, fluent rent-paying adults. Sometimes we come to identify with the role, so to do otherwise becomes unacceptable, even unthinkable. I identify as a professor who cares about her students; I cannot respond to them with unwarranted anger without undermining my sense of who I am.

One strategy for critiquing identities is to point to the injustice baked into the social practices and social structures that they sustain. If an identity shapes an agent to conform to unjust practices, then the identity should be taken as suspect. But this is too simple in several ways. As Appiah argues, individual agency is a matter of negotiating the social demands of identity; neither identities or social practices are fixed and rigid frames: Identities evolve "through contrast or opposition," (Appiah 2018, 202) and "every element of culture – from philosophy or cuisine to the style of bodily movement – is separable in principle from all the others; you can really walk and talk in a way that is recognizably African-American and commune with Immanuel Kant and George Eliot, as well as with Bessie Smith and Martin Luther King, Jr." (*ibid.*, 207). Identities often conscript us to enact and sustain injustice, yet "…identities can free us only if we recognize that we have to make their meanings together and for ourselves" (*ibid.*, 216).

Appiah's critique of identity (or at least of five major identities – creed, country, color, class, culture) focuses on the tendency to "essentialize" them. Essentialization brings with it several errors: we assume that there is something that all members of the group have in common – an essence by virtue of which they are members – and this essence explains their (and our) behavior; we note striking or dangerous features of those in groups other than our own and project these as essential features of the group; we assume that identities are "given" or "natural" and don't recognize their histories, their social functions, or our own role in defining them; we shape our action to fit with the identities, usually uncritically and unthinkingly, and criticize, correct, and even condemn those who fail to do so.

Recall Williams' idea that we must seek "a basis for a shared life which will be neither too oppressively coercive (the requirement of

freedom) nor dependent on mythical legitimations (the requirement of enlightenment)." Because identities are what enable us to avoid coercion – we autonomously conform to norms that we identify with – it is reasonable to see Appiah's critique as of the second form: the strategy is to reveal and discredit the myths of essence that often accompany identity.

This project has been taken up over time by many others. Williams took it to be an imperative of the Enlightenment that we seek "a more reflective and demystified world assurances that were taken in an earlier time (or so we imagine) as matters of necessity." Appiah's book effectively debunks myth after myth. Yet there are many important issues to discuss. I will raise three related questions: (i) Is there a tension between the alleged psychological underpinnings of essentialism and the recommendations offered? (ii) Is the analysis overly idealist (in the Marxian sense), i.e., does it over-emphasize the cognitive dimensions of the problem? (iii) How is individual enlightenment – and what one gains by "seeing through" the myths that undergird one's identities – related to social change?

Let's begin with the "little theory." Appiah situates his characterization of essentialism in recent psychology and linguistics (*ibid.*, 25-29). Experiments show that children have a tendency to essentialize certain features of things, especially when we use bare plural generics to describe them, e.g., tigers have stripes, sharks attack bathers, women are nurturing. According to the theory, this tendency to essentialize is very primitive and ingrained in us and persists throughout our lives. (Appiah also suggests that we are, by nature (?), clannish beings who place a lot of weight on in-group/out-group distinctions (*ibid.*, 31)) But the main point of the book is that we should avoid essentializing. How are we going to avoid this, if we can't help but do it? Sarah-Jane

Leslie, one of the authors Appiah relies on, suggests that we should avoid using generics. But this not feasible and would deprive us of important linguistic resources (Haslanger 2014b).

As a matter of fact, not all generics promote essentializing. Some generics just express statistical regularities and are interpreted as such: Barns are red; cars have radios. And not all generics promote substantival essentializing of the sort involved in identities: this is who I am. A generic can express a necessary connection between a property and a kind, without any implication that the kind is essential to its members. For example, tenants pay rent. This generic is true because it is a defining feature of tenants that they pay rent to landlords; one might say that an agreement to pay rent is an essential part of a tenant/landlord arrangement (allowing too that the agreement can be contested and renegotiated). But consider Marion, who is a tenant. No one would infer that it is part of Marion's essence that she pay rent; and she might accept the generic without identifying as a tenant. Being a tenant is a contingent feature of her social circumstances that she simply deals with. But even if she started a tenants' union and came to identify as a tenant, it isn't clear that she would fall into the traps of problematic essentializing (see Appiah 2018, 218) So it would seem that some generics are unproblematic, some statements of essence are unproblematic, and some identities are unproblematic. Can we do more to capture the problem?

Appiah places a lot of weight on labeling groups or kinds: an identity is associated with a label. This label, in turn, is associated with a set of norms that invoke first-person commitment and third person expectations. Labeling, of course, is insufficient for creating identities, and itself doesn't seem to be a problem. (What counts as a label and whether labeling is even necessary are also a questions worth asking.) The label 'tenant' applies to tenants without

(usually) producing an identity, without assuming that all tenants are the same, without taking it the relationship to landlords be fixed or natural. And associating norms with labels isn't sufficient to create an identity, at least in the relevant sense. We do and should have norms associated with tenants and landlords, professors and students. Sometimes people identify with such roles, e.g., as professors or students – this is "who they are" – but often not; and even without embracing the identity, they reliably not only conform to, but commit themselves to the norms, and others expect as much. The worry is that the three conditions he has explicitly stated (labeling, associated norms, possibilities of contestation), even if we include tendencies to essentialize, miss something about what it is to have an identity, and also what goes wrong in the problematic cases.

In fact, humans are not as dense about essences as the (simple version of the) psychological theory would have us think (Cohen 2004; Sterken 2015; Saul 2017). As just noted, we aren't fooled by all generics into essentializing, and we are not perfect, but we are pretty good at distinguishing between regularities that are evidence of a robust or law-like connection and those that aren't. And such tendencies to essentialize usually come with a recognition of fallibility. This is fortunate, because we need these abilities if we are going to follow Appiah's recommendations to stop bad essentializing. I don't have a theory of identity that explains the link to bad essentializing. But, like Appiah, I think there are ways to disrupt it. As I read him, he recommends a twofold approach: recount the history of identities in a way that reveals their contingency and mutability, and emphasize the possibility of individual autonomy in renegotiating the norms associated with them. These are strategies that focus on thinking differently about ourselves. Such rethinking is, of course, tremendously important.

But as I see it, the problem isn't primarily in our heads, but in the unjust structures in which we are embedded.

Social constructionists, in general, are in the business of arguing that categories assumed to be natural or immutable are contingent and socially/historically produced. An important strategy in such work is to argue that what might appear to be a substantive kind is actually *relational*, e.g., gender and race (and other kinds, even disability) are relational; they aren't a matter of what your body is like or what kind of person you are, but of how you are situated in society (Haslanger and Ásta 2018). One reason this works to dislodge essentialist assumptions is that for the most part, things (objects, persons) are only contingently related to other things. Unity and integrity – that something is self-contained and can move about in ways that alter their situation and their relation to other things – is a hallmark of being an object. It is much harder (but not impossible!), then to essentialize relations in ways that become fixed identities. This is clear in the tenant/landlord case. It is hard to essentialize Marion as a tenant because that would seem to bind her identity – who she is – to this relationship. Yes, she is a tenant and is expected to pay rent; the label 'tenant' and the norms apply to her. But being a tenant is not fixed or given "in her nature."

The goal of such social constructionist work is not, however, simply to highlight one's autonomy in relation to social roles and norms, but to call attention to the hidden relations that distribute status, power, wealth, and other goods. Being White is not just a matter of skin color or ancestry; it is not about expectations concerning music, dress, or cuisine. Whiteness is a privileged position within a racial power structure. Challenging Whiteness isn't simply a matter of refusing to conform to norms of proper White behavior, but of working to dismantle the unjust structure.

Refusing to be White – being a "race traitor" in the social justice sense – is a step in the right direction. Individual attempts to renegotiate the norms associated with race are important (a Black man whistling Vivaldi as he walks down a Chicago street at night may disrupt stereotypes and even save his life (Steele 2010)), but as I see it, racial identity is not the main problem. White Supremacy is the problem; it will take a broad social movement and deep changes to laws, culture, and institutions to overturn it. Once we take down White Supremacy, the race relations that define the social roles and identities – and the lies that support them – will dissipate. But until we do, identities will be reinforced and hard to avoid because they enable us to be fluent in the existing structure.

As mentioned above, Williams and Appiah are invested in a particular understanding of an enlightenment project. The Enlightenment gave us resources to think of ourselves as autonomous, as persons with a right to live our lives according to our own conception of the good rather than essentially bound to social roles. Identities sometimes stand in the way of autonomy because we take the local imperatives to constitute who we – ourselves and those around us – truly are. This is a mistake, and it is a pernicious mistake because it stunts our autonomy, creates unnecessary conflict, and gives undue power to those who claim authority in knowing who we are and what is good for us (be they priests, scientists, influencers). But we are social beings, and we cannot be autonomous without being embedded in a social milieu that provides opportunities for meaningful action. Socially intelligible agency seems to require willing conformity to social norms and meanings, and thus identity comes back to bite us. This is the tension that Appiah vividly captures. Recognizing the inevitability of some form of identity, he suggests we identify (simply? primarily?) as human (Appiah 2018, 219).

On a different approach, however, a crucial lesson of the Enlightenment was not about autonomy but justice. Hierarchically structured societies that sort individuals into dominant and subordinate, exploiters and exploited, are unjust, whether or not this is achieved by coercion or, as Althusser would say, interpellation, or as Foucault would say, discipline. Being shaped by society is not a problem if the shaping enables us to live together justly.

Certainly, one step in taking down White supremacy and interrelated oppressive systems is to do ideology critique: to reveal the lies and illusions in our thinking about creed, country, color, class, culture. Such critique is a necessary part of movements to achieve social justice. But without collective action focused on change in material conditions, ideology critique withers. The structural incentives and real benefits together with the background coercive mechanisms that uphold existing social positions are more powerful than good arguments, and alternative ideological narratives are always available.

Consider Marion, the tenant, again. Marion Nzinga Stamps was a tenant in Chicago's notorious Cabrini-Green housing project who helped found the Chicago Housing Tenants Organization which successfully organized a nation-wide rent strike (Nash 2017). Stamps, in some sense, identified as a Black woman and a tenant, and she exercised autonomy in renegotiating how the relevant norms applied to her. But she radicalized others about race, gender, class, capitalism, and the state, not by disrupting essentialist assumptions, but by changing the material relationships between tenants and city officials, and eventually improving conditions through her organizing. The autonomy of individuals was enhanced by their identification with the movement and by the greater economic opportunities it enabled. It is important to

challenge the lies that trap us in identities. But autonomy is a small gain if the social positions still available to us are part of an unjust system, e.g., if our choices are materially constrained by oppressive conditions or if our freedom is achieved at the expense of others. Appiah is, of course, aware of this. Identities themselves are not the problem, and autonomy, alone, is not the goal: "…the problem is not walls as such but walls that hedge us in; walls we played no part in designing, walls without doors and windows, walls that block our vision and obstruct our way, walls that will not let in fresh and enlivening air" (Appiah 2018, 218). So my engagement with Appiah's text is less a matter of disagreement and more a matter of emphasis. Of course, anything that rigidifies social positions in a way that compromises autonomy and sustains injustice and should be challenged. But individual autonomy is too modest a goal, and challenging our tendencies to essentialize too imprecise a strategy, to confront injustice. Ideology critique and the creation of new identities – as a feminist, as an antiracist, as a socialist – is a first step in creating a movement, but the best way to broadly disrupt problematic identities is to change the world. A new, more just, world will change who we are.

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SYMPOSIUM

IDENTITY AND LIBERAL POLITICS

ESSENTIALISM OR THREAT PERCEPTION

ON KWAME ANTHONY APPIAH'S *THE LIES THAT BIND: RETHINKING IDENTITY*

BY

MICHAEL RABINDER JAMES

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Essentialism or Threat Perception
On Kwame Anthony Appiah,
The Lies That Bind: Rethinking Identity

Michael Rabinder James

Kwame Anthony Appiah begins his profoundly learned but wonderfully accessible book, *The Lies that Bind: Rethinking Identity*, by reminiscing about rides in taxis, and the inevitable confusions his own identity evokes amongst the cabbies ferrying him about. As a son of a Ghanaian father and an English mother, he is taken for a Brazilian in Sao Paolo, a "Colored" in Cape Town, an Ethiopian in Rome, and an Asian Indian in London. And despite speaking the Queen's English, New York cab drivers are not satisfied when he responds "London" to their queries about his place of birth, since the question they really want to ask is "what are you?" racially or ethnically (Appiah 2018, xi).

Like Appiah, my own liminal identity provokes confusion among cabbies. As the child of South Indian Christian parents, my name – Michael James – does not comply with their expectations

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about Indians. And because I am bald and darker than most South Asian immigrants to North American or Europe, I am often thought to be African American. This led to my most troubling taxi experience. Shortly after shaving my head for the first time, I traveled to Manhattan to visit a friend. After arriving at Penn Station, I tried to hail a cab. Despite the plethora of taxis circulating around me, the drivers, most of whom appeared to be South Asian, avoided me. Having never had this problem on previous trips to the city, I remained befuddled, until a white man on the same corner sympathetically conveyed his frustration about cab drivers refusing to pick up black men. Suddenly, the scales dropped from my eyes. Back when I had the wavy hair that coded me as South Asian, cab drivers perceived me as a safe fare. Now that my bald head coded me as black, they saw me as a threat. My follicular failings transformed my public identity, to the point that even Indian cab drivers could not recognize a fellow *desi*.

I focus on this example not simply because it allows me to share taxicab experiences with Appiah, one of my intellectual idols. More important is the different valence of my version of the cabbie experience, which points to a strongly divergent approach to thinking about the problem of identity. By delving deeply into the intricacies of five forms of identity – creed, country, color, class, and culture – Appiah repeatedly forces us to recognize that there is no clear answer to the question "what are you?" His contention is that by undermining our essentialist answers to this question, we can avoid the many identity conflicts that undermine our ability to live peaceful and happy lives. Although I am thoroughly convinced by Appiah's anti-essentialism, I am more skeptical that epistemological transformation will prove nearly as useful in mitigating identity conflict. This is because, as my example suggests, identity conflict is as much a product of threat perception

as it is of outdated 19th century science. As a result, I fear that identity conflict may persist even if all parties recognize the socially constructed and contingent character of identities associated with creed, country, color, class, and culture.

Before expanding upon my critical concerns, let me first appreciate the brilliance of Appiah's own theoretical moves. Note that Appiah's substantive chapters are devoted to five forms of *inter-generational* identity: creed (religion); country (nationality); color (race); class (social and economic); and culture. In each case, these identities are typically handed down from parents of both cis-genders to children of both cis-genders through biological and social reproduction. Even if race is, as Appiah points out, a social construction, one's racial identity is inherited by one's biological parents. Although cabbies, and fellow academics, commonly identify me as African American, once I tell them my parents are from India, they quickly change their ascription and assign me to the South Asian category. The question "what are you?" is "correctly" answered as South Asian, even if this socially constructed category is not some brute, biological fact. Similarly, a black African child adopted and raised by white parents will still, in most contexts in North America, be ascribed as black. But whereas racial identity depends on inter-generational, biological transmission, other identities are transferred through forms of social reproduction, such as family upbringing, inherited financial and social resources, formal and informal education, and legal categorization (e.g., citizenship). Albeit not always as directly as with race, all five forms of inter-generational identity are bequeathed from one generation to the next, typically from parents to children but also from broader network of elders to youth.

In a brilliant move, Appiah probes these inter-generational identities by drawing on theoretical insights from the study of

gender, a non-inter-generational identity. Although gender norms are transmitted between generations, gender itself is not inter-generational, since a cis-gender woman might bear only cis-gender sons, with whom she will never share a gender identity. So while socially constructed black biological parents will beget a socially constructed black child, a socially constructed female gendered mother need not beget only socially constructed female gendered children. Appiah's reasons for using gender theory to probe creed, color, country, class, and culture stem not from the juxtaposition between identities that are and are not inter-generational. Rather, he does so to show that even a supposedly natural division between male and female sex identities are not so biologically clear. For instance, because some individual fetuses have androgen insensitivity syndrome, they do not develop male genitalia, despite the presence of a Y chromosome. Conversely, some fetuses have two X chromosomes, but nevertheless develop male genitalia via the mother's androgens. The sexual binary between male and female develops within a variety of inter-generational communities because statistically, the overwhelming majority of fetuses develop with male genitalia derived from an XY chromosomal pair or female genitalia derived from an XX chromosomal pair, but this rule is regularly, if infrequently violated as part of the natural, biological train of events (*ibid.*, 12-20). Given that sex is not discrete and binary, unsurprisingly gender is neither, and Appiah provides succinct but insightful discussions of gender fluidity, intersectionality, and essentialism.

Appiah's point is to use sex and gender to undermine essentialism, which psychologist Susan Gelman defines as "the view that certain categories have an underlying reality or true nature that one cannot observe directly, but gives the object its reality" (*ibid.*, 26). While essentialism is factually false, it remains

psychologically compelling, given human mental survival mechanisms, with the result that most children are essentialists by the time they are six years of age. The challenge is to fight against our tendencies towards essentialism, which Appiah tries to help us do through his substantive chapters. As mentioned above, I have no philosophical problem with Appiah's use of gender to probe creed, country, color, class, or culture. My concerns lie more with the practical effect of this intellectually compelling exercise. Appiah is certainly correct that we must discard the 19th century science of essentialism in favor of the best intellectual tools of the 21st century. But doing so is no guarantee that it will heal the social and political problems surrounding identity conflict, and part of the reason stems from the disjuncture between those identities that are inter-generational, like race, religion, or class, and those that are not, like gender or sexuality.

Importantly, inter-generational identities can facilitate forms of violence that are profoundly different than is the case with other identities. Of course gender-based violence is unfortunately all too common, but I at least cannot recall protracted gender-based wars. Conversely, civil or inter-state wars based on race, religion, nationality, and class are not hard to identify. And even if we reject the dystopian predictions of Samuel Huntington, we can think of violent clashes of civilizations if we define culture not in Matthew Arnold's refined sense but follow Sir Edward Burnett Tylor, who saw it as "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, arts, morals, law, customs and any other capabilities and habits" (*ibid.*, 191). Wars between political nations and economic classes occur even without any attribution of essentialism, for a variety of economic or political reasons, and the threat of such violence is itself a cause of the same.

The inapplicability of the anti-essentialist, gender-theory approach to inter-generational conflict is clearest in the chapter on religion. Appiah's anti-essentialism teaches us to reject "scriptural determinism," which defines religion through reference to select doctrinal texts (*ibid.*, 44), and instead asks us to see religions as doctrinally plural communities whose tenets are open to contestation. This approach is particularly helpful in challenging religious fundamentalist oppression based on gender or sexual orientation (*ibid.*, 56-61). But when Appiah turns to a discussion of inter-religious violence, his comments ring hollow. For instance, he mentions that sometimes a group will be more prone to violence if it is closer doctrinally to a society's major religious group, citing the case of the Ahmadis of Pakistan who suffer violence at the hands of other Muslims, who in turn largely leave Christians alone (*ibid.*, 42). His point seems to be that scriptural determinism leads Pakistani Muslims to fear doctrinal impurity among supposed co-religionists more than the full-fledged infidelity of Christians. Leaving aside instances of anti-Christian violence in Pakistan, I question the generalizability of this claim. For instance, in neighboring India, the Hindu majority regularly terrorizes the doctrinally distant Muslim minority but ignores the doctrinally similar Jain community. In the United States, meanwhile, anti-Jewish violence, while real and currently resurgent, has historically remained below the levels reached in Europe. According to the historian Hasia Diner, this stemmed from three factors contingent to the United States: the prevalence of the black-white racial division, which coded Jews as white; the constitutional embrace of religious pluralism and disestablishmentarianism; and the social approval of capitalism, with which Jews were associated (Diner 2006). Without trying to propound a full theory of religious conflict, my point is that the presence or absence of religious conflict often has nothing to do

with doctrine and more to do with whether a particular group is perceived as a threat to the political or economic interests of other groups.

While doctrinal essentialism need not drive most conflict between religious groups, so too racial essentialism need not drive racial conflict. Over the years, the number of white Americans who believe that racial identity is primarily biological has steadily declined, so that now only a small minority holds such a view. However, that does not mean that racial conflict is over in America. Instead, a "new racism" ascribes negative traits to blacks, for instance, due to purported cultural deficiencies. Furthermore, racial animus proves to be remarkably sensitive to political context. For instance, a recent study shows that working-class white Americans chose to support a black candidate, Barack Obama, when they perceived his economic positions to favor their class interests over those espoused by Mitt Romney, a white candidate. But many of these same whites favored Donald Trump over Hilary Clinton because he foregrounded racial threats to white dominance while simultaneously assuaging some of their economic concerns related to international trade. Not economic anxiety *per se* but rather "racialized economics," in which whites perceived their economic interests to be opposed to those of black and Latinx populations, drove the behavior observed among pivotal Obama-Trump voters.[1]

Appiah does briefly consider how inter-group conflict can arise independently of any deep-seated essentialism when he discussed the "Four-Day-Old Tribe," an experiment in which boys were divided into two groups in a remote rural area. Once aware of the other group, the boys proceeded to ascribe not only labels but also

[1] Cf. Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck 2018, 175-179.

character traits to themselves and to the other group. According to Appiah, "Labels came first, but essences followed fast" (Appiah 2018, 30). But here he is talking about stereotypes, not the purportedly scientific essences that grounded 19th century racial science, or biological claims about female inferiority, or even a scripture-based understanding of religious identity. Groups can form over fairly superficial traits, but they fight when they perceive the other group as a threat to their bodily or economic security.

This insight, I think, reveals weaknesses in Appiah's treatment of national identity in the chapter titled "Country." Here, his target is the Romantic notion of essential national identities based on language, culture, and character. After revealing the linguistically, religiously, and culturally diverse composition of any nation, and after rightfully rejecting the historical solutions of annihilating, expelling or assimilating those who do not fit the national mold (*ibid.*, 80), Appiah concludes: "People have long known in America what many in Europe have come to grasp – that we can hang together without a common religion or even delusions of common ancestry" (*ibid.*, 103). True enough. But while Appiah points out the obvious flaws in claims about discrete nations, he does not do much to interrogate the philosophical problems posed by discrete *states*. Indeed, Appiah suggests that the solution to the problems of nationalism is to remember that "What binds citizens together is a commitment…to sharing the life of a modern state, united by its institutions, procedures, and precepts" (*ibid.*, 103).

It is true that numerous difficulties emerge in trying to define the borders of a nation, whereas it is not so hard to define the borders of states. The questions are *whether* state borders are justifiable, and if so, *which* ones. Although he concludes this chapter with a section titled "Democratic Difficulties," which includes a brief mention of the problem of secession, he does not confront

the thorny "democratic boundary problem," which holds that the outcome of a democratic vote may depend on where the boundaries of the demos are placed.[2] So if Catalonia holds a referendum to secede from Spain, what happens if a majority of residents of the entire region vote for secession, while a majority of those within the sub-section of Barcelona vote to remain? Does Barcelona get to remain part of Spain, or is the operative boundary that which encompasses all of Catalonia. The same problem can confront Brexit, given that most of Scotland voted to remain within the EU. Looking more broadly, thinkers like Robert Goodin and Arash Abizadeh have questioned the democratic legitimacy of all nation-state borders, given that these were not legitimated through a global democratic process.[3] Again, I have no problem with Appiah's treatment of nations and nationalism. I too find them constructed. However, given the historical record of wars between states, even those that affirmed internal diversity like the Austro-Hungarian and Russian Empires, we cannot go too far in seeing the state as the solution to nationalist conflict. And given the ongoing injustice of global inequality between rich and poor states, we cannot ignore the problem that states, and their exclusive claims, pose for another of Appiah's normative commitments, that of ethical cosmopolitanism.

Inter-state war again reminds us of how threats to bodily and economic security can generate inter-group conflict, even absent essentialist notions of race, religion, or nation. Interestingly enough, Appiah's inattention to the problem of inter-group threat undermines some of his insights into the one identity that is putatively not essentialist, that of class. Many people think that class identity is fluid, not fixed, and that modern societies facilitate

[2] Cf. Whelan 1983.
[3] Cf. Abizadeh 2008 and Goodin 2007.

individual social mobility across different classes. Appiah correctly shows how class identity is actually much more rigid. According to his analysis, class is a complex form of multi-dimensional stratification, based on the distribution of three types of capital: financial (resources, such as money); social (connections to other people with resources); and cultural (habits and behavioral markers that grant one respect or honor). The result is Michael Savage's model of social stratification, with seven classes: an elite that enjoys a surfeit of all three forms of capital, an underclass deprived of all three, and five intermediate classes with differing levels of each (Appiah 2018, 165-6). Appiah's solution is to try to break up monopolies on capital in favor of a plural redistribution, such that one can still gain financial capital without needing social or cultural capital, or vice versa.

Unlike the other chapters, Appiah's prescriptions here are much more tangible and could easily inform policy debates. But what he lacks is a political model, one that addresses one source of class rigidity: the threat that certain classes perceive as coming from other classes. For instance, one of the greatest problems to class justice is the fact that middle classes perceive greater threats from the redistributive demands of classes beneath them rather than perceiving greater opportunities from making their own redistributive demands on the classes above them. As Jean-Jacques Rousseau famously put is in *The Discourse on Inequality*: "Citizens let themselves be oppressed only so far as they are swept up by blind ambition and, looking below more than above themselves, come to hold Dominion dearer than independence, and consent to bear chains so that they might impose chains in turn" (Rousseau 1997, 183). *Amour propre*, or comparative esteem, not essentialist categorization *per se*, makes people perceive threats where they should instead perceive allies.

Rousseau did not find easy solutions to the problem of *amour proper*, and nor do I. But I do contend that a greater appreciation of the role of comparative threat perceptions in the generation of inter-group conflict would have rendered Appiah's brilliant book all that much more valuable. Appiah is certainly right to challenge all forms of essentialism. But the failure to probe other psychological sources of identity conflict limit the practical efficacy of his noble enterprise.

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SYMPOSIUM

IDENTITY AND LIBERAL POLITICS

THE BULLSHIT THAT BINDS

REFLECTIONS ON KWAME ANTHONY APPIAH'S *THE LIES THAT BIND, RETHINKING IDENTITY*

BY

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The Bullshit that Binds
Reflections on Kwame Anthony Appiah's *The Lies that Bind: Rethinking Identity*

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I

Isaiah Berlin loved the following joke. A Jew wants to become a member of a prestigious golf club that does not admit Jews. In order to do so he converts to Christianity, changes his name, moves to the right neighborhood and makes friends who can support his application. Finally he feels ready. Your name asks the women at the registration desk: John Smith, your occupation? An accountant, your religion? Huhh, sighs the Jew, finally I am a Goy.

I was reminded of this joke while reading Appiah's account of Erick Erickson's childhood, which opens "The Lies that Bind: Rethinking Identity". Erickson, a son of a Danish father was raised by his stepfather, a Jew named Homburger. Jews in the Synagogue called him 'the Goy', for the children in school he was a Jew, finally he changed his name to mark the fact that he was his own creation, the son of Erick – Erickson.

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It's no coincidence that people who write about identity (and tell jokes about it) have complex identities. In this respect Appiah is the right man for the job: a son of British mother who could trace her origins to her Norman forefather, and a father originating from West Africa who could trace his origins to an eighteenth-century General, a member of the military aristocracy that created the Asante Empire, later to become part of Ghana. Like Appiah, other members of the celebrated group of scholars that pioneered the study of identity were strangers in their chosen land. It includes a disproportionate number of Jewish immigrants who choose Britain as their homeland such as Hans Kohn (a Czech-born British historian), Isaiah Berlin (a British philosopher and intellectual, born in Riga), Ernest Gellner (a Czech-born British sociologist), Eli Kedourie (a British historian, born in Baghdad), Anthony Smith, Eric Hobsbawm (a British historian born in Alexandria), Benedict Anderson (a Chinese born Anglo Irish intellectual), alongside some American Jews like Michael Walzer, Donald Horowitz, Leah Greenfeld (a Russian-born Israeli-American Sociologist), Ivan Krastev (an American-Bulgarian theorist), and some Canadians such as Charles Taylor and Will Kymlicka.

The question: "what are you?" inevitably hovers over the lives of immigrants, minorities, and individuals of mixed lineage who are constantly reminded of their complex identity. Hence they are sensitive to the tormented state of mind of individuals who do not fit in, who must invest considerable efforts in carving out a place for themselves where they can feel at home. When reflecting about his own identity Berlin always stressed that he wasn't an Englishmen but an Anglophile. Someone who loves England but whose roots prevent his from fully belonging. In his essay on *Benjamin Disraeli, Karl Marx and the search for identity*, he identifies the extreme states of mind that shape the identity of those who remain…

> …betwixt and between, unmoored from one bank without reaching the other, tantalized but incapable of yielding, complicated, somewhat tormented figures, floating in midstream, or, to change the metaphor, wandering in a no-man's-land, liable to wave of self-pity, aggressive arrogance, exaggerated pride in those very attributes which divided them from their fellows; with alternating bouts of self-contempt and self-hatred, feeling themselves to be objects of scorn or antipathy to those very members of the society by whom they most wish to be recognized and respect. This is a well-known condition of men forced into an alien culture, is by no means confined to the Jews; it is a well-known neurosis in an age of nationalism in which self-identification with a dominant group becomes supremely important, but, for some individuals, abnormally difficult (Berlin 1970, 255).

One could try to escape identity consciousness by retreating "to a place where [one] would not be defined by his complexion" (Appiah 2018, 134). Going home is an option for some, but for the many, home is so far removed that it is no longer a possibility, and even the few who come back find themselves estranged because they have changed too much in their life journey.

Making a home away from home and finding a place in a mixed and diverse society are endless struggles, struggles that paved the way for the politics of identity. Is the emergence of such politics to be celebrated? One would have liked Appiah to be more prescriptive in his writing. The tales he tells are engaging but what is the moral and political lesson to be drawn? I assumed Appiah sees identity politics as a blessing, but does he have answers to the recent criticism raised against it?[1] Globalism, for Appiah, remains an option. In the

[1]. See for example, Remink 2017.

very last pages he evokes the cosmopolitan impulse "that draws on our common identity" (Appiah 2018, 10) and echoes ideas presented in his previous book *Cosmopolitanism* (Appiah 2007). But how are we to balance these sentiments against particular, local, and national impulses that are rising around the globe? What does identity politics entail for us as members of different identity groups, as individuals with conflicting preferences?

Fragmenting the discussion to different identities allows Appiah to discuss each and every one of them in an engaging way, moving back and forth from personal stories to theoretical reflections. And yet the conflict zone is left deserted. I wish the book had visited the spheres where our intuitions conflict. Ever since Susan Okin asked the question: "Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?" we know that identity interests collide. Many of the cultures protected on the basis of multiculturalism, Okin argues, embody oppressive attitudes towards women. Under such conditions, "group rights are potentially, and in many cases actually, anti-feminist" (Okin 1999, 12). Other identity-based conflicts are also left out: conflicts between race and class, sexuality and culture, country and color, religion and nation, not to mention Jan Paul Sartre's conflict between familial obligations and national ones.

Some conflicts are political: whom should a black women vote for: Barak Obama or Hillary Clinton? Others touch issues of distributive justice: who should get preference in public spending, a shelter for battered women or a home for illegal immigrants? Should class trump race? Should color trump creed? These conflicts, and the solutions we offer, shape our lives – hence they ought not to be ignored.

Our interest in them is highlighted by Appiah's main point: despite their fluidity, identities are powerful motivating forces in human life. They matter to people. Because "having an identity can

give you a sense of how you fit into the social world." But more importantly, because they help us answer the question "what should I do?" In other words identities are reasons for action. Saying "because I'm this I should do that" is saying that identity matters for the practical decisions individuals make:

> And one of the commonest ways in which it matters is that they feel some sort of solidarity with other members of the group. Their common identity gives them reason, they think, to care about and help one another. It creates what you could call norms of identification rules: about how you should behave, given your identity. [Moreover] not only does your identity gives you reasons to do things, it can give others reasons to do things to you (Appiah 2018, 10).

Identities are, then, reasons for action. This is puzzling if we accept, as I do, Appiah's important point that identities are – to a considerable extent – grounded in misconceptions, or simply lies. Can we combat the divisive power of identities by revealing their untruthful foundations? Will the unearthing of "the lies that bind" bring us globally closer together? Is the growing interest in "fact finding" paving the way for human solidarity? After reading the book I remain a skeptic.

I have always been fascinated by the paradoxical connections between the truth content of our beliefs and action. This complex issue has been visited by several scholars of nationalism and identity.[2] In his famous essay "what is a nation?" the French philosopher Ernest Renan claims that a nation is a group of

[2] Including my own work: see Tamir 1996.

individuals who cherish and retain their shared history but remember it selectively, ready to forget some of its less pleasant episodes. Deliberate forgetfulness and misrepresentation of historical facts, he argues, constitute an important, and perhaps indispensable, feature of nation-building.[3]

More modern authors follow the same line of argument. In his writings on nationalism Anthony Smith stresses the fact that the binding power of collective memories is less dependent on their truth-value and more on "their abundance, variety and drama (their aesthetic qualities) or their example of loyalty, nobility and self-sacrifice (their moral qualities) that inspire emulation and bind the present generation to the glorious dead" (Smith 1991, 164). David Miller agrees: national consciousness, he claims, depends on whether members "have the right beliefs; it is not part of the definition that the beliefs should in fact be true" (Miller 1988, 648). Appiah goes a step further claiming that we are not simply dealing with imprecisions or forgetfulness but with lies. These, he argues, are central "to the way identities unite us today. We need to reform them because, at their best, they make it possible for groups, large and small, to do things together. They are the lies that bind" (Appiah 2018, xvi). This claim contributes to the aura of irrationality surrounding group affiliation and leaves us with a query: shouldn't we be troubled by the fact that we rely on lies and misconceptions as reasons for action.[4]

[3] See Renan 1947.

[4] It is important to note that advancing opposing narratives could be consistent with caring about accuracy and truth, as facts could weigh differently in different narratives. What opponents generally lack is the imagination, or desire to acknowledge and understand the other's point of view, or give due weight to that facts that are salient in the other's narrative. So there are many obstacles for reconciliation or peace social, other than lies or bullshit.

II

Lies and Bullshit

The will to believe, George Kateb argues, is regrettable, it reflects "a gross form of self-deception (a most murky vice) and, hence, a severe blow to one's integrity. The process of drowning out one's inner reproaches and accepting one's own lies… makes one an instrument of mendacity, and hence an instrument of immorality" (Kateb 1994, 530).

We tend to think that rational agents should seek truth-based reasons for action, but this disqualifies identity as a motivating power and brackets out almost everything we, as human being, care about. Are we then to choose between being informed rational choosers and making choices that express our humanity? Or should we accept the fact that we are motivated by lies? Is relying on "lies" or falsehood a sign of irrationality? John Heil offers the following answer:

> … if people consider a particular set of feelings a precondition for living a meaningful and satisfying life, and if they fear that inquiring into the nature of the beliefs that evoked these feelings might disrupt them, they have a reason to hold the beliefs that support these feelings even barring any other justification for doing so. Not only do we not have a moral commitment to found our feelings only in true beliefs, but practical grounds could be adduced for deliberately acquiring functional beliefs even if false.[5]

[5] Cf. Heil 1984 and 1983.

Could we be indifferent to the role lies play in shaping reasons for action? Shouldn't we prefer to be guided by truth? Do we have a duty to rebut lies others tell themselves? Women and Blacks have long fought falsities undermining their equality. Those who believe that White or male supremacy is grounded in lies feel morally obliged to refute these lies, even if, for some they are functional in sustaining group identity and a sense of self-esteem. Indifference to lies is therefore not an option. I am sure Appiah shares this view but he gives us no hint as to what differentiates the lies we are obliged to refute from acceptable ones.

Can there be a productive conversation between those guided by conflicting lies? The liar will not be deterred by the fact that he is lying as his purpose is to say the opposite of the truth. What then can change his mind? Harry Frankfurt famously drew attention to the distinction between lies and bullshit. A lie is the opposite of truth whereas bullshit is an expression of not caring about the truth. Frankfurt regards this indifference to how things really are, as the essence of bullshit.

> What bullshit essentially misrepresents is neither the state of affairs to which it refers nor the beliefs of the speaker concerning that state of affairs. Those are what lies misrepresent, by virtue of being false. Since bullshit need not be false, it differs from lies in its misrepresentational intent. The bullshitter may not deceive us, or even intend to do so, either about the facts or about what he takes the facts to be. …[T]he fact about himself that the liar hides is that he is attempting to lead us away from a correct apprehension of reality; we are not to know that he wants us to believe something he supposes to be false. The fact about himself the bullshitter hides, on the other hand, is that the truth-values of his statements are of no central interest to him; what we are not

> to understand is that his intention is neither to report the truth nor to conceal it (Frankfurt 1988, 130).

Arguably, since bullshitters ignore the truth and are not guided by a desire to subvert it, they are greater enemies of truth than liars. But given that they are guided by external purposes, like the will to bind people together, to create a commitment to a certain cause, or to promote a certain behavior, this purpose could serve as a point of reference external to the debate about truth value of a statement. The debate would then shift from the epistemological level to a utilitarian one; rather than asking is this belief true one would ask, is this belief functional to the purpose I want to achieve.

Luckily, identity-supporting narrative are closer to bullshit than to lies. It is too much to expect Appiah to give his book the title *The Bullshit that Binds* but this would have been more accurate. Lies of identity are not necessarily meant to be the opposite of truth but to produce a convincing story. Those who tell them are not committed to telling a lie, they are invested in creating an appearance of accuracy that serves their goals and do not shy away from twisting the truth for that purpose.

III

Bullshit and Action

Being indifferent to the truth value of beliefs can be practical. The essence of the mythological point of view, argues Joseph Campbell is acting 'as if' something is true (Campbell, 180). Freud admitted that this kind of behavior could be both functional and rational. In his critical analysis of the role of religion he presents the point of view of the believer claiming that "even if we knew,

and could prove, that religion was not in the possession of the truth, we ought to conceal that fact and behave in ways prescribed by the philosophy of 'as if' and this in the interest of the preservation of us all" (Freud 1964, 57).[6]

Functional 'as if' behavior is justified in cases were one is confident that holding a certain belief serves a purpose. If this purpose fits other valuable projects or ends it would be reasonable to endorse it. In such cases, the belief is no more than an illustrative source of support for the set of beliefs and narratives one already holds. Such beliefs are believed to be true…

Not because the historical evidence is compelling, but because they make sense of men's present experience. They tell a story of how it came about. And events are selected for inclusion in a myth, partly because they coincide with what men think *ought* to have happened, and partly because they are consistent with the drama as a whole (Thompson 1985, 20).

The fact that bullshitters are not obsessed with misleading their listeners by saying the opposite of the truth, that they simply don't care, or want to avoid a cognitive dissonance that knowing the truth may stimulate could be the beginning of a dialogue in which rather than debating the truth value of a particular belief it is asked whether it serves well the desired purpose.

If we ask a white supremacist what he wants to achieve by adhering to a set of beliefs (rather than asking if they are true or false) we may be able to convince him that there could be other

[6] Freud then refutes this view in this essay, but not because he holds one cannot adopt an "as if" philosophy of action, but because he thinks that civilization runs a greater risk if we maintain our present attitude to religion than if we renounce it. Rather than questioning the plausibility of an "as if" philosophy, he wonders whether religious beliefs justify such behavior.

(better) ways of achieving his goals. For example we could find ways of helping him and his community to gain a sense of status and self-worth by emphasizing his own value rather than denigrating others. Stigmatizing and stereotyping and looking down on others are cheap cognitive tools, but they could be replaced with more expensive, though less aggressive, ways building one's self-confidence (a role the nation-state played very effectively.) Identifying a goal and offering alternative ways of achieving it could then be the beginning of a cognitive adjustment. Learning that one's beliefs are dysfunctional (or less functional) could lead to a change of hearts and minds.

An important aspect of changing one's view is rooted in a distinction between the different purposes of endorsing a belief. Beliefs can guide us how to act in particular cases as well as in identity-related matters.[7] Because identity is constitutive of our conception of the self than any single action it may be rational for individuals to hold a belief to be true in one context (that of identity) even if they know it to be false in another (one that is guiding a single a single action). An interesting example exposing the way individuals function when torn between conflicting beliefs grounded in different authoritative sources comes from Ethiopia. Ethiopians believe that the leopard is a Christian animal that respects the fasts of the Coptic Church. Nevertheless, they are no less careful to protect their livestock on Wednesdays and Fridays (which are fast days) than on other days of the week. "Leopards are dangerous every day; this [the Ethiopians] know by experience. They [the leopards] are Christians; tradition proves it" (Veyne 1983, xi).

[7] I am well aware that this is not a good enough distinction but space does not allow me to develop it further here.

Here is another example, Orthodox Jews place religious authorities above medical ones. During the Covid-19 pandemic many of them followed rabbinical instructions and violated safety measures that were introduced to protect them and the rest of the community. But when taken ill they allowed themselves to be hospitalized and relied on medical teams to fight for their lives. At that very moment they had to admit to themselves that payers might not be enough. And yet, if and when they were healed, they prayed and thanked God for their recovery. Like the Christians in Ethiopia they know very well that God protects those who protect themselves, thus they placed trust in modern medicine within the framework of their religious belief. Wanting to come to terms with Orthodox communities on public behavior it is then better not to try to prove the non-existence of an omnipotent God but to find ways to allow the medical and religious spheres of authority to coexist.

How do individuals compartmentalize their beliefs? How do they decide, in each particular case which of the conflicting beliefs to act upon? What if untruths spill over and lead to harmful behavior? I will not attempt to offer a full-fledged answer to these questions here but the above examples indicate that individuals often know what kind of arguments fit best in each sphere.[8] They

[8] There are cases where individuals do harm themselves due to their beliefs. A moving example is "The Child Act" by Ian McEwan that tells the story of Fiona Maye, a judge in the Family Division of the High Court of Justice of England and Wales, dealing with a case of a 17-year-old boy, Adam Henry, who is suffering from leukemia. Adam's doctors want to perform a blood transfusion, as that will allow them to use more drugs to cure him. However, Adam and his parents are Jehovah's Witnesses, and believe that having a blood transfusion is against biblical principles. She rules that, as a matter of law, Adam's welfare is the "paramount consideration" and declares that the medical treatment,

believe a certain narrative because it accords with their identity or because they accept the authority of the religious or political source conveying it, and disbelieve it on the grounds of their own experience or that of others whose authority they accept. Their actions in the different spheres are guided by different sets of beliefs. This may explain why much of the 'proof finding' efforts do not have the consequences their architects aspire to achieve. For example, in a press update President Trump said the following:

> I see the disinfectant where it knocks it out in a minute. One minute. And is there a way we can do something like that, by injection inside or almost a cleaning? So it'd be interesting to check that.

Pointing to his head, Mr. Trump went on: "I'm not a doctor. But I'm, like, a person that has a good you-know-what.[9]

Not many followers adhered to this advice as they realized its falseness, and yet they still identify with Trump's general MAGA narrative. Like the Copts and the Orthodox Jews they may suspect that parts of the narrative are false, but value other parts, which serve them well. Identity is so precious that it prevails. This is an interesting lesson. In trying to weaken people's identification with Trump, or any other political leader, the question of truth may be less important than the way he/she represents the identity of

including blood transfusion, may proceed despite the absence of Adam's consent and that of his parents. But soon after he turn 18 Adam decides to refuse any further treatment and dies.

[9] BBC News, Coronavirus: Outcry after Trump suggests injecting disinfectant as treatment 24 April 2020.

his/her voters. Attempts to swing votes should then be focused on identity issues rather than of truth finding.

IV

Identity and Freedom

Identity matters in ways that are independent of the truth, it is not grounded in preferring lies over truth but in a functionalist view that searches ways to strengthen one's self-image. This is the important lesson Appiah teaches us. And it is an optimistic one as it leaves room for reflection and change.

If essentialism is a misstep in the realm of creed, color, country, class and culture, as it is in the domain of gender and sexuality, then it is never true that identity leaves us no choices. The existentialists were right: existence precedes essence: we are before we are anything in particular. But the fact that identify comes without essences does not mean they come without entanglements. And the fact that they need interpreting and negotiating does not mean that each of us can do with them whatever we will (Appiah 2018, 217).

Introducing choice into the process of shaping our identity does not imply that it is unsubstantial or marginal. Our affiliations are not weakened "by the constant exercise of choice, they are in fact strengthen by it" (Tamir 1993, 22).

Acknowledging the indifference to truth that lies at the core of our identities may, as I have argued, be the beginning of a social dialogue and reflection. Preserving our identity while feeling compelled to reflect about it and reform it is an important feature of modern life. Stressing the ability, or responsibility, to choose makes Appiah's discourse of identity a liberal one. He thus joins

those liberals who think identity is as paramount [essential?] to our humanity as choice.

> Rejecting the assumption that individuals have the potential to reflect and refuse the values and norms offered to them in the course of their socialization sets us on a slippery slope leading to social and cultural determinism. Every conception of the person acceptable to liberals must therefore include the notion of this potential (Tamir 1993, 25).

To sum up: Some disrespect for the truth may be necessary in order to fulfil basic human needs. Identities endow individual life with meaning and foster illusions desperately needed in an age characterized by rapid social change, fear and alienation. The price, which includes fostering false beliefs, would be enormously onerous if it meant depriving individuals of their ability to discern true beliefs from lies, forever excluding them from the realm of well-informed rational behavior. But as we have seen another options are available. They are grounded in the ability to adopt two parallel lines of reasoning, relying on two different attitudes to evidence and proof. Appiah's excellent book forces us to reflect on issues whose importance transcend time and place, and will shape the future of our society, for better or worse.

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APPIAH ON COLLECTIVE IDENTITIES AND LIBERALISM

BY

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Appiah on Collective Identities and Liberalism*

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We prepared this special issue of *Philosophy & Public Issues* on Kwame Anthony Appiah's latest book *The Lies That Bind: Rethinking Identity* to explore in detail a political philosophy that is rather unique on the contemporary scene. Appiah is a staunch liberal and cosmopolitan but defends at the same time an ethics of collective identities. Generally, liberalism has great problems with collective identities.[1] Feminists, multiculturalists, African Americans, postcolonial critics, the LGBT movement, indigenous people and let's not forget Marxists, to name only the politically most outspoken, all turned eventually against liberalism because of this inherent difficulty to recognize, for good or for bad, the foundational character of collective identities in society. There have been of course many efforts to reconcile liberalism with identity,[2] but Appiah is among the first to provide a comprehensive liberal theory of identity that is supposed to accommodate not only

* I would like to thank Marcello di Paola for his helpful comments.
[1] See in particular Barry 2001.
[2] See for example Kymlicka 1995 as much as Raz 1994 and Tamir 1995.

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questions of nationalism and multiculturalism but also the other collective identities.

The Lies That Bind addresses the question of what exactly social phenomena such as religion, nation, race, class and culture are. Appiah believes that a more thorough understanding of their nature could help to overcome some of the worst political excesses of our time, be it the worldwide rampant populism, chauvinism, racism or religious extremism. Moreover, the truth about identities would finally make explicit their compatibility with liberalism and underline their constitutive role in a liberal democracy, a point that Appiah seeks to show in his earlier *The Ethics of Identity*.

Appiah makes two claims: First and foremost, those collective formations are about *identity*. Secondly, those identities are currently surrounded by *lies*. In the book Appiah sets out, chapter by chapter, to uncover the lies behind first religion and then nation, race, class and culture. I am going to argue that Appiah is right in criticizing a certain tendency in politics and popular discourse to essentialize social groups. The question is whether, according to the alternative account of identity that Appiah presents throughout the book, collective identities can be anything else than lies and forms of self-deception, although I stop short of drawing this conclusion. However, my broader aim is to show that collective identities stand *in opposition* to liberalism. Collective identities, contrary to widespread theoretical trends, are neither a challenge nor an opportunity for liberalism but the most evident expression of its *failure*.

According to one possible interpretation of Appiah's theory, collective identities emerge on the basis of social rules that put different social *groups* and not just individuals into competition, creating thereby inequalities between those groups. My thesis is, first, that identities on these grounds might lack normativity. It is

at least a question if there is anything ethical in identity. And secondly, that liberalism with its radical conception of equality among individuals cannot justify social rules that divide society into groups independent from individual action and attributes individuals to those groups independent from their consent. Given that in this interpretation collective identities are the result of social institutions that provide access to life prospects and primary goods on the basis of group membership, any social contract among individuals must strictly rule out collective identities as the basis of politics.

I am going to build my argument on Appiah's account of class, where he rejects the Marxist conception of class conflict in favor of an understanding of class in terms of inequalities among individuals, and not groups, that arise in an efficiency-oriented market economy. I argue that in Appiah's own theory of liberalism class identities actually cannot arise and have no place in a liberal society.

I

The Argument Against Essentialism

Appiah's argument is that today identities have fallen prey to so-called 'essentialism.' Appiah provides in the text two possible interpretations of essentialism: one in terms of generics, another in terms of properties. In the first interpretation essentialism is a sort of unwarranted generalization of the sort "Women are gentle" (Appiah 2018, 26) which wrongly implies that *all* women are gentle. In this sense, identities would be mere illusions, since there is not one property that all the members of a social group share. Although I am called a German, people actually do not refer to

anything specific. Some Germans are blond, others are dark haired, some Germans are racist, others are cosmopolitan; some Germans are rude, others have very gentle manners and so on. To summarize, generics and along with them identities are stereotypes, nothing more and nothing less.

Should this interpretation be right, Appiah would be a skeptic on identities and *whatever* talk about identities would be tantamount to lies. Yet, as I stated earlier, Appiah is a firm defender of collective identities and, as a matter of fact, when he defines essentialism, quoting the developmental psychologist Susan Gelman, he introduces an alternative interpretation of essentialism: "Essentialism is the view that certain categories have an underlying reality or true nature that one cannot observe directly, but that gives an object its identity, and is responsible for other similarities that category members share" (*ibid.*). Here the use of identity labels is not arbitrary and identities have meaning and reference. To go back to our example, the German nation exists and all Germans share something, have something in common. However, the commonalities that members of a certain group have are not due to some underlying property – be it natural, metaphysical but also social. Appiah's conclusion confirms this reading in terms of mere contingency: "It's worth insisting from the start that essentialism about identities is usually wrong: in general, there isn't some inner essence that explains why people of a certain social identity are the way they are" (*ibid.*, 29).

In this regard, religion, though existent as a category, is not about scriptures. The nation is not rooted in blood or "something spiritual, the soul or spirit of the folk: the *Volksgeist*" (*ibid.*, 82). Race has nothing to do with skin color. Cultures do not have their origin in certain values. And class not only is not determined by

the possession of means of production but does neither depend on merit, as more recent theories propose.

Appiah's objection is that identities in today's world do not correspond to any essences. Identities cannot be traced back to any particular property. Scriptures are the result of historical contingencies and religious believers "can also disagree about what's *in* the books. (…) Scriptural passages can get new readings" (*ibid.*, 54-55). Given that "all of us in fact belong to more than one group with shared ancestry," Appiah asks "what, beyond a putative shared ancestry, makes a nation yours?" (*ibid.*, 74). Moreover, "the reality of linguistic and cultural variation within a community can be in tension with the romantic nationalist vision of a community united by language and culture. Indeed, this tension is the rule, rather than the exception" (*ibid.*, 86). Gregor Mendel's discovery of genes makes the biological concept of race obsolete. Merit is a matter of moral luck and therefore cannot be the basis of class. Last but not least, values are shared among cultures: "The values that European humanists like to espouse belong as much to an African or an Asian who takes them up with enthusiasm as to a European" (*ibid.*, 211).

And as a matter of fact, essentialism seems to be *the* problem in many of today's political conflicts. A literalist reading of the Koran is at the basis of much of Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism. An understanding of the nation in terms of kinship has contributed to the exclusion of immigrants around the world. The culturalist interpretation of the nation has led to the forced assimilation of minorities. The division of the world in naturally superior and inferior races has provided the grounds for racism, colonialism, slavery and genocide. As also Michael Sandel in *The Tyranny of Meritocracy* argues, attributing class status to individual effort and merit in our increasingly unequal Western societies is at the root of

populism and the current class wars. Declaring human rights and democracy as Western inventions and products has indeed given rise to something similar as a clash of civilizations.

I believe Appiah is fully right that those conflicts are in fact all *group* conflicts and that they won't be overcome denying the social reality of groups, as many postmodern and postcolonial thinkers tend to do, who categorically refute essentialism.[3] Which is then the reality of social groups? Which is the truth about collective identities that helps to avoid this conflictual stance?

II

Collective Identity as Practice

Appiah puts forth a notion with regard to identities that goes back to Pierre Bourdieu. It is a certain *habitus* that underlies and constitutes identities, a *habitus* that Bourdieu defines as a "bodily hexis, a durable way of standing, speaking, walking, and thereby of feeling and thinking" (quoted in Appiah 2018, 21) and which is largely unreflective and unconscious (*ibid.*, 25). In other words, the reality of collective identity consists in shared social *practices*.

Appiah illustrates this point with respect to religions when he distinguishes the three dimensions of belief, practice and community. He affirms that "abstract beliefs mean very little if you lack a direct relationship to traditions of practice, conventions of interpretation, communities of worship" (*ibid.*, 37). Hence, what makes a Muslim or, as a consequence, a German is not the Koran

[3] See Bayart 2005 for a very vivid illustration of this point in international politics. For a more theoretical account see Bhabha 1994.

or a particular ancestry but simply forms of life, common patterns of beliefs and action.

It is important to note here that Appiah's conception of religion in terms of *identity* is quite different from the one proposed in contemporary liberal theory. Both Rawls and Habermas conceive religion in purely doctrinal terms and as a consequence see the moderation of religion as a matter of practical reason and justification. Appiah's practice-based account indicates, as we are going to see, that the sources of religious toleration might be found in society rather than in the single individual and its reason.

Identities based on practices are clearly more open, fluid and porous than those grounded in some objective criteria. Though white, living for a sufficient time among Africans, I could indeed become at least in part a *black* person, as much as the African Anton Wilhelm Amo was a *German* philosopher (*ibid.*, 107-110). Identities stop to be exclusive, yet this does not entail that they must become properly liberal. In *Islam Observed*, Clifford Geertz shares Appiah's practice-based notion of religion, however he does not therefore sustain that the more open-minded, progressive Indonesian Islam is more Islamic or better than the conservative, doctrinal Moroccan Islam.

Although I believe that Appiah is right to conceive social groups in terms of shared practices, I also think that the argument is not yet sufficient for sustaining that common practices constitute identities that are fundamentally *liberal* and tolerant. Appiah's larger claim, that takes already shape early on in *In My Father's House*, is that there is not only a compatibility between identity politics and liberalism, but that social identities are the sources of individualism and allow for individuality in the first place. Appiah maintains on the basis of John Stuart Mill's theory that with the help of social

identities individuals are in a position to fashion a self.[4] Therefore he cannot avoid discussing the sources of shared practices, also because a theory of *habitus* is largely compatible with essentialism.

III

The Sources of Collective Identities

Appiah makes different claims in this regard. The first theory he takes into consideration is that of voluntarism. He refers here to Ernest Renan who "argued, what really matters in making a nation, beyond these shared stories, is 'the clearly expressed desire to continue a common life.' That's why he said that a nation's existence 'is, if you will pardon the metaphor, a daily plebiscite.' What makes 'us' a people, ultimately, is a commitment to governing a common life *together*" (Appiah 2018, 102). The *habitus* has its origins in the individuals' will and is basically their voluntary creation. "Recognize that nations are invented and you'll see they're always being *re*invented" (*ibid.*). If identities are indeed the result of practical reason, then it is plausible, as Christine Korsgaard (1996) demonstrates, that identities are *moral* constructions. However, in the conclusion of the book Appiah clearly stresses the limits of the voluntarist position: "There is a liberal fantasy in which identities are merely chosen, so we are all free to be what we choose to be. Identities work only because, once

[4] Appiah argues that "collective identities provide what we might call scripts: narratives that people can use in shaping their projects and in telling their life stories" (Appiah 2005, 22). Discussing the example of the butler in Mr. Stevens in Kazuo Ishiguro's novel *The Remains of the Day*, Appiah claims that "he plans to live *as* a butler, his father's son, a man, a loyal Englishman. What structures his sense of his life, is something less like a blueprint and more like what we nowadays call an 'identity'" (*ibid.*, 16).

they get their grip on us, they command us, speaking to us as an inner voice; and because others, seeing who they think we are, call on us, too" (Appiah 2018, 217).

With regard to race, Appiah mentions further the theory of social constructionism – "race is a social construct" (*ibid.*, 131). Although also social constructionism considers identities to be the result of human inventions and imaginations, it does not see them as individual voluntary and intentional creations. The theory sustains that certain, such as racial labels emerge in the context of in particular scientific discourses that seek to constitute knowledge and truth and as a consequence result in the control and domination of certain subaltern groups of people. A constructionist understanding of identities leaves at least in theory room for ideological critique,[5] subversions and new counterhegemonic constructions,[6] although Appiah concedes that "the recognition that these differences are produced by social processes has not made it any less difficult to alter them" (Appiah 2018, 131).

In a sense, Appiah is neither a convinced voluntarist nor a social constructionist on identities. And I believe again that he has good reasons for this. Voluntarists face an objection that already Hegel raises against Kant[7] and that in the case of social identities gains particular significance. Hegel maintains that practical reason remains empty and merely subjective. And what reason could a person have to invent or endorse some practical identity rather

[5] Cf. Haslanger 2017.

[6] For the critical role of agency within regimes of truth see in particular Bhabha 1994 as well as Butler 1990 and Mbembe 2001.

[7] See Hegel 1991, 120-139 (§§ 135-140).

than another? Any choice is by definition arbitrary and therefore this existentialist stance can never give rise to a veritable commitment.[8]

Also social constructionists face the problem of arbitrariness, since it is not clear why certain discourses emerge and not others. Is it really the case that discourses about race, class or nation arise spontaneously without any underlying causes? Moreover, why should individuals identify with those labels, in particular in cases where these draw negative pictures fraught with prejudice? Against what Appiah sustains in his earlier work,[9] it seems that people just do not have reasons to identify with insulting stereotypes and that the simple enunciation of labels cannot have social and psychological effects, determining how people are supposed to conduct their lives.[10] By the way, essentialism runs into similar problems when it has to explain why certain properties are supposed to be socially and politically salient.

Yet, Appiah mentions repeatedly in the text a third possible theory of social groups that explains *why* individuals develop a certain *habitus*, but also identification, and thereby avoids the arbitrariness of both voluntarism and social constructionism. Next to *habitus* and a certain psychological tendency towards essentialism, Appiah lists clannishness as a third constitutive feature of identity. He reports the Robbers Cave experiment[11] where preadolescent boys with similar sociological background were sent to a remote summer camp in Oklahoma and divided into two groups, while neither group was aware of the other's existence.

[8] Cf. Kaul 2020, *Identity and the Difficulty of Emancipation*, 29-42.
[9] Cf. Appiah 2005, 66.
[10] Cf. Kaul 2020, 145-168.
[11] This is the reference: Sherif et al. 1988.

After about one week (phase 1), the two groups were introduced and brought into competition with each other through games and activities that created winners and losers. Situations were also devised whereby one group gained at the expense of the other. In the course of the four-day series of competitions between the groups (phase 2) initial prejudices escalated into fierce antagonism, aggressions and violence. The groups also gave themselves names, the Rattlers and the Eagles, and identified with different, partly opposing norms of behavior (Appiah 2005, 63).

The conclusion Muzafer Sherif, the experiment's lead researcher, draws is that social *identities* develop and conflict between groups occurs only once two groups are put in competition for limited resources. The formation of social groups (phase 1 of the experiment) takes place through the pursuit of common goals that require cooperative discussion, planning and execution. During this organizational process social norms develop, leadership and group structure emerge. However, group identification as much as group differences, prejudices and stereotypes seem to be the result of competition and conflict over scarce resources. Appiah states that "these quasi-cultural differences could be recognized in the way each group talked about itself and the other group. The boys didn't develop opposing identities because they had different norms; they developed different norms because they had opposing identities" (Appiah 2018, 30). In his earlier work, Appiah quotes Jean-Loup Amselle who argues that cultural identities "might be seen, in the first instance, as the consequence, not the cause, of conflicts" (Appiah 2005, 64).

The experiment shows that groups with their shared practices, *habitus* and one could even say *culture* develop spontaneously once individuals need to cooperate to achieve determinate goals.

However, group *identity*, the fact of a second-order endorsement of the group itself with its presumed norms, and the resulting distinction from other groups happen only at the moment other groups are perceived as threats. In this sense, culture is a first-order theory in fact different from identity that is a second-order theory,[12] a psychological reaction to social rules or facts putting at risk the well-being of similarly situated individuals. The important point here is that identities are a byproduct of the rules that organize society. The more these rules introduce competition between groups, the more social identities will be accentuated and conflictual.

Appiah's studies of in particular culture and race confirm Sherif's theory that goes under the name of realistic conflict theory. With regard to the idea of the West and its civilization, Appiah remarks that "the first recorded use of a word for Europeans as a kind of person seems to have come out of this history of conflict," resulting from the Muslim conquest of Europe from the 8th century onwards. "Simply put, the very idea of a 'European' was first used to contrast Christians and Muslims" (Appiah 2018, 193-194).

Concerning race, Appiah observes that "many historians have concluded that one reason for the increasingly negative view of the Negro through the later eighteenth century was the need to salve the consciences of those who trafficked in and exploited enslaved men and women" (*ibid.*, 117). And today, "the persistence of material inequality gives a mission to racial identities, for how can we discuss inequities based on color without reference to groups defined by color?" (*ibid.*, 132). This means race was first functional

[12] For an account of identity as a second-order theory see Bilgrami 2014, 241-259.

to colonialism and slave trade and became then a source of identification in the struggle against resulting inequalities between races.

IV

Collective Identity and Group Consciousness

Still, the question is if the Robbers Cave experiment really provides the elements for a theory of collective *identities*. One might think that the theory of collective identity Appiah presents is largely confirmed by the experiment, though the theory might need some integration. According to Appiah, collective identities come first with labels and rules that pick out the members of a group. Secondly, identities have a specific *content* that provides reasons for action. In this sense, identities are sources of *normativity*. Thirdly, identities require or give other people *reasons* to treat the bearer of an identity in certain ways (Appiah 2018, 8-12).[13]

As Appiah is very much aware, in particular the latter two points that involve normativity and ethics are despite a certain sociological correctness problematic from a liberal point of view. He states that "gender, sexuality, and racial and ethnic identity have all been profoundly shaped (even, in a sense, produced) by histories of sexism, homophobia, racism and ethnic hatred" (*ibid.*, 69). However, in Appiah's theory of identity, it is not only alright but almost obligatory that we live according to our identities and others are *justified* to treat us as such. To put it somewhat provocatively, if you are born as a girl into a working class family, you have all the reasons to live your life as a working class woman and others are right to treat you as such. Liberal intuitions suggest

[13] See also Appiah 2005, 66-69.

that in contexts of classism, racism, sexism and so on something might be wrong here and indeed the Robbers Cave experiment adjusts the picture.

It is true that identification with the group takes place. Yet, group identity itself is only the result or, as Appiah puts it in the quote above, the product of society's organization. Identity is not the cause but the effect. Should we change the rules of the game, identities are going to change with them, as in the last, third phase of the experiment that I am going to describe in a moment. Moreover, although group identity involves some form of normativity, identification is merely of psychological, reactive nature rather than purely volitional.[14] We should therefore only add a forth point in Appiah's theory that states that identity, consisting in group labels and identification, has its origin and distinguishable cause in social institutions that distribute resources along group lines. This way we seem to keep together the ethics of identity as much as individual rationality, agency *and* causation, first-person *and* third-person perspective.

However, it is interesting to note that, in the Robbers Cave experiment, identification turned rapidly from an apparent solution into a problem, diverting attention from the real cause of the group conflict. Moreover, the youngsters developed something close to a full-blown moral identity. Of course the context was that of a game, but applied to larger social conflicts identity really risks to be a sort of opium making people blind to what is going on. The problem with the social-psychological approach is not so much, as Akeel Bilgrami holds, the risk of a certain "surplus phenomenology of identity," according to which identity acquires "a momentum of

[14] For the distinction see Strawson 2008 on reactive attitudes and Frankfurt 1988 on volitional identity.

its own that may survive even after the function has lapsed" (Bilgrami 2014, 229). The fundamental problem is that this way identity is *not* functional to individual well-being *in the first place*, at least in the cases of class, gender and race where identification goes to the expense of the oppressed group.

Marx, different from later Marxists like E. P. Thompson whose position Appiah embraces (Appiah 2018, 142-143), avoids, to my knowledge, entirely the term class *identity* and prefers that of class *consciousness* to underline that class is not about ethics and the good life but a product of capitalism that is going to be overcome through collective action. Group consciousness might be a rational necessity given the way society is organized, but it shouldn't be attributed any kind of normative significance. Some people of the working class might of course come "to view manual labor as a source not just of income but of pride" (*ibid.*, 159). But this for Marxists would be a matter of *false* consciousness.

Robbers Cave suggests nevertheless that identification in certain situations seems to be inevitable, although it therefore must be neither rational nor functional. Later Marxists explain this conundrum differently attributing it either, as Gramsci, to the cultural hegemony of the bourgeoisie (Gramsci 2011) or, as Althusser, to processes of *subjectification* (Althusser 2013). Although identity in this sense is not an outright lie tantamount to false consciousness and involves probably even a form of dignity, I think the Robbers Cave experiment shows that identification is still *not* a source of normativity.

Appiah derives from Robbers Cave the "psychological truth that we humans ascribe a great deal of significance to the distinction between those who share our identities and those who don't, the insiders and the outsiders" and the fact that "we are

clannish creatures" (Appiah 2018, 30-31). In reality, I believe that the experiment shows that individuals *under particular circumstances* tend towards identification, but clannishness does not therefore have to go along with moral attributes. The Robbers Cave experiment was made up of a third phase in which Sherif tried various means of reducing the built-up hostility and low-level violence between the groups. He came to the conclusion that superordinate goals (goals that require both groups to achieve them) reduced animosities significantly and more effectively than other strategies (e.g., communication, contact) that involve practical reasoning.

Appiah's theory of identity focuses on the moral self, whereas Robbers Cave puts at the center the question of justice. Insofar as social groups and the conflicts among them are not about morality but anchored in society's organization, Robbers Cave shows that social divisions can be overcome *politically* with the right institutional design. In this last section, I would like to suggest that, in Appiah's analysis of class, liberalism appears precisely as the theory that is supposed to put an end not only to identity conflicts but to identity as such.

V

Class Identity and Liberalism

To some extent, the concept of class with its emphasis on class conflict and class struggle should be the test case of the Robbers Cave experiment. In fact, Marx comes to identify the capitalist system as the origin of classes in the wake of the Industrial Revolution, substituting the hereditary class system with its different estates characteristic of feudalism that, as Appiah rightly remarks (Appiah 2018, 171), resembles in many respects today's

caste system in India.[15] The caste system ascribes explicitly individuals to different social groups on a hereditary basis, in the sense that there are social rules that determine from the outset the distribution of resources, privileges and rights. The emerging liberalism in the 19th century after the French Revolution sought precisely to abolish those social rules that divided society into estates and introduce the individual's will as the sole criteria that decides about his or her place in society.

Hegel, who anticipates this transition, states clearly, despite his recognition of the *objective* legitimacy and necessity of estates, that "the question of which particular estate the individual will belong to is influenced by his natural disposition, birth, and circumstances, although the ultimate and essential determinant is *subjective opinion* and the *particular arbitrary will*, which are accorded their right, their merit, and their honour in this sphere. Thus, *what* happens in this sphere through inner necessity is at the same time *mediated by the arbitrary will*, and for the subjective consciousness, it has the shape of being the product of its own will" (Hegel 1991, 237, § 206).

Accordingly, liberalism and its radical system of formal equality among citizens were supposed to gradually overcome the old class system. Not in the sense that it would not allow for substantial social and economic inequalities, but that those inequalities had their origin only in individual freedom and not in some social institution. Now Marx contests the very fact that liberalism is the end of history and does away with social barriers and social conflicts. His thesis is that the laws of capital introduce social divisions similar to feudalism, that individual will alone cannot overcome, and thereby constitute social classes. Capitalism divides society irreconcilably in those who own the means of production

[15] Cf. Dirks 2001.

and those who do not own them, the capitalist class and working class.

Appiah is skeptical about Marx's notion of class, because it is both too reductive and too narrow. He criticizes its economism and prefers Max Weber's and Bourdieu's richer accounts in terms of status, honor, power as much as cultural, social and human capital other than financial capital. Yet he repeatedly recognizes that "the connection between class and wealth, though complex, is indissoluble" (Appiah 2018, 144) and "there's an intrinsic association between class and money" (*ibid.*, 163).

Moreover, according to Appiah there are more than the two opposing classes of capitalists and proletarians, even though he reports a certain erosion of the middle class even among those with graduate degrees in the United States. This trend towards a two-class society with a tiny upper class and a immense lower class find some confirmation by Thomas Piketty's well-known study on the rise of inequalities (Piketty 2014)[16] as well as Appiah's own observation that "many elite schools take more students from the top 1 percent of the income distribution than from the bottom 60 percent" (Appiah 2018, 173). Richard Reeves observes that "there has been no increase in inequality below the eightieth percentile. All the inequality action is above that line." (quoted *ibid.*).

My idea is that Appiah rejects Marx's conception of class not necessarily because of its sociological inaccurateness, although his objections are certainly well taken. Appiah is aware that, historically, the formation of class identity takes place within the context of an irreducible social conflict. He quotes E. P.

[16] See also the study by Leonhardt and Serkez 2020 on inequalities in the United States over the last decades where the income of the richest rose by 420% and that of the lower classes by a maximum of 50%.

Thompson in this regard who sustains that "class happens [when shared experience leads some men] to feel and articulate the identity of their interests . . . as against other men, their rulers and employers" (*ibid.*, 143). Only in the face of this insurmountable difference, "people in what had once been called the 'lower orders' developed a growing sense of self-respect, something that manifested itself in the development of a self-conscious working class" (*ibid.*, 158).

Appiah rejects Marx, because, as a *liberal*, he cannot accept a society in which class division is a matter of social institutions rather than individual freedom. If Marx should be right and the institution of capitalism divides society into something similar as a caste system, liberalism would lose all its justification but also appeal. Therefore Appiah has a conception of class in terms of more basic economic and social inequalities. He believes that "money and status are social rewards that can encourage people to do the things that need doing" (*ibid.*, 181). And "the social rewards of wealth and honor are inevitably going to be unequally shared, because that is the only way they can serve their role as incentives for human behavior" (*ibid.*, 183). Social hierarchies and with them different classes arise because meritocracy is the only way to guarantee efficiency.

But for Appiah already meritocracy and the resulting class system risk to have illiberal traits. "Neither talent nor effort, the two things that would determine rewards in the world of the meritocracy, is itself something earned" (*ibid.*, 180), since both do not depend on the will of individuals but on their natural endowments and upbringing. As a consequence, in a truly liberal society, institutional desert, the fact that people are rewarded according to certain criteria laid down by institutions on the basis of their respective needs, should not be confused with the

worthiness of individuals. An individual's place in a fully liberal society is "a matter of luck" (*ibid.*, 181), the result of the "massive contingency of human life" (*ibid.*, 182). Class positions are purely accidental and as such do not contradict the spirit of liberalism.

Yet, it is not exactly clear if Appiah's liberalism can actually account for class identities. Appiah reports Tocqueville's point of view in this regard who maintains that "what is most important for democracy, is not that there are no great fortunes; it is that great fortunes do not rest in the same hands. In this way, there are the rich, but they do not form a *class*" (*ibid.*, 151, emphasis mine). Tocqueville certainly has in mind here the rigid, hereditary caste-like system in feudal Europe with which he contrasts American democratic society, but there is something to the point that class in an actual liberal society is almost an oxymoron.

How could class labels apply in an open society in which citizens cannot only move from rags to riches at any time with some luck or effort but are supposed to change social positions incessantly? If class goes along with an attitude, a consciousness and even identification as Appiah suggests, how could those develop in a social system that is constantly in flux? As a matter of fact, any form of identification that attributes "normative significance" to class would be counterproductive and avoid the desired mobility. Moreover, individuals have little reason to identify with class labels that relegate them to the bottom of society, if their social position is a matter of bad luck or personal failure. At best they can feel ashamed, embarrassed or depressed but not empowered and proud of their destiny. I think it is no accident that in current Western societies, constituted around the ideal of meritocracy, class and class solidarity have lost their political salience and have become substituted by populism. If it is

up to the individuals to carve out their lives, only the people as a whole and not classes can oppose injustices.

VI

Towards a Comprehensive Liberalism

Appiah is of course aware that in today's societies it is not so much luck or meritocracy that determines in which positions people end up but the socio-economic background of the family, their class. He quotes Richard Reeves' work *Dream Hoarders* to exemplify the "hoarding mechanisms" by which "nearly all parents are going to try to gain unfair advantages for their offspring" (Appiah, 2018, 172). As Appiah further quotes Daniel Markovits, "American meritocracy has thus become a mechanism for the dynastic transmission of wealth and privilege across generations" (*ibid.*, 173), "a modern-day aristocracy" (*ibid.*, 174) in which class is as fixed as in a system of caste. This brings us back to Marx's point and seems to underlie much of Trump's claim that the system is rigged.

The question is if the game is irreparably fixed. Both populists and Appiah do not believe so, though of course on a different basis. Libertarian populists share the belief "that America mostly is and certainly should be a society in which opportunities belong to those who have earned them" (*ibid.*, 169) and accept the class system on that basis. But they believe that globalization and immigration have undermined the meritocratic system, so that the people receives much less than what it deserves.

Given that libertarianism tends to solidify class boundaries rather than to make them permeable, Appiah relies on an account of social justice to realize liberalism's promise of equality and social

mobility. He maintains that "historically, we have used inheritance taxes to help even out the opportunities. Further democratizing the opportunities for advancement is something we know how to do" (*ibid.*, 183). As Rawls and luck egalitarians, he believes that redistribution is the key to equal opportunity, helping individuals to enter the market more or less on an equal footing but also to social security, once they exit the market.

In the last decades, liberal politics has been far too complacent with inequalities on the basis of class, gender, race, culture, ethnicity but also of the nation. The reason is a misunderstood pluralism that attributes moral value to collective identities[17] and therefore results in a neutral state and laissez-faire politics. Concerns with pluralism have displaced questions of social justice and in this sense the rise of populism is little surprising.[18]

I think Susan Moller Okin's work on gender equality shows to what extent a liberal theory actually requires substantial public interventions even in the private sphere and family (Okin 1989). From this perspective, it would be surprising that equality among the other identities would not require the same institutionalist approach in the domains of the market, civil society and international relations. As a consequence, traditional identities might slowly disappear. To make just one example: The increasing equality of opportunity between men and women in at least some parts of the world over the last decades has contributed to what the magazine *National Geographic* (2017) calls a gender revolution and a continuous blurring of gender roles.

[17] For an account of the different types of pluralism see Kaul and Salvatore 2020.
[18] See also Sandel's criticism of political liberalism in Sandel 2020.

How this new liberal theory will look like is the big question. It is the merit of *The Lies That Bind* to have initiated the search for this new, more comprehensive liberalism.

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SYMPOSIUM

IDENTITY AND LIBERAL POLITICS

RESPONSES TO CRITICS

BY

KWAME ANTHONY APPIAH

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Responses to Critics

Kwame Anthony Appiah

Introduction

Each of these four essays challenges claims suggested or asserted in my book about how to respond to the facts of identity in ways that will make the world better. They also all suggest (even if they don't assert) that I could – and perhaps should – have said more about these questions, which are, in the broadest sense, political. I could offer in mitigation that I did say in the introduction to the book that I thought philosophers "contribute to public discussions of moral and political life … not by telling you what to think, but by providing an assortment of concepts and theories you can use to decide what to think for yourself." And I do think that there is a useful place for a book that tries simply to understand how identity works, seeking also to limn the forms of some central specific identities. In answering questions about how to deal with political and social challenges posed by the ways identities really work in the

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world, it must be helpful to have such an understanding. But in these responses, I want both to get clearer about my actual views on the questions on which these essays challenge me, both by way of insisting on what I did say in the book, and by saying more than I did. I cannot take up every useful idea or contest every misconception. I will try to focus on a few large themes. And let me say at the start how grateful I am for the thoughtful attention of these four colleagues and to this journal for asking them to respond to my book.

I

Volker Kaul

Volker Kaul's essay focuses on the ways in which *The Lies that Bind* pursues a liberal agenda while, at the same time, endorsing social identities that seem at least in tension with and perhaps even just inconsistent with liberalism. I agree that my position is broadly liberal, and that liberalism can be in tension with actually existing identities. But in trying to defend a liberalism that is friendly to identity, I had hoped to demonstrate that liberalism is compatible with the existence of identities, even if it must reject some forms of identity and insist on the liberalizing reform of others. I find much of what Kaul has to say congenial, and I am grateful for his careful reconstruction of my arguments. What I'd like to do in response, rather than taking him on point by point, is to sketch a conception of the legitimate role of identity in a liberal political order.

Liberalism like all significant traditions of political thought is as much a collection of arguments and themes as it is one coherent system of values and beliefs. I find my own place in that tradition in seeing the state as centrally concerned with the creation of a context in which each citizen has the possibility of making a

dignified human life. I think, like most contemporary liberals, that this requires a bundle of somewhat diverse civil and political rights; but, again like many, I think that the state also has a role in making sure that every citizen has access to the bundle of economic, social, and cultural resources that a dignified life requires. At least since Mill, the liberal tradition has recognized that providing for the needs of all requires acknowledging their diversity:

> [D]ifferent persons also require different conditions for their spiritual development; and can no more exist healthily in the same moral, than all variety of plants can exist in the same physical atmosphere and climate. The same things which are helps to one person towards the cultivation of his higher nature, are hindrances to another... Such are the differences among human beings in their sources of pleasure, their susceptibilities of pain, and the operation on them of different physical and moral agencies, that unless there is a corresponding diversity in their modes of life, they neither obtain their fair share of happiness, not grow up to the mental, moral, and aesthetic statures of which their nature is capable. (Mill 1989, 68).

My view is that among the socially provided resources in a just liberal society, there will be a variety of identities, produced through processes of negotiation among equals. They will have to be various in recognition of this diversity of persons. Precisely because identities, as I have defined them, involve pre-given structures of constraints, it may be that the forms of identity that meet a person growing up in a society fail to provide them with a way of being in the world that suits the needs and interests they discover that they have. Then they must militate for change. But they couldn't find their way into a human world at all if they didn't

have some such options. The idea of a human world without identities makes no sense.

So, Kaul is not completely right to say that I "cannot accept a society in which class division is a matter of social institutions rather than individual freedom." If there are social identities associated with different places in hierarchies of wealth and honor – and that is what I take to be the key to current class structures – they can be made compatible with liberalism, but only if people are not denied access to the most highly remunerated or honored positions on the basis of their other identities and only if every position is compatible with human dignity. Since what dignity requires is, in part, a matter of changing social understandings, we can only know if this is possible once we try to achieve it. It is true that I am skeptical of this possibility, and so I think of class as one of the kinds of identity that we should do without. But that is not because its structure is imposed on people through a process of social negotiation: it is because of the kind of structure that it is.

On the other hand, I do not see any reason to think that gender – social identities grounded in real or imagine differences in the sexual body – cannot be reformed, through such processes of social negotiation, in ways to make all gender options – male, female, gay, straight, bi, cis, trans, non-binary, intersex – consistent with human dignity. Indeed, I am hoping that that is where we are going.

Settling questions like these is in part a matter of what Mill called "experiments of living." Different groups in different societies explore different options. Seeing them, others outside can borrow and adapt. These are all collective processes, but they should serve the needs of individuals. Where they can be shaped to that end, they are compatible, I think, with a liberal concern for human dignity.

II

Michael James

Michael James makes two important criticisms of my argument. The first is that in stressing the error in essentialism I seem to suggest that a wider grasp of the truths of anti-essentialism would reduce political conflicts around identity. "Although I am thoroughly convinced by Appiah's anti-essentialism," he writes, "I am more skeptical that epistemological transformation will prove nearly as useful in mitigating identity conflict" (James 2020, 34). This is because he thinks that a good deal of identity conflict arises because people feel threatened – his essay, recall, is entitled "Essentialism or Threat-perception" – and are thus mobilized against people of other identities whether they essentialize them or not.

It was natural to think that, because I lay so much stress on the errors of essentialism in my criticisms of the way people think about identities, I must believe that combatting essentialism will contribute centrally to undoing some of the harms done in the name of identity. But I don't anywhere say this in the book, and, for the record, my view of the contribution of anti-essentialism to identity-conflict is more modest.

Furthermore, as I'll say at the end, I do have views about the mitigation of identity conflict, and the central strategies I favor could be pursued even if essentialist views persisted, even, indeed, if they were correct.

But I think it is important to see that identity-conflict is not the only problem identities raise; and, as Sally Haslanger rightly sees in her essay (2020), a significant part of my interest lies elsewhere. My central concern in this book was ethical not political: in allowing people to understand how identities work

in their own lives, they are freed from the sense that their identities are somehow inevitable and fixed and thus more able to develop strategies for working to reshape the identities they live with. A second virtue of this sort of analysis is that it helps even those who are satisfied with their identities to grasp more clearly how others might not be; and thus, to develop empathy for demands for changes in identity of the sort that trans people have successfully articulated in the last couple of decades. Dialogue about these issues is a part of the social process of moving identities in directions that work better for more people.

And, in fact, I do not even think that identities have to be conceived in an essentialist way, or in terms of the sort of essences that have traditionally been associated with them. James is right that much modern conflict around race is organized not by biological essentialism but by cultural essentialism; and, perhaps he is correct, too, in supposing that some of it is not really essentialist at all.

I am less certain about this second point. If you respond spontaneously with negative attitudes to Black people, it is natural to think that, at some level, perhaps below conscious awareness, you think that Black people have something deep and important in common. If you don't think that, why respond to them all in that way? But, in any case, I take this to be an empirical question, of the sort that is explored by psychologists working on racial attitudes – including implicit ones; and that literature suggest to me that the fact that people do not defend essentialist views doesn't mean they don't have them or fall back into them routinely when they are not vigilantly policing their own attitudes. So, I would need persuading that, as he says, "[o]ver the years, the number of white Americans who believe that racial identity is primarily biological has steadily declined,

so that now only a small minority holds such a view" (James 2020, 39). And, once I was persuaded of that, I would need evidence that the resulting position of these White Americans was not a form of cultural essentialism.

Now James had begun by pointing out, usefully and correctly, that in using gender as a model for identity, I picked a form of identity that is not transmitted inter-generationally within groups to model identities that normally are. Typically, you share your religion, nationality, race, class, and culture with your parents; almost always, though, you don't share your gender with them.

This point made, he suggests that the model has misled me.

> Appiah is certainly correct that we must discard the 19th century science of essentialism in favour of the best intellectual tools of the 21st century. But doing so is no guarantee that it will heal the social andpolitical problems surrounding identity conflict, and part of the reason stems from the disjuncture between those identities that are inter-generational, like race, religion, or class, and those that are not, like gender or sexuality. (James 2020, 37).

Now, I agree, of course, that the forms of identity-based violence associated with identities standardly inherited in families are often different from those associated with identities that are not. More generally, the ways in which descent-based identities work are clearly connected with the fact that, in being centered on families, they draw in a particular way on the sentiments of intimate life. I am not so convinced, though, that the reason that the dissolution of essentialism doesn't eradicate identity-conflict is that xenophobia and religious bigotry and classism are associated with descent-based identities. But that is only because, as I'll argue

in closing, the solutions to identity-conflict I favor can work with gender, too, and, as I've already said, they don't depend on anti-essentialism.

James's second main line of objection is that I fail to attend to the role of inter-group threat as a source of inter-group conflict. I agree that I do say little about this, but that is because, as I say, my focus in the book wasn't on inter-group conflict – on war, pogroms, revolutions – at all. He argues that when people act on the basis of one identity to mobilize against another, it is often because they feel threatened by those others. This must be true. He gives as an example the shift of some white working-class voters from supporting Barack Obama to voting for Donald Trump because of a shift from a sense of class threat to a sense of a racial threat. But notice that there is no evidence of an objective shift in the situation of those voters from being more threatened as working-class to being more threatened as white.[1] What shifted in this case, then, was which form of identity was salient for those voters. It was a shift in attitudes not in the situation.

But speaking of threat as a source of conflict strikes me as unhelpful unless we recognize two things, both of which have to do with the way identity works. The first is that what matters is not whether someone's individual position is truly under threat. It is perceptions of threat, not their reality, that matter in motivating conflict. And drawing attention to a person's identity can sometimes lead them to feel threatened whether or not they face any actual personal danger. Talk of White racism can make White people feel threatened, whether or not they are in danger. Talk of

[1] There are interesting questions about how they understood the threat in ways that could seem morally legitimate even to them. Arlie Russell Hochschild's work is very helpful in understanding this moral understanding. Cf. Hochschild 2018.

sexism can make men defensive, even when their personal material situation is not at risk.

The second point about identity and threat is that in warfare or in communal riots, it is not really threats to *me* that motivate: it is threats to *us*. So, as in the case James quotes, it was a shift from a class "we" to a race "we" that did the work in redirecting the sense of threat. Which threats a person perceives will depend not just on the question what changes in the world would actually reduce their individual well-being; it can depend as well on whom they identify with. What concerned these voters, on James's account, was a loss in status of their group – a decline, so to speak, in the identity premium for being White. And while they might have feared that this would reduce their economic well-being, the motivator was surely, in large measure, that collective loss.

James has many other interesting things to say. I am sorry I cannot respond to them all. But let me end this section of my response by gesturing towards an answer to his objection that I do "not do much to interrogate the philosophical problems posed by discrete *states*" (James 2020, 40). While my discussion of nationalism and the positive uses of identities organized around states does, indeed, not address the question of the legitimacy of state boundaries in the first place, that is a topic I did discuss in *The Ethics of Identity*. What I wrote there still strikes me as right:

> It is because humans live best on a smaller scale that liberal cosmopolitans should defend not just the state but the county, the town, the street, the business, the craft, the profession, the family *as* communities, as circles among the many circles narrower than the human horizon that are appropriate spheres of moral concern. They should, in short, defend the right of others to live in democratic states, with rich possibilities of association within and

> across their borders, states of which they can be patriotic citizens. And, as cosmopolitans, they can claim that right for themselves.[2]

But if this is to work, as I argue in *The Lies that Bind,* national identities must be shaped to achieve those ends.

III

Yuli Tamir

The fact that my book is so keen on its anti-essentialism leads not just James but, I think, all four readers to conclude that my main remedy for the problems of identity is anti-essentialism. If four such thoughtful readers draw the same conclusion, the fault must be mine.

So, in responding to Yuli Tamir's essay, I should like to begin by saying – but for the last time – that this is, indeed, clearly not enough. Tamir's position, though, is not, as I read her, that this isn't enough, but that it's no help at all. "Is the growing interest in 'fact finding' paving the way for human solidarity? After reading the book, I remain a skeptic" (Tamir 2020, 49).

Well, it may not be paving the way for human solidarity, but, as I have been insisting, that wasn't the main focus of the book. It is true that I did argue, at the end, for a sense of human solidarity; but that wasn't as an alternative to other identities, but as a supplement to them; and it wasn't meant to be anti-essentialism as such that gets us there, but the freedom from a determinism of identity that comes from the recognition that there are choices to

[2] Cf. Appiah 2005, 246.

be made in deciding who we are. On that, as she says, she agrees with me.

Tamir's response here leads her into a fascinating discussion of the question when lies should be resisted, and when it is okay to let them be. She thinks that *The Lies that Bind* has nothing to say – I give, she says, no hint – as to how we should answer this question. I am not sure it is right to say there are no hints, but I do think she is right that I should say more.

As I mentioned in the introduction, this question is at the heart of my last book, *As If*. The central idea there was that untruths do not have to be rejected if they are useful in particular projects. We work with different pictures, I argued, for different purposes. Each can be true enough for its purposes. So, the short answer to the question when lies should be refuted is: When they are getting in the way of some morally worthwhile project. We should argue vigorously against the untruths about racial and gender and class inferiority that enable oppression, sustain inequality, and deny the dignity of those about whom these lies are told; we should oppose them, as well, because in undermining the self-confidence of the oppressed, they also weaken their capacity for resistance.

If this is the right general answer, then, as Tamir sees, objections to untruths are justified relative to practical contexts. And so, there is the important question of how we decide which picture of the world to bear in which contexts. "How do individuals compartmentalize their beliefs? How do they decide, in each particular case which of the conflicting beliefs to act upon?" (Tamir 2020, 56).

I am not sure that there is a useful general answer here. But here is one thing that strikes me as just true: In different contexts we bring different identities to bear; and those different identities often come with different pictures of the world. That is the truth

she exemplifies by talking about the ways in which Ethiopians handle the question of how to respond to leopards. In other words, the modularity of our beliefs is something that we all handle regularly with ease, but our identities are part of the way we handle it.

Tamir argues that many of the useful untruths that sustain, say, national identity, are not so much lies – offered to deceive – as bullshit, in the technical sense, introduced by Harry Frankfurt, of things said without a concern for truth. A good national story, of the sort that Renan discusses in the essay Tamir mentions, need not be offered with a sincere full-throated sincerity. And she argues that in many contexts the right response, faced with bullshit, is not to contest the falsehood but to focus on "identity issues rather than truth-finding." It seems to me, though, that when we are facing utterances offered as bullshit, it may be better not to think of them as statements of belief at all. As I put it in *The Lies that Bind,*

> an avowal of faith is a performance as much as it is a proposition. The Athanasian Creed tells of "one God in Trinity and Trinity in unity." Who knows what this has meant to individual believers around the world? It's a pledge of allegiance: the act of affirmation matters independently of what philosophers would call its "propositional content." Could most Christians explain, for that matter, precisely what it means for the Holy Spirit to "proceed from the Father and the Son," as the Nicene Creed insists? (Appiah 2018, 37).

But I am glad to find that we agree about two central ideas: what matters is not untruth, as such, but dangerous untruth; and we can cordon off the dangers of the untruths some identities require to do their work, because we have ways of keeping our different pictures from contaminating one another.

Tamir's other main worry about my book is that I don't discuss the ways in which identities conflict within a single individual. I suppose the discussions of religion and gender in the Creed chapter were meant to be an example of a small-scale examination of that sort. But I agree there is a great deal of exploration to be done here, though I fear this is a topic about which it is rather hard to generalize: and the perhaps too-brief discussion of Cavafy at the end aimed to suggest how many dimensions of identity can struggle to fit into a single life.

IV

Sally Haslanger

Sally Haslanger's essay very helpfully locates the ethical project that I said I was engaged in in the context of an interpretation of the Enlightenment that she exemplifies in some work by Bernard Williams. I am grateful to her for this elegant formulation of what I was up to:

> The Enlightenment gave us resources to think of ourselves as autonomous, as persons with a right to live our lives according to our own conception of the good rather than essentially bound to social roles. Identities sometimes stand in the way of autonomy because we take the local imperatives to constitute who we – ourselves and those around us – truly are. This is a mistake, and it is a pernicious mistake because it stunts our autonomy, creates unnecessary conflict, and gives undue power to those who claim authority in knowing who we are and what is good for us (be they priests, scientists, influencers). But we are social beings, and we cannot be autonomous without being embedded in a social milieu that provides opportunities for meaningful action. Socially intelligible agency seems to require willing conformity to social

> norms and meanings, and thus identity comes back to bite us (Haslanger 2020, 28).

I wish I had put it this way myself.

Now Haslanger's sympathetic account of the project comes, like James's, with a courteous insistence that this focus leaves out something very important: "On a different approach, however, a crucial lesson of the Enlightenment was not about autonomy but justice" (*ibid.*, 29). And in seeking justice, as she argues, reforming identity is not just a matter of reforming oneself. Indeed, as she says, so long as identities, shaped as they are, are part of what keeps unjust social institutions, social structures, in place and doing their doleful work "because they enable us to be fluent in the existing structure" (*ibid.*, 28). This is a deep and important point, one that relates to my own observation that identity reform is collective work and requires negotiation.

I think that the sort of analysis of identity that I gave in my book can advance that work of justice in two ways. First, as I've already said, if we are to reform rather than abandon identities – precisely because we cannot live fluently without them – we must understand how they work, and, in particular, how they sustain injustice and obstruct that individual pursuit of one's own life that Williams and I are focused on. It is, after all, part of the work of justice to allow each person a decent opportunity to make such a life. But the work of justice is not, as Haslanger rightly insists, merely conceptual. It is a matter of organizing movements, in the course of which the creation of identities – as tenants, in her very illuminating example – will be part of the job. As Haslanger says in closing: "Ideology critique and the creation of new identities – as a feminist, as an antiracist, as a socialist – is a first step in creating a

movement, but the best way to broadly disrupt problematic identities is to change the world" (*ibid.*, 30).

Her mention of political identities here draws attention to a whole class of explicitly political identities – partisan and ideological labels – that are a part of the social landscape which I neglected in my book. Reflection on them suggests a couple of ways for disrupting identity conflicts, which I promised earlier I would say something about, in closing.

V

Changing the world

On August 10, 2018, the *Washington Post* published a picture of two men at a Trump rally whose matching T-shirts read, "I'd rather be a Russian than a Democrat."[3] This slogan spoke to our moment. The Republican brand used to be pointedly anti-Russian. In the Trump era, though, you can be a Republican Russophile for whom Putin is a defender of conservative values. American politics, it has become plain, is driven less by ideological commitments than by partisan identities – less by what we think than by what we *are*. Identity precedes ideology.

Political scientists have been investigating these tendencies for a long while. In a research that was published in 2018, Liliana Mason conducted a national survey that determined where people stood on various hot-button issues: same-sex marriage, abortion, gun control, immigration, health care, the deficit. Then they were asked how they felt about spending time with liberals or conservatives. About becoming friends with one. About *marrying*

[3] https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/your-everyday-republican-has-some-galling-views/2018/08/10/96b78edc-9bfc-11e8-b60b-1c897f17e185_story.html

one.

People's ideological animus, the study found, wasn't best predicted by their opinions, or even by how strongly they held them. It was best predicted by what *label* people embraced, conservative or liberal. Mason calls this identity-based ideology, as opposed to issue-based ideology. Other researchers in political psychology prefer to speak of "affective polarization." Either formulation is a polite way of saying that political cleavages are not so much "I disagree with your views" as "I hate your kind." You can be an ideologue without ideology. Experiments suggest that *partisan* in-group preferences are extremely powerful. Americans are, in fact, more polarized by party than by race. Indeed, while few Americans are still bothered by interracial marriage, recent surveys find that between thirty and sixty percent of people who identify as Democrats or as Republicans want their kids to marry in the party.

So, think again about those T-shirts. It's easy to assume that the great majority of Republicans who now support Trump are drawn to his noxious views – and easy to forget that among candidates who led in the Republican primaries, his percentage of the vote was the lowest in nearly half a century. Tribes come to rally behind their leaders, and partisan identification wouldn't be so stable if it didn't allow for a great deal of ideological flexibility. That's why rank-and-file Republicans could go from "We need to stand up to Putin!" to "Why *wouldn't* we want to get along with Putin?" in the time it takes to say: Trump's in, Rubio's out.

So, what can we do to take advantage of our tribes without succumbing to the debilitating effects of tribalism? Well, for the citizens of every divided nation, one of their identities is "the national identity." And the theory of democracy is that we the people – all of us – are charged with directing the ship of state together. Democracy isn't about majorities winning and minorities

losing: it's supposed to be a system in which each of us takes responsibility for contributing to the nation's collective welfare. As John Rawls argued, we need to recognize that our fellow citizens, with their differing conceptions of the good, must nevertheless treat each other as free and equal persons, and offer terms of social cooperation that all of us can endorse.

A democratic compact requires us to secure for *everyone* – not just our own kind – the rights enunciated in the Universal Declaration, freedoms of speech, religion, and assembly, the right to petition the government, equal protection of the laws regardless of race, and so on. If you think, as those men in their T-shirts *pretended* to do, that you'd rather abandon the nation than allow it to achieve some of the aims of the other tribe, you're not in the democratic compact at all. And I am pretty confident that those guys *are* in fact still in the compact, despite their T-shirts. In pretending to reject our compact, they only succeeded in reminding us of it. They care about America – and thus about Americans – even when they affect to despise many of them.

So, what can we do to stick to the compact while still caring, as we will, for our own tribes and their common projects?

Well, social psychology teaches us that bigotry towards members of one's own community is something that can be both created and destroyed by the circumstances in which people live together. Long ago, the psychologist Gordon Allport argued for what is called the Contact Hypothesis. Roughly, it said that contact between individuals of different groups makes hostility and prejudice less likely if it occurred in a framework that meets a few important conditions: crucially, it must be on terms of rough equality and it must be in activities where shared goals are pursed in contexts of mutual dependency. That's is one reason that America's racially integrated armed services turn out to produce

people who are less racist, on average, when they leave, than when they arrive.

It is this that makes the segregation of communities within a single society potentially so disastrous; for segregation makes it unlikely that children will meet and collaborate, acquiring the experience of mutual reliance on terms of rough equality. We can do something about this, in principle, within the nation, by desegregating our communities and our schools. And Americans are used to thinking that we ought to do this to face the challenges of our racial divisions.

But our political tribes are increasingly segregated, too. So, we need to find more spaces where people of our dominant political tribes build the social trust that allows tribes to cohabit, while continuing to disagree about important matters. We need to be in conversation with one another across all our differences.

Here's a small fictional story that exemplifies what I mean. In the final episode of the first season of the British television series, *Skins,* which is about a group of students in England, there's a scene at the birthday party of one of the characters, Anwar, an English teenager of South Asian ancestry, whose father is a devout Muslim. His best friend, Maxxie, is gay. And he's been waiting for Anwar to tell his parents, which Anwar has been afraid to do. So Maxxie is standing outside, refusing to come into the party until Anwar finally tells them. While they're talking, Anwar's father comes out and invites Maxxie in: his wife has made a spicy curry just for him. As Anwar's father talks, Anwar, in the background, finally says "Dad, Maxxie's gay." But his father ignores him. So, then Maxxie himself says "I'm gay, Mr. Kharral. I always have been." There's a long silence and Anwar waits anxiously to hear what his father will say. And then Mr. Kharral says this: "It's a … stupid messed-up world. I've got my God; he speaks to me every day. Some things I just can't work out. So, I leave them be, okay,

even if I think they're wrong. Because I know one day He'll make me understand. I've got that trust. It's called belief. I'm a lucky man. Right? Come Maxxie, the food's ready."

This is how things are with people who are in conversation with one another. Mr. Kharral belongs to the Muslim tribe; Maxxie's tribe is Christian or, at any rate, post-Christian. But they do not have to agree. They have only to accept each other. And they can do that without a theory or a principle, because being together has generated commitments that can transcend even serious disagreement. This sort of what I would call "cosmopolitan cohabitation" is something we all know how to do. But we are only going to bother to take this step if we are already in conversation with one another. And that means sharing our thoughts about the things we agree about and about the things we disagree about. Big things and small things. Football, television shows, movies, the gossip about other people at work.

Mr. Kharral begins in exactly the right place: with an admission that he can't work out everything. That the world is hard to understand, and he may not be right about everything. He doesn't abandon his belief that homosexuality is wrong: he lays it aside as something to work out later. Right now, what matters is celebrating his son's 17th birthday with his son's best friend. This works in practice. It doesn't need a theory. I am a philosopher. I *like* theories. But theory isn't the only thing that matters.

In the processes of reform required to achieve a more just society, we need, as Haslanger rightly insists, to change institutions, practices, laws, behavior. But that takes people willing to do the work. Building links across identities is part of what builds that willingness.

To accept the ways in which all politics is identity politics is to recognize that high-flown ideas – including a moral commitment

to equality – don't matter until they come down to earth. Right now, we Americans (like the divided people of post-Brexit Britain) need to find ways to draw on our non-partisan identities, as Americans, as citizens of particular communities, members of churches and synagogues and mosques, to combat the tribalism that is undermining our democracy. For better or worse, it's only through identities that ideas can change the world.

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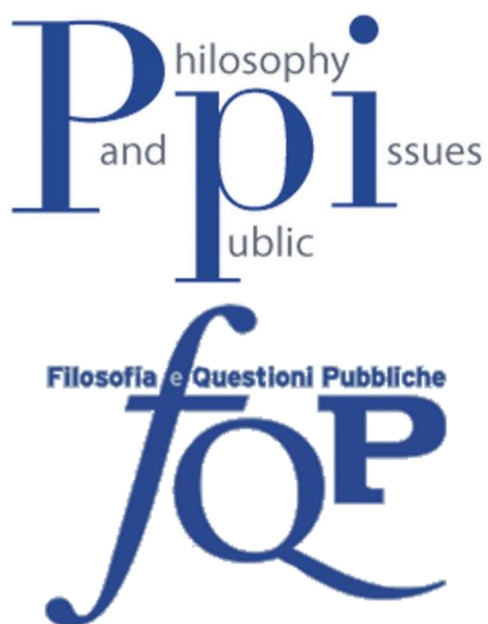

MEANING, IDENTITY, AND ETHNONATIONALISM

BY

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Meaning, Identity, and Ethnonationalism

Roman Altshuler

Introduction

In a 1968 speech to the London Rotary Club, Enoch Powell, erstwhile British MP and Secretary of Health, claimed that "the West Indian or Asian does not, by being born in England, become an Englishman. In law he becomes a United Kingdom citizen by birth; in fact he is a West Indian or an Asian still" (Powell n.d.). Recently defeated long-serving Iowa Congressman Steve King infamously tweeted that "we can't restore our civilization with somebody else's babies."[1] Such sentiments have grown both more common and more public over the past decade, as ethnonationalists rebrand themselves as "identitarians." But why do the ethnonationlists who speak in these terms find them so convincing and so seductive? On

[1] https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/politics/wp/2017/03/12/rep-steve-king-warns-that-our-civilization-cant-be-restored-with-somebody-elses-babies/

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some views, the ethnonationalist's mistake lies in ignorance: he takes identity to be established by some essential core, and the solution lies in education in history and racial genetics, allowing him to see that his essentialism rests on error. While this response is helpful to a point, I propose that the essentialism that drives ethnonationalism is itself a project, founded on the need for meaning, and that the mistake lies not primarily in understanding the basis of identities, but in understanding how meaning is possible for us. In Part I, I distinguish between the different kinds of reasons that might be called "reasons of identity" and argue that only some of them properly fall under that label. While identities can sometimes provide reasons for action, at other times they function by reinforcing reasons that have other sources, including a recognition of freedom. In Part II, I develop an account of a core aspect of identity: identification. Here I argue that our identities are constituted by the acceptance of projects aimed at satisfying our need for meaning in life, and that projects aimed at freedom are best suited to that need. In Part III, I demonstrate that the projects at the core of ethnonationalism prioritize reasons of identity over reasons of freedom. Because identities are products of freedom, they are unstable; in order to draw on them as a source of normativity, the ethnonationalist aims to provide them with stability by insulating them from others. But in so doing, the ethnonationalist undermines his ability to find meaning.

I

Reasons of Identity

People sometimes act on reasons that we may classify as reasons of identity. Anthony Appiah takes acting on such reasons to be one of the main components of identity. To have an identity, on his view, requires the presence of three distinct features. First, there

must be a label for an identity, L, with more or less agreed upon criteria for how to identify an L and stereotypes about what an L is like and how an L can be expected to behave under certain circumstances. Second, being an L involves identification, which here means that being an L shapes one's feelings and actions in some way. Finally, being an L licenses others to treat one in a certain way – being an authority figure (a boss, a police officer) entitles one to a certain amount of deference, for example.[2] I want to focus on the second feature of identity: that identifying with being an L means, at least sometimes, acting in a certain way *because* one is an L. In such cases, one performs act A for the reason that one takes oneself to be an L, and takes A to be in some way required of Ls. Let's call reasons of this sort, *reasons of identity*.[3]

It is not clear exactly what this means. In what follows, I will develop what I take to be a core ambiguity in the concept of identification: acting on reasons of identity is only one sort of identification. Identity has a wider role to play in our lives, and identities need not provide us with reasons to move us to action. Our identities may give us reasons, but they may also make reasons salient or powerful without being their source.

Appiah gives several examples of how an identity can shape one's actions: "offering a helping hand to another L, perhaps, who is otherwise a stranger; or restraining your public conduct by the thought that misbehavior will reflect badly on Ls" (2007b, 68). Here, the reasons of identity on which agents act are, first, reasons

[2] This basic account is spelled out, with some variations, in Appiah (2006, 16-17; 2007b, 66-69; 2007a, 21-30; 2014, 147-52; 2019, 8-12).

[3] At times, Appiah seems to make this the central component of his account of social identity, since he notes that what "makes it a social identity of the relevant kind is not just that people identify themselves or others as X's but that being-an-X figures in a certain typical way in their thoughts, feelings, and acts. When a person thinks of herself as an X in the relevant way… she sometimes *feels like an X* or *acts as an X*" (Appiah 2007a, 26–27).

of solidarity with one's fellow Ls and, second, reasons of solidarity coupled with a recognition that each L is viewed, by others, as representative of all Ls. Appiah also presents a very different sort of case, using Jains as an example: "there are things people do and don't do because they are Jains. By this, I mean only that they themselves think from time to time, 'I should be faithful to my spouse…or speak the truth…or avoid harming this animal…because I am a Jain'" (2019, 9).

While all the examples so far have something in common, since in all of them an L acts in a certain way out of the recognition that she is an L and that Ls ought to act in such a way, this recognition does not guide actions in the same way. In the first two cases an L acts for reasons that are instances of a universal case. That is, for anyone who falls under any category L, it makes sense to act in ways that display solidarity with other Ls; this is a rule that can apply equally well to every human being with a social identity, barring perhaps some unusual identities that explicitly prohibit solidarity. Showing concern for how an L's actions may reflect on other Ls, on the other hand, is not universal; it is more typical of marginalized identities, which dominant groups tend to see as homogeneous.[4]

And yet the principle is still universal: it applies to all Ls who belong to such communities that are likely to be judged on the basis of individual members' behaviors. So we can say that such reasons of identity have a universal form but a particular content. There is a universal reason to somehow aid members of one's group, insofar as this reason applies to all human beings regardless

[4] There is a further category of reasons of identity worth mentioning: we sometimes act in ways that allow us to determine or at least shape the social position others ascribe to us, a phenomenon recently dubbed "agential identity" (Dembroff and Saint-Croix 2019). See also the closely related phenomenon of code-switching (Morton 2014).

of what social identities may be true of them; in my case, for example, this would mean that I have reason to support refugees, Jews, academics, or philosophers.

The examples in the second group are not universal: in acting as an L here, the agent does not act on a reason that a member of any other identity can be expected to share. A Jain may have reason, as a Jain, to avoid hurting this animal, while recognizing that those who are not Jains do not have such a reason.[5] Such reasons have a particular form. What about their content? The content, it seems, can vary. In the example just given, the particular form is accompanied by a particular content, since neither the form nor content is one we expect others' reasons to share unless, of course, those others share our social identities. But switch to one of the other examples: a Jain may think that he has to tell the truth because he is a Jain, but he may at the same time believe that everyone has reason to tell the truth, though he may doubt that they in fact will. Here the reason has a particular form, but a universal content. A Jain may believe that he has reason to tell the truth because he is a Jain, but others also have reasons – though different ones, perhaps – to tell the truth.

The idea of acting on a reason of identity is complicated by a point Appiah raises: that our identities typically involve a habitus. Habitus, a concept borrowed from Pierre Bourdieu (1986; 1990), involves the various ways in which identities are imprinted on us. The kinds of clothes we are accustomed to wearing shape our tastes in clothes, but they can also (if, for example, they are constrictive in particular ways) shape the ways we move our bodies.

[5] Such cases are tricky. If I believe that a particular animal is sacred, then it makes sense to believe that others have a reason to avoid hurting it, although they do not recognize that they have such a reason. On the other hand, if I believe that a particular animal is my spirit guide, then it makes perfect sense to believe that only I, or others like me, have a reason not to hurt it.

Our accents and vocabularies mark us out as certain kinds of people. But habitus isn't just a matter of shaping how we move, dress, eat, and talk; it shapes our patterns of thinking, feeling, and judging as well. As Appiah notes, "identities matter because they give us reasons to do things, reasons we think about consciously. But the connection between identity and habitus means that identities matter in unreflective ways as well" (2019, 25). Habitus introduces a wrinkle: we do many things because of the identities we have, but our reasons for doing them are not *directly* reasons of identity, in the sense that in thinking and acting in ways shaped by my habitus, I may well do so *because* of my identity, but this will not be part of the reason.

Some of my actions are shaped by my habitus without the interjection of reasons: accents, facility with catching a ball, and the ability to distinguish colors are examples. Judgments are often trickier, however. If I prefer the subtitled German New Wave movie to the latest comedy by an SNL alum, my preference is based on reasons, but those reasons grip me *through* the identity I have. To take another example, the immigrant from an authoritarian country may find herself unsympathetic to the demands for recognition made by members of marginalized groups. She may feel such demands – for example, for greater representation in cinema – to be making too much of an insignificant issue, and she may feel that such demands unnecessarily weaken the social fabric. She has reasons for these views, but these reasons have their grip on her because of her identity, though of course the habitus that comes with other identities (for example, those of dominant social groups) may also render similar reasons salient. As Linda Alcoff argues, our identities affect "basic level perception of events and of people, perception that surmises identity, credibility, salient evidence, probable causal relations, plausible explanations, relevant concepts and similarities, and other important epistemic judgments" (2005,

128). That is, our identities affect the basic epistemic structures on the basis of which we recognize and respond to reasons. Thus, although in a sense habitus is unreflective, it can lead us to fall easily into some modes of reflection over others, recognizing some reasons as decisive and missing the importance of others altogether. We can sometimes become aware of such reasons, we can seek to change our identity or at least aspects of it if we come to think reasons arising from it are problematic, and we sometimes aim to point them out to each other as, for example, when we say, "you only believe that because you are an L!" Such reasons, then, may be called reasons of identity only in a derivative sense.

These are not cases of identification in the way Appiah defines it: "thinking of yourself as an L in ways that make a difference: perhaps thinking of yourself as an L shapes your feelings (so that you respond with pride as an L when an L triumphs); perhaps it shapes your actions so that you sometimes do something as an L (offering a helping hand to another L, perhaps, who is otherwise a stranger…)" (Appiah 2007b, 68). In the cases under discussion, the thought of oneself as an L may play no role at all in the agent's feelings or actions. Perhaps the agent simply sees a particular action as the thing to do without ever recognizing, or even being able to introspectively discover, that she sees it that way precisely because of her identity. In such cases, the identity does shape her feelings and actions, but it does not do so by way of any thought that she should act that way because she is an L.[6] Instead, the identity works

[6] For example, let's grant that in the US home ownership is an especially prudent way of managing one's finances. There is, in other words, a good reason to strive for it. Still, people who strive for it will often do so because of a set of values they find motivating because those have been instilled in them. Others, with different backgrounds, may not care about home ownership and may pursue other goals instead. If readers don't want to call this "habitus," I need not insist on the term. The point is only that what reasons stand out and move us depends

through external mechanisms, by making certain reasons stand out to her over others, or by moving her toward finding some reasons especially appealing. The identity does not play the role of a normative reason, although from the outside it may well be clear that the identity *does* provide an explanatory reason: we, well acquainted with Ls, see the agent acting as an L, but from her perspective, her being an L does not provide her a reason. In fact, she may even have the thought that she is doing X because she is an L without her identity serving as a reason. She may, for example, simply see X as the thing to do, while being aware that people outside her group would not see it that way. The agent here does identify with certain ways of acting and feeling that are associated with her identity; but she does not take them up *because* they are associated with her identity.

I want to illustrate the discussion so far with a heavily caricatured example.[7] Some American Jews are dedicated to the belief that, as a people whose historical experience is shaped by various forms of oppression, they must support and defend Israel, the one state where Jews are guaranteed freedom from such oppression, at all costs. Let's call this the AIPAC group, or A-group. A cursory examination of their official position includes repeated references to Israel's security, its commitment to human rights (without, of course, acknowledgement of its flawed human rights record), a stress on democracy (again, an uncritical stress),

often on features unrelated to those reasons but clearly explicable by our identities.

[7] In noting that this is a "heavily caricatured example," I don't mean that it is fictional, but only that the positions of the groups I describe are far more complex than I can show here, and that there are significant other Jewish organizations and positions on all sides of the question of how Israel should relate to the Palestinians (and other Arabs) within its borders and occupied territories.

and its focus on "keeping Israel safe and America strong."[8] But others – let's call them the IfNotNow group, or I-group – believe that, as a people whose historical experience is shaped by various forms of oppression, they must be on the front lines in the fight against any oppression, even – and perhaps especially – when that oppression is carried out by Jews. They aim to "create political space for leaders to stand up for the freedom and dignity for all Israelis and Palestinians" and ground such a commitment in Jewish identity: "As we were dehumanized by the oppression we faced, we are now dehumanized by that which we are inflicting."[9]

Here we seem to have a conflict between different interpretations of a particular identity: people who find themselves with certain norms stemming from their Jewish identity reach dramatically different – and on the question of Israel, diametrically opposed – practical conclusions. This appears to be a conflict between reasons of identity.

Consider the A-group: *their* reasoning is clear. "We," they may say, "are a people that has been oppressed for millennia. Now there is a powerful state able to defend our interests and formed for that purpose. We must stand behind it at any cost in order to protect ourselves."[10] This reasoning is hard to resist. Anti-Semitism, as we have all been reminded over and over, is not an anachronism that ended with the defeat of National Socialism and that has been purged from liberal Western Democracies. Rather, it has been ever with us, and in recent years has returned with a vengeance as European Jews increasingly report feeling unsafe, and American Jews face an uptick in anti-Semitic violence. So long as Jews exist

[8] https://www.aipac.org/movement

[9] https://www.ifnotnowmovement.org/about

[10] To be clear, in this and the following paragraph I am providing reconstructions of their reasoning rather than quoting any individuals or organizational materials.

and humans are what they are, it seems, a powerful state that can protect Jews, at least within its own borders, remains a necessity, at least for Jews.

But the I-group draws a very different conclusion: "Because our identity is so intimately tied to experiences of oppression, we must struggle against oppression." These are not reasons of identity in the straightforward sense: it is not really because they are Jews that they fight for Palestinian rights. They fight for Palestinian rights because they are human, and because Palestinians are human, and they feel that as Jews they have a special obligation not simply to resist the oppression of Jews, but to resist the oppression of others. We might say their being Jews does not by itself give them a reason to oppose such oppression; rather, it puts them in a special position to be aware of and opposed to oppression: as Jews, they feel the sting of oppression and its dangers in ways others may not.

What kinds of reasons are these? First, there is the possibility that these are the sorts of reasons we've already seen: those that have a particular form and a universal content. I think this is not quite right. As I've suggested, the role that Jewish identity plays here is not exactly the role identity plays in reasons of this sort. In embracing reasons given by such an identity, one embraces not reasons of identity in the strict sense, in which the reasons arise from the identity, but rather ones such that the identity reveals or strengthens independently existing reasons: the I-group is driven not by reasons that apply to them as Jews, but reasons that are salient to them as Jews.

It may be tempting to see these reasons as stemming primarily from a shared human identity, as Appiah (2019) and Parekh (2008) seem to do. I want instead to suggest that such reasons can stem from our freedom. In seeking to oppose the oppression of Palestinians, the I-group recognizes that their own freedom to inhabit their identity is intertwined with that of others. Such

reasons derive their normative force not from some specific identity we might have, but from our recognition of the value of freedom itself, a point I will return to in the next section.

Candidates for reasons of identity constitute a broad category. Even if we limit the application of the term to cases where one's thought that one is an L figures explicitly in one's recognition of how one must act, we will find many cases where the appropriateness of such application is unclear. What, for example, should we say of the sorts of cases I've labeled as having a particular form and a universal content? If a Jain recognizes that everyone has reason to tell the truth but he, as a Jain, especially has such reason, is this really a reason of identity? Many religions and cultures inculcate universal moral rules; this could hardly be otherwise. When such rules are followed only for reasons of identity, they are thereby weakened, for an obligation to tell the truth should rightly rest on more than the contingent fact of one's cultural affiliation. Similarly, if someone committed to the liberation of the oppressed takes that commitment to apply to one *especially* as a Jew, that commitment would lose much of its significance if she took it to apply to her *only* as a Jew. When such reasons are treated *as* reasons of identity, in other words, their strength as reasons is greatly undermined.

Appiah gives at least two reasons why collective identities are valuable: first, because they provide us with scripts that we can utilize in our life-plans. Second, because they "allow us to do things together" (2018, xvi). The second of these is ambiguous. On one hand, it can mean that our identities give us particular reasons, and these then allow us to collaborate with others (including others from other social groups) who share those particular reasons. Advocates of women's suffrage may make common cause with Black Americans in seeking the right to vote because they benefit from increasing pressure on voting restrictions. But as the example

of Frederick Douglass, Susan B. Anthony, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton illustrates, such alliances are unstable. Identities perhaps best allow us to do things together when reasons of identity do not play a role, but instead when reasons grip us *through* our identities: that is, when our identities make us more aware of and more committed to reasons that spring from a deeper source.

Moral reasons can, of course, be tied to identities. Jonathan Glover provides an example:

> When the Jews in Denmark were about to be rounded up by the Nazis, Danish non-Jews gave massive support to the Jews and saved over 90 percent of them. Jews were stopped on the streets and offered keys to people's flats and houses. Some Jews were hidden in hospitals by doctors and nurses who gave them false medical records. Taxis, ambulances, fire engines, and cars were used to take them to the coast for their escape to Sweden. In the public statement made by the Danish church, the roundup was described as being "in conflict with the sense of justice inherent in the Danish people and inseparable from our Danish Christian culture through centuries" (Glover 1997, 20).

The Danes had reason to be proud of their actions. But if they had reason to be proud, it cannot be because in protecting Jews they were acting on reasons of identity. Pride seems to require a standard that is independent of what one is proud of: one can be proud of oneself for living up to one's own ideals, but it makes little sense to be proud of one's culture for leading one to do the right thing if what makes that thing right is only that one's cultural identity demands it. It is only if the Danes saw themselves as acting

on reasons that did not stem from their identity that they could be proud of their identity for guiding them to act on those reasons.[11]

It is one thing to say, "because I am a Jew, I must support Israel," or "because I am a Jew, I must say the Kaddish." It is another to say, "because I am a Jew, I must stand up for Palestinians," or "because I am a Jew, I must march for civil rights." In the first category, the normativity of the reasons follows directly from the identity. In the second, while the connection between reasons and identity is certainly coherent, the normativity need not derive from the identity itself; the identity may instead make that normativity salient or give the agent additional motivation to act on it.[12] Some reasons in this group derive their normativity from the fact that the reason aims not merely at expressing the agent's commitments, but also the liberation of others.[13]

[11] "The national character will *of course* be superior *relative to the values of the national culture*. But if the members of the nation value the national character because they have been indoctrinated by the culture to do so…, this casts doubt on the objective defensibility of their evaluation" (McMahan 1997, 127).

[12] If I believe that good Jews oppose oppression, my desire to be a good Jew may well give me extra motivation to oppose oppression. But in this case, my Jewish identity is not the source of the reason. Although I do not have space to discuss the point here, it should be clear that I take reasons and motives to be distinct. A motive can provide an explanatory reason: that is, a third-personal account of why a person did what she did. But I take it that we can have reasons for actions that are normative for us even in the absence of a motive to act on them. Conversely, having a motive to do something need not, by itself, provide a reason to do it. See Scanlon (2000, Ch. 1) for one account of this sort. It follows that we may have a reason to do X and a motive to act on that reason such that the motive and the normativity of the reason have distinct sources.

[13] Not all such reasons need be explicitly ethical or political, as in the examples I've used. A wide range of human activities – painting, athletics, gardening – can be liberatory in ways both explicit and opaque.

Part of the upshot of the discussion has been that "reasons of identity" can be used in a wide variety of senses. Reasons of identity in the narrow sense, in which reasons derive their normativity from the identity itself, and in which I will continue to use the term in the rest of this paper, may be far less significant to our ethical lives than they appear. More significant are reasons of identity in a broad sense, in which identity provides one with special epistemic access to reasons, or with special motives to act on reasons, such that agents with such identities may be more likely to act on those reasons in ways that can be explained by their identities. But the sources of those reasons lie outside the identities themselves. Thus, even in cases where the thought that one is an L figures in one's deliberation about how to act, it will not always be clear that one is acting on a reason of identity. Conversely, there may be cases in which that thought is absent – in fact, the agent can no longer retrieve it at all – and yet her reasons do stem from her identity.[14]

I will argue that reasons of identity are important because of – and draw their normativity from – their role in contributing to meaning in life. But they cannot serve this role if they are given priority over reasons of freedom. Reasons of freedom draw their normativity from the value of some end, which has that value by virtue of its contribution to freedom. Reasons of identity, on the other hand, draw their normativity from their conformity to what agents take to be the norms associated with their identities. These sorts of reasons can certainly interact. Our identities just *are* ways of manifesting and bolstering our freedom. That is precisely why to give priority to reasons of identity over those of freedom is a mistake.

[14] A slightly different form of this problem, one that argues that taking one's being an L to be a reason for acting is neither necessary nor sufficient for identification, is pursued by Placencia (2010).

II

The Nature and Significance of Identity

Reasons of freedom present us with a distinct way in which identities can operate. To act on my identity need not always mean that, explicitly or implicitly, I reason from the fact that action A is in some way required by identity Y and the fact that I have identity Y, to the conclusion that I should perform A. Sometimes, of course, identities do work this way. But sometimes they do not, because sometimes the fact that I have identity Y might give me an insight that others may lack, and it is this insight that makes the requirement to perform A salient. And sometimes, in recognizing that my identity is something that depends on me, though not wholly, I recognize that the value of my identity depends on my continuing to inhabit it. Here is a path from which any identity leads us, through the significance of that identity, to the value at its root: freedom. And in recognizing the value of freedom, I recognize that value for others as well.

To get to this idea in another way, we can first look at what it means not just to have an identity, but to identify with it, that is, to take up components of my identity, and especially my social identity, as ones that are normative *for me*, not simply because there are expectations for Ls to act in this way, but because *as* an L, I take *this* requirement to matter. And second, we need to understand why it *matters* that we be able to do this, that is, why it is important for beings like us to identify at least to some extent with the social identities available to us. The first component is sometimes referred to by the term "practical identity," defined by Christine Korsgaard as "a description under which you value yourself, a description under which you find your life to be worth living and your actions to be worth undertaking" (1996, 101). Korsgaard argues that your identity is up to you, but you *must* choose one: a reason to act can only be a reason for you against

the background of a practical identity, constituted by general principles to act on reasons of this sort, and thus without choosing some practical identity you would not be able to act for reasons at all.

The emphasis on choosing might seem misplaced here, since clearly we do pick up all sorts of identities without explicitly choosing them, and indeed we seem to be saddled with a number of identities before we are able to choose anything. But even in the case of those identities that are most difficult for us to avoid – those, like gender or race, which for most are simply forced on us by the way others see us – we have choices about how to *act* in light of those identities, and whether to prioritize the reasons given to us by them or by some others.[15] That is, identities handed to us cannot give us reasons unless we choose to accept those reasons as binding on us; "whenever I act in accordance with these roles and identities, whenever I allow them to govern my will, I endorse them, I embrace them, I affirm once again that I am them" (Korsgaard 2009, 43). Thus, our identities are constituted by the principles on which we act, and in acting on one principle or another we endorse it and make it part of our practical identity. In defending this view, Korsgaard closely approaches Sartre, who saw our identity as consisting of an underlying project, which is constantly both disclosed and chosen in the course of our actions and responses (Sartre 2012). That original project is extremely difficult to change, because it is constituted by *all* of our actions and reactions, and thus a change to any one of them would require shifts across the board in a self-wide ripple effect, but such change is not impossible, and thus our practical identities are always up to us.

[15] This point is emphasized by Amartya Sen (2006), who stresses that, given that all of us have multiple identities that can give us competing reasons, choice is never entirely displaced by identity.

So part of the reason we must choose our identities is that without them we would be unable to act at all, or at least to have reasons for acting, for in order to have reasons for acting we need some underlying principle or project on the basis of which some reasons are normative for us, and it is our choice of that underlying project that in turn makes the reasons we act on on its basis binding on us. But those identities are also the means through which we pursue meaning. The most popular view of meaning in life today, laid out in detail by Susan Wolf, holds that "meaning arises when subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness" (2012, 9). In other words, for our lives to feel meaningful we must be committed to at least some of the goals we pursue and find them fulfilling, but for them to not simply feel but actually be meaningful, at least some of *those* goals must have value independently of us. I won't defend this view here, but I want to connect it with the sense of identity just outlined. Having projects that matter to us, and on the basis of which things matter to us, is a crucial component of meaning. But so is having a commitment to something that is valuable, and valuable not simply because we care about it, but independently of us.

How is this last part possible, however? We might assume that this is where the *social* component of identity plays a key role: by valuing something that Ls value, I value something the value of which does not depend on me alone. But of course entire communities can value worthless things. Sometimes communities even define themselves through the valuing of things that, from a perspective outside the community, appear worthless (though in such cases Wolf suggests that sometimes what's valuable isn't the thing itself, but the community-building that occurs around it). Yet it is unclear – on the voluntarist existentialist picture of identity I've suggested – how anything could have value independently of myself. After all, what makes something a *reason* for me is just that

it appears as such on the basis of my project, and my project is something I choose by acting on the reasons it suggests.

An existentialist theory of this sort can answer the question in two ways. It can, on one hand, simply reduce all value to subjective value, making meaning in life that involves independent value impossible. Or it can argue that, although what is valuable to me depends on my choice, my choice itself has some ends built into it, so that while it is possible for me to diverge from those ends, what is *truly* valuable is what I would choose were I to choose correctly. Korsgaard's suggestion is to focus on the fact that *I* must choose, and thus that a choice counts as successful only if it succeeds in constituting me as a unified self; if I choose capriciously, then I constitute myself as a divided self (since a capricious choice can be overturned in the next choice, and thus my guiding principle becomes incoherent), and fail to constitute an identity that can guide my choices and give them normative force. A second path, however, is suggested by Simone de Beauvoir, who denies the ideal of a unified self: such unity is not something to seek, nor can we seek it without bad faith. What I am is not something behind my projects that unites them all, but rather that which transcends them all – to impose unity on myself would be to limit that transcendence. Beauvoir instead takes her starting point from the claim that a genuinely free choice cannot be purely arbitrary: freedom has its own criteria built in because freedom "cannot will itself without aiming at an open future" (1948, 71). A choice made without any criteria at all would be arbitrary, but it would not be fully free. On one common reading, the existentialists reject the idea that there can be any values that aren't purely subjective – that is, existentialism is often portrayed as the view that while meaning depends on value, what is valuable is only what we take to be valuable, and thus we create the meanings of our lives entirely from scratch by choosing our values. As we saw above, this reading would make existentialism incompatible with a view of meaning in

life that requires us to seek objective value, at least insofar as this means value that is not dependent on oneself. But this reading – which certainly *sounds* like the kind of thing Sartre and Beauvoir often say – misses an important part of the picture: that what is valuable isn't whatever I take to be valuable, but whatever I can will to be valuable consistently with freedom. Neither Sartre nor Beauvoir think we can will just anything at all while retaining such consistency, but seeing why requires recognizing that there are two stages of freedom.

The first act of freedom – a choice of one's original project – is necessarily arbitrary, in the sense of being made in the absence of any criteria, since it is chosen prior to our ability to evaluate choices. It involves choosing the identity that provides the background of all evaluation, and Beauvoir thus describes it as "an upsurging as stupid as the clinamen of the Epicurean atom" (1948, 25). If all choice of identities and values were like this, we could hardly hope to derive meaning from them. But Beauvoir stresses that the original project must be retroactively *justified*, and we justify our projects in the course of our lives by building on that initial arbitrary foundation. The initial project thus has value not by virtue of having been chosen, but by virtue of then having been justified, and it turns out that not all justifications will be equally good. As Beauvoir goes on to argue, "freedom always appears as a movement of liberation. It is only by prolonging itself through the freedom of others that it manages to surpass death itself and to realize itself as an indefinite reality" (1948, 32). What justifies a free choice, in other words, and makes it truly free, is not simply that it was made, but that it contributes to the freedom of others.

The argument for this view is given in Beauvoir's earlier essay, "Pyrrhus and Cineas" (2004). There, she notes that the fact that our freedom constantly transcends itself – constantly strives to go beyond whatever goals we set for ourselves – raises a fundamental

antinomy for human agency. On one hand, it seems, for any end we set for ourselves, as soon as we reach it we must immediately seek a new end. Setting goals, then, seems pointless; free choices become meaningless once their ends are transcended. But at the same time, we cannot help setting ends. Living is acting, and acting without ends is impossible. There are two ways out of this antinomy. The first, which Beauvoir rejects, is to accept that human life is absurd: that we are condemned to set meaningless ends.[16] The second is to find an end that we cannot transcend, and thus one that does not reduce freedom to absurdity.

Beauvoir canvasses a number of candidates for such an end, but none seem promising. For example, we might think that serving God is the sort of end we cannot transcend, but the problem is that our only access to what God wants is through our own interpretations, which rest on our projects, and thus cannot get us out of the cycle. Others think we should dedicate ourselves to humanity as an end – to act on reasons of humanity, perhaps – but as Beauvoir notes, there are no ends shared by all of humanity, so that in serving the interests of some human beings we are almost always fighting against others.[17] Nor can we simply select our ends through reason, because even if reason alone gives us some abstract ends, it does not point us to anything concrete. Ultimately, then, Beauvoir suggests that we can avoid the transcendence of our ends – and thus avoid completely meaningless freedom – only by aiming at something that we can never transcend: the freedom of others. For Beauvoir, this means that a freely chosen act, to be able to justify itself, must aim not to reach termination, but rather to

[16] See Webber (2018) for an account of how Beauvoir rejects absurdity via a contrast with Camus.

[17] This is one reason to be wary of the thought that when "it comes to the compass of our concern and compassion, humanity as a whole is not too broad a horizon" (Appiah 2019, 219).

create a "point of departure" that other freedoms can use (Beauvoir 2004, 124).

This means two things. First, a genuinely free act must strive for ends that can at least in principle be taken up by others. Second, it must at the very least not restrict the freedom of others, since such restriction prevents them from freely taking up our projects. Beauvoir demonstrates the point further when discussing different orders of bad faith, including the "passionate man," who takes what is valuable to be valuable only through his caring about it. In demonstrating this as a failure to accept one's freedom, Beauvoir notes that passion "is converted to genuine freedom only if one destines his existence to other existences through the being – whether thing or man – at which he aims, without hoping to entrap it in the destiny of the in-itself" (Beauvoir 1948, 67). The suggestion, on my reading, is this: to think something is valuable only because you care about it is to fail to value it. To value something is, necessarily, to recognize it as something that others have reason to value, and thus in valuing a thing one must act also in ways that recognize it as potentially valuable to others and help others to freely pursue that value rather than hindering them.

Without delving too far into a defense of Beauvoir's ethics, I want to suggest that it brings us to a useful way to think about identity. We construct our identity through the pursuit of projects. Those projects are freely chosen, not in the sense that we chose them while fully informed and rational, since that is impossible for many if not most of our projects, but in the sense that in acting, we reinforce some projects and undermine others; our choice of a project is *diachronic*, in that the choice is confirmed and re-made every time we express the project in question. We give meaning to our lives by pursuing these projects, and by acting for ends in such ways that do not keep others from adopting them but, rather, seek to aid them in being able to freely do so. Beauvoir thus

distinguishes the original freedom inherent in our projects from the *moral* freedom involved in taking responsibility for our original freedom by justifying it through acting on projects that are open to and supportive of the freedom of others.[18] It is freedom in this latter sense that allows us to live meaningful lives by engaging with projects of value rather than simply projects we have chosen, and it is this sense of freedom which I invoke when speaking of reasons of freedom.

But this still hasn't answered the second question with which I opened this section: why do we need collective identities, rather than simply individual ones? So far, I've been discussing identity in the broader sense, as encompassing all of our projects. Given this account, were I to act in accordance with reasoning of the form, "as a Jew I ought to oppose the oppression of the Palestinian people," I would commit myself to two things: (1) that I have a certain collective identity, L, at least in principle shared with others, and (2) that I accept an interpretation of what Ls ought to do. But why bother drawing on (1) in the first place? What is the difference between this and the somewhat different-sounding "I ought to oppose the oppression of the Palestinian people"? Both, after all, lead to the same ends, and the latter can be reached without the former.

What, then, is the value of adopting collective identities? Appiah suggests that collective identities allow us to do things together, as we've seen, but also that they help us construct life plans by adding a source of value to guide us through the options (2007b, 24), thus helping us to live flourishing lives (2006, 17). Parekh notes that they "are sources of order and predictability, and hence of freedom" (2009, 273), insofar as collective identities provide us with roles for which we have at least some guidance and which

[18] For a book length discussion of the distinction between original (or ontological) freedom and moral freedom in Beauvoir, see Arp (2001).

others can mostly count on us to fulfill. Alcoff argues that our perception and interpretation of the world, in light of which reasons appear to us as reasons, necessarily arises through interaction with others, so that "selves are affected by others in that they are constituted in and through collectives or groups" (2005, 120). We can now add another reason why collective identities are important by building on these suggestions: we need them to lead meaningful lives. From Alcoff's analysis, we can pick up the point that, insofar as things matter to us, they matter to us in part because of the collective identities that form who we are.[19] But if living a meaningful life requires that we justify our freedom by allowing it to escape transcendence by pursuing ends that are open to being points of departure for others, then living a meaningful life requires us to pursue ends that can matter to others. And this requires that we share some aspects of our identity with those others, so that we can commit ourselves to projects that they may take up. Collective identities are necessary to meaning.

We may thus think that while reasons of identity aim at meaning, reasons of freedom are better adapted to doing so successfully. As we've seen, all reasons of identity are chosen freely; even identities largely imposed from without do not displace all other identities, nor do they force a specific interpretation on the agent. But not everyone who acts on such reasons accepts the value of freedom, either their own or that of others. Some simply treat their reasons of identity as brute demands that their authentic and (they think) unchosen identity requires. But in so doing, they undermine their quest for meaning. Insofar as they treat their reasons as based on values that are simply given, they reject the

[19] Of course this is not to deny that many of the things we care about are grounded in our biology, or that many of the things we have learned to care about because of our collective identities are things we would have learned to care about if raised in altogether different communities.

possibility of incompatible values having any claim to legitimacy, and thus they exclude whole groups of others from even potentially taking up their ends as points of departure. To treat one's projects as entirely beyond the domain of choice is to treat their ends as closed to others, and thus render them meaningless.

III

Perverse Identity

Consider ethnonationalism. There is no dominant consensus on how ethnonationalism is to be defined, but at the least it involves seeing one's nation essentially in terms of ethnicity, understood as involving some combination of religious, linguistic, cultural, or racial features. As such, ethnonationalism is necessarily exclusive at its core, since taking one's nation to be defined in ethnic terms translates, in practice, to the exclusion of other ethnic groups. For the ethnonationalist, ethnicity is thus treated as a layer of identity that subsumes other identities. In recent scholarship and popular media, ethnonationalism has been frequently invoked to explain such worldwide political developments as the appeal of Donald Trump, Brexit, and Narendra Modi's grip on power.[20]

Despite providing so much of the background – and, unfortunately, foreground – of contemporary political life around the globe, ethnonationalism barely registers in Appiah's account of identity, occurring at most as the backdrop of his account of "Country" (2018, Ch. 3). But there is little investigation of just what it is that drives that ideology. On his view, it seems, ethnonationalists are caught in the trap of essentialism. They are

[20] Recent discussions often leave the term itself largely undefined, focusing instead on the symbolic and cultural appeals that manifest ethnonationalism. For representative recent articles, see Schertzer & Woods (2020), Manza & Crowley (2018), Bonikowski (2017), Thompson (2021), and Stanley (2020).

making a mistake about the extent to which the nation – and who belongs to it – is merely an invention. The mistake is a factual one, and thus the response is simple: "Recognize that nations are invented and you'll see they're always being reinvented" (Appiah 2019, 102).

One difficulty with this is practical: showing people that the beliefs upon which their worldviews are based are factually mistaken rarely succeeds in converting them.[21] But another difficulty is that it's unclear that *all* ethnonationalists are mistaken in this way. Some do indeed seem to think that their nation, understood as an ethnic group, has some deep spiritual significance. Richard Spencer, one of the founders of the American white nationalist alt-right movement, for example, has said, "A race is genetically coherent, a race is something you can study, a race is about genes and DNA, but it's not just about genes and DNA. The most important thing about it is the people and the spirit. That's what a race is about."[22] Some have gone in another direction, employing dubious science (in a time-honored tradition of race science, but now without the support of the scientific establishment) to provide a biological justification for ethnonationalism (Rushton 1998).

But it is not clear that all ethnonationalists simply make such mistakes. Some are fully aware of the plurality of origins and the historical contingency of the present form of their nation, but they

[21] There is a large collection of literature demonstrating that, at least under some conditions, providing facts that contradict deeply held beliefs fails to alter those beliefs or the behavior produced by them. See, for example, Cohen (2012) or Nyhan & Reifler (2010). The latter also identified a much-hyped "backfire effect," by virtue of which people tended to hold their beliefs more strongly in the wake of factual contestation, though later research has cast doubt on the extent and even existence of this effect (Sippitt 2019).

[22] https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/individual/richard-bertrand-spencer-0

make ethnic unity their project. So the problem with their view is not that they are mistaken about identity. It's that they are mistaken about meaning. Appiah writes a powerful story for those who embrace ambiguity (like his examples of Svevo and Cavafy, like Appiah, like myself) in their identities. But what about those who do not? What about those who embrace certainty? Those who stick with, say, Frenchness or Englishness as an identity developed over centuries. Or those – in the US and Australia, for example – who, lacking the common heritage of nation, resort to simple racism. As the fascist Australian group, the Lads Society, writes: "The nation is an unbroken chain, which [sic.] we, as individuals, are merely one link, it stretches back even before White settlement on this continent and can stretch indefinitely into the future."[23] Perhaps they are merely essentialists, but perhaps not; perhaps they aim at a future in which the "white race" is as unified and independent as they want it to be, and they merely embellish the past in order to create a more compelling narrative.

We need an answer to them, too, and not just an answer that says they are mistaken about history or that they are falling into essentialism. The mistakes Appiah notes are ones they can ignore, because they can continue to claim they do share a common heritage, and they project a preferred future on the basis of some elements of that heritage that speak to them; moreover, to attribute their errors to essentialism cannot account for the depth of their commitment. But let's instead identify their problem – a need for meaning – and suggest a solution. For this, we can go back to the existentialists: genuine freedom means not only freedom for oneself, but the possibility of a continuation of one's projects via the freedom of others. Isn't this, however, what the Lads Society

[23] https://www.ladssociety.com/single-post/2019/09/19/Why-National-Socialism

wants? A destiny for the "white race" in which the sorts of white projects they embrace have prominence?

Now consider, by contrast with Appiah's culturally ambiguous figures, Renaud Camus, who has recently come to prominence by proposing the phrase "The Great Replacement" (the likely origin of the "You will not replace us" chants from Charlottesville's Unite the Right rally) over the less popular "white genocide" in ethnonationalist self-marketing. Camus observes that democratization promises to give everyone access to something that was once accessible only to a small elite:

> To reach that aim, it has to provide and offer cheaper versions of everything – salmon, plane tickets, diplomas, hotel rooms. Hotels are particularly significant in this respect. All over the world there has been a bounty of newly-built, upper-range establishments... They are the real thing, except for the price. Unfortunately, it was the price which was the real real thing. What you pay is what you get…because a higher room rate carried the extra benefit of keeping at bay people like you. If you can afford it, it is not worth it; above all, if you and me can afford it, it is not the real thing (2018, 15-16).

So far, this seems like an innocent, if eccentric, observation, one made only a little odder by the addition of a broadside against increasing access to higher education on the grounds that a "college degree granted to eighty per cent of the population implies ten times less knowledge and understanding of the world for each graduate than it did when granted to eight per cent only" (2018, 18). But this strange understanding of the value of education and how it works, as well as the point of staying in hotel rooms, quickly takes a more sinister turn:

> This is exactly like Europe for Africans: what made it desirable for them was that they were not there. They envy an order, a prosperity, a sense of generosity in terms of social benefits and safety nets, the sound functioning of institutions which have been achieved through centuries of nurturing efforts, trials and tribulations, cultural transmission, inheritance, sacrifices and revolutions. What make countries, continents, cultures and civilisations what they are, what we admire or regret, are the people and the elites who have fashioned them and continue to embody their man-made essence. With other peoples, and other elites, these would be, and indeed are, different countries, different continents, other civilisations... If and when populated with Africans, be they from North Africa or Black Africa, Europe would be just another Africa, with a few interesting ruins as added value. (2018, 16-17).

Camus is, of course, not alone. But notice that ethnonationalists of his ilk are not simply confused by essentialism. The sense that a nation has some spiritual inner core isn't foundational to Camus; it is, rather, supervenient on a history of nation-building and a project – much like the kind Appiah thinks must be at the core of a cosmopolitan understanding of identity. Camus, the Lads Society, Generation Identity, Identity Evropa, and any number of other groups and individuals of similar leanings imagine a past in which long-dead others undertook the project of building a nation with its institutions and cultural norms, and they see themselves as continuing this project into the future, against newcomers with very different projects.[24] What the ethnonationalists believe is that

[24] The Lads Society is a white nationalist and fascist group founded in Australia in 2017, mentioned earlier in this article. Generation Identity is the youth wing of the French Identitarian movement; it was founded in 2012 and has since

what matters for meaning is that their projects have a future – that they be taken up by future generations. Their mistake lies in the failure to see that projects, to survive, must be malleable.

For Appiah, culture is a project in the sense that it *belongs* only to those who make it their own (2019, 210), and it is reasons of freedom that allow for this view of culture. In this sense, it is those who prioritize reasons of freedom, rather than those who prioritize reasons of identity, who drive culture, because they are the ones who do not simply accept the norms that apply to Ls, but seek, as Ls, to challenge those norms where needed and propose new ones, perhaps by drawing on other cultures, or perhaps simply by applying the tools provided by their own cultures to new situations; and the norms they propose are taken up by others, because they prove useful to others.[25] But cultural norms, once introduced and widely accepted, become part of the background for those who prioritize reasons of identity. They lose the character of freedom in the eyes of the latter, and appear to them as merely a part of their history and identity, and thus not as something to be challenged and interrogated, but as something to preserve as a means of preserving one's identity. The identities themselves, rather than the freedom to take them up and reconstruct them, are treated as the source of their normativity. To this group, then, reasons of identity become their reasons, and challenges to them appear as external challenges to their identity. Reasons of identity, in this way, become exclusionary, to the extent that other people –

spread to a number of other European countries. Identity Evropa is an American white nationalist group, founded in 2016 and rebranded in 2019 as the American Identity Movement in response to negative publicity arising from its role in 2017's Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville.

[25] Of course it's unlikely that anyone acts exclusively on reasons of identity or on reasons of freedom, or that it would be desirable to do so. The point is that those who prioritize reasons of identity are unlikely to generate new cultural forms, especially ones others can take up.

especially those who might challenge the norms these reasons are grounded in – now appear as threats. As a result, we see an emphasis on the idea of *real* Americans, or *authentic* Frenchness, grounded in tradition, which must be protected against those who would destroy it by making it something different. This view helps us to understand why those who take up exclusionary identities in this way tend to confuse culture with race and ethnicity; why, in other words, the slide from nationalism into ethnonationalism may seem so natural to them. Camus, after all, isn't simply concerned with people from Africa coming to France and changing its culture; he is concerned with Africans coming to France and changing its culture. Race is not incidental here. A much clearer example of this confusion, perhaps, was offered inadvertently by American journalist Tom Brokaw:

> The fact is, on the Republican side, a lot of people see the rise of an extraordinarily important new constituent in American politics, Hispanics. Also, I hear, when I push people: "I don't know if I want brown grandbabies." That also is a part of it. It's the intermarriage that's going on and the cultures that are conflicting with each other.[26]

Brokaw slips easily, and in ways that seem nonsensical out of context, from skin color to cultural conflict, yet he is describing a common enough attitude, in which somehow having "brown grandbabies" necessitates a culture clash. Similarly, Samuel Huntington mixes culture with language when he writes that, "There is no Americano dream. There is only the American dream created by an Anglo-Protestant society. Mexican Americans will

[26] https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/28/business/media/tom-brokaw-hispanics-assimilation.html

share in that dream and in that society only if they dream in English" (2004, 45). This is perhaps a bit clearer than Brokaw's confusion, and yet still does not show why, exactly, speakers of different languages should necessarily find themselves in cultural conflict. Language does not necessitate conflict any more than skin color does.

But we can see one source of the confusion by applying the model above. Those who prioritize reasons of identity over reasons of freedom will see those reasons as *fixed*. Moreover, if you deny any role to reasons of freedom, then reasons of identity are normative exclusively for those who already have the appropriate identity. Just as those who have the identity *must* follow the reasons laid out by that identity, on this line of thought, so no one who lacks the identity *can* follow those reasons without, at best, being inauthentic. An African in France is not a *real* Frenchman, just as a Honduran in the U.S. is not a *real* American.

Notice again that this winnowing of the authentic from the inauthentic is not driven simply by essentialism or, rather, that the essentialism is itself driven by something else. It is driven by a need to not simply accept some norms, but to treat the norms one has accepted as necessary, and thus as springing directly from an unchangeable identity, though one that is simultaneously fragile and in need of protection. Insofar as following norms and engaging with the values encoded in them is the path to a meaningful life, the protection of one's identity thus appears as a necessary precondition of such meaning. If the norms are undermined or weakened – for example, by the suggestion that one's treasured American National Anthem can also be sung in Spanish[27] – the

[27] https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/2006/04/28/an-anthems-discordant-notes-span-classbankheadspanish-version-of-star-spangled-banner-draws-strong-reactionsspan/5885bf36-cf07-4c56-a316-f76e7d17c158/

agent's certainty that his identity presents a stable path to meaning is likewise weakened. In response, he doubles down on his commitment to that identity: preserving it from change becomes his project. In other words, insofar as the agent embraces reasons of identity – reasons that derive their normativity entirely from the agent's having a certain identity – and insofar as he sees acting on those reasons as his path to a meaningful life, he has reason to shore up that identity against threats. And the acceptance of sufficiently different kinds of people into that identity, insofar as it would mean only a partial acceptance of the identity along with a partial repudiation or alteration of it,[28] would show the identity in all its contingencies and thus would make it incapable of grounding norms and therefore incapable of grounding the meaning derived from commitment to those norms.

In order to treat reasons of identity as normative, the agent must treat the identity as unchangeable and thus recalcitrant to outside intrusion. And perhaps the strongest way to achieve this is to make the identity *heritable*, so that no one can enter into it without being born into it. But once one takes one's identity as heritable, it makes perfect sense to sort insiders and outsiders on the basis of other heritable characteristics, such as skin color or place of birth.

This position is unstable in multiple ways. For example, it is clear that even inheritance is not strong enough to grant identity – at least, not the identity the ethnonationalist seeks to preserve for himself. Thus "brown grandbabies," who as grandchildren

[28] One reason for thinking that certain outsiders are a threat to one's identity is that cultural others *clearly* embrace different cultural norms, and thus can be expected not to accept *all* of the norms of one's own identity. But their children are likely to be ambivalent about their new cultural identity as well, finding themselves torn between two sets of cultural identities, neither of which they've been able to fully internalize, and thus experiencing neither set of norms as fully authoritative in a phenomenon Manuel Vargas, following Emilio Uranga, has recently described in detail under the moniker of "accidentality" (2020).

necessarily inherit quite a bit from oneself, are still, by virtue of being brown, only admitted into one's cultural identity, if at all, with ambiguity. At the same time, inheritance is no guarantee of identity. As the Lads Society make clear, "Our race is the White race and this common blood is needed for a nation to arise, but a nation and a race are not synonymous. We have a common race with the White communist, the White miscegenator and any other White traitor, but not a common nationality."[29] It is for this reason that the ethnonationalist sticks to nation: a concept slippery enough that it can be separated from race, ethnicity, and culture, drawing on elements of all three and especially on the heritability of the first two and the project-quality and timelessness of the last, while simultaneously remaining flexible enough to include and exclude as necessary for the ethnonationalist's project of establishing his identity as something fixed and unalterable.

So we see that the ethnonationalist's essentialism, such as it is, is not *simply* essentialism. It is deployed with an end in view, that of distinguishing the real from the fake. And its deployment is based on criteria needed for the aim to succeed: it must establish an identity as fixed by both taking its reasons as normative for oneself and simultaneously preventing it from being altered or made impure by the admission of people who, the ethnonationalist judges, threaten to alter it. That essentialism thus has the shape of a project, and it is, I've suggested, a project aimed at preserving the ethnonationalist's pursuit of meaning by allowing the values that allow one's life to have meaning to be firmly planted in a stable identity.

We can now characterize the ethnonationalist's confusion, as suggested earlier, as a confusion about meaning. He takes it that

[29] https://www.ladssociety.com/single-post/2019/09/19/Why-National-Socialism

meaning requires engagement with value, and that such value is given intersubjectively – independently of his own volition – by the norms of his social identity.[30] But recognizing that the norms of a social identity can be challenged and revised, he takes this contingency of identity as a challenge to be overcome. To seek meaning, he thinks, it is not enough to simply follow the reasons given by his identity, since insofar as that identity is contingent, the reasons stemming from it seem contingent as well, and any meaning gained through acting on them seems too flimsy, too easily undermined and lost. Imagine, after all, living one's life with the certainty that one's reasons of identity are supported by a solid social identity, represented by customs and symbols (such as flags), only to be told that those customs and symbols are racist and their value meretricious. One's entire meaning, insofar as it is drawn exclusively from reasons of identity, now falls into question. Thus, the need for meaning seems to require a secondary project of shoring up one's identity and insulating it against challenges. But if we go back to the model of meaning developed in the previous section, we see where the ethnonationalist is mistaken. He takes meaning to be grounded in a fixed identity, and the preservation of that identity *from* outsiders. But on a Beauvoirian picture, preservation of an identity requires its preservation *for* outsiders. On that picture, we cannot simply ground meaning in an existing identity, because the bounds and norms of that identity are themselves dependent on our choices. This is why the ethnonationalist picture is unstable, and must resort to the flexibility of the ambiguous concept of "nation" to leave out those who belong on other grounds but deviate from certain cultural

[30] To say that value is given intersubjectively is just to say that although we pursue meaning through the pursuit of value, we cannot determine what is valuable on our own. Thus, the pursuit of value requires one to pursue something that others can at least potentially also find valuable.

ideologies, or those who seem on solid, heritable, grounds to belong, and yet are viewed as dangerously "accidental."[31] The very efforts at exclusion aimed at shoring up one's identity against the inability to provide an ungrounded ground, in turn, reveal that the "nation" meant to serve as the grounding social identity is itself a project, and relies on the freedom of those who support it. Acting simply on reasons of identity, while defending that identity from others, cannot guarantee the stability of meaning that the ethnonationalist seeks.

Meaning cannot be found in stability, because it can arise only within projects, and projects are by their nature unstable because they are grounded in freedom. Limiting access to projects does not make them more stable; on the contrary, it saps them of adaptability and undermines their longevity. That longevity can be restored only by opening one's projects to the needs and interests of others, so that they can be taken up by those from other cultures and bound largely to other sets of norms and identities. Meaning is not to be found in adherence to stable values because, as Beauvoir's example of the passionate man suggests, to take something as a *value*, rather than simply as a passion, just is to grant the possibility of its acceptance by others. To provide meaning, then, values must be such that they can serve as points of departure for those others: they must be such that they are open not only to those acting on reasons of identity, but on reasons of freedom, who not only seek to adapt their reasons so that others can take them up, but seek also to enable others to take up those reasons. Reliance exclusively on reasons of identity entraps those subject to those reasons, and not only those excluded by them; by making them unable to share their values with others, it makes them unable

[31] See note 28, above, for a brief account of this term.

to find a meaning that can outlast their own commitment to their projects.

None of this, of course, tells us how to answer the ethnonationalist in the sense of a knock-down argument that he will accept. But if the essentialism at the core of ethnonationalism is itself a project, then it follows that a simple education about historical or biological facts is unlikely to make a difference. One can change an agent's project only by giving them a new project that supersedes it, or by changing their situation such that they must change their projects to accommodate it. Education can be part of the answer, though its focus must involve at the least the ways in which what appear as national projects are indebted to others and the way others' projects still have value for one's own. But a social transformation that calls for engagement with rather than exclusion of others, and makes clear that such engagement is necessary for living a meaningful life, is essential. How to achieve this, then, is the practical question of responding to ethnonationalism.

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IDENTITY, IDENTIFICATION AND THE 'INVENTION' OF NATION

BY

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Identity, Identification and the 'Invention' of Nation

Franco Manti

Introduction

Appiah's book *The Lies that Bind. Rethinking Identity* offers an important contribution to reflection on the topic of identity, which has become central for ethics and political philosophy starting from the 1990s. I would like to dwell upon two issues, among others: the attribution of identity in relation to recognition (Appiah 2019, 3-32) and the construction of national identity (*ibid.*, 73-77). In which sense are identities "lies that bind"? How did the transition from the attribution of identity to individuals to attribution of identity to nations happen? If nations have been invented, in the face of the emergencies of our times, should we re-invent them?

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In order to attempt an answer to these questions, I propose both a historical-genetic and a conceptual pathway, which can be summarised as follows: 1. An analysis of a number of theoretical accounts from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, concerning what we now call recognition, shows the non-essentialistic nature of identity and how, as opposed to what used to happen in the classical world, through *anagnorisis*, it has acquired an intersubjective and attributive characterisation to the extent of determining priority criteria, distinctions and the donation of fully-fledged identity "assets"; 2. Political Romanticism based on an essentialistic interpretation of identity has operated a "transfer" of attributive identity from individuals to nation states; 3. The most sustainable answer to essentialistic interpretations, both Romantic and current, consists in considering a nation as a construct in which political and extra-political phenomena are combined through an integration process. 4. Since the recognition of a common identity as members of the human race evoked by Appiah is fact (we are all, men and women, *homo sapiens*), makes *anagnorisis* become topical again and goes hand in hand with today's ethical and political challenges which cannot be faced at national level. Awareness of this leads to the identification of a shared ethos and the construction of a social imaginary acting as a framework for a new integration of the cultural and the political dimension, which may "re-invent" the nation both in terms of rulers vs. ruled relations, and in terms of constructing a world governance who may be able to tackle the current emergencies.

I

From distributive conflict to identity conflict

In the early 1990s, in political theory, a shift in the focus of interest takes place from distributive to identity conflict (cf. Veca

1995, 7). A.M. Schlesinger Jr.'s book, *The Disuniting of America: Reflections on a Multicultural Society*,[1] is perhaps the best written representation of this transition. The dynamics described by Schlesinger underline the connection between the construction of identities, both individual and collective, and recognition strategies. He highlights the political relevance of the definition of national identity and of the cohesion of nation-states. Considering the United States as a reference frame, Schlesinger goes as far as envisaging the end of the melting pot and *The Disuniting of America.* Reflection on the forms and modes of recognition is fundamental, since they constitute the process through which personal and cultural identity is defined, that is, what Appiah calls labelling: "[…] every identity comes with labels, so understanding identities requires first that you have some idea about how to apply them" (Appiah 2019, 8). Such labelling concerns not only individuals and groups, but also nations (*ibid.*, 73-77).

II

Anagnorisis and the problem of the identity-truth relationship

In ancient Greek, the word for recognition is αναγνώρισις (*anagnorisis*). The term means a particular form of knowledge not characterised by a transition from ἄγνοια (*agnoia*), lack of knowledge, to γνῶσις (*gnosis*), knowledge, but by a 'retrieval' or

[1] See Schlesinger 1998. Published a couple of years before *Political Liberalism*, it functions in a way as a basis for it. Here I will not look into the complex questions dealt with in *Political Liberalism* and the debate originating from it. Rather, I would like to highlight how Schlesinger's analysis is relevant to understand the nature and problems of pluralism, which Rawls considers as fact, see: Rawls 2005, xiv-xix and 47-68; Ottonelli 2010, 166. For an analysis of *Political Liberalism,* see Maffettone 2010, 79-137; Manti 2012, 71-96.

'recovery' of something that was in one's knowledge beforehand. For the Greeks "[…] recognition expresses a deep relationship with truth: mainly, the truth of an identity; sometimes, the truth of a status" (Manfredi 2004, 11). Truth is in turn defined as a principle of correspondence between what is and what humans say. For this reason, *anagnorisis* plays a fundamental role in the plot of dramatic works (Aristotle, *Poetics* 1452a 36) and in literature. Recognition is pivotal in the lives of characters, but for the spectator, who knows the characters and, more often than not, already knows the plot too, this is about θέα (thea), i.e. a show. Through the ups and downs of characters, however, recognition expresses something going beyond sheer poetic representation: it tells the plot in which one gets lost, as is the case with Oedipus, or one becomes oneself again thanks to the intervention of others, as is the case with Ulysses (Manfredi 2004, 13-24). Plato mentions *anagnorisis* in *Theaetetus* where it consists in recognising among different feelings the one contributing to shape appropriate knowledge (Plato *Phaedrus* 72e; *Meno* 81d). *Anagnorisis* implies the selection or identification of a sensible experience giving functional clues to the knowledge of truth. In other words, there comes to be a correspondence between a phenomenal datum and episteme, that is, knowledge, which imposes itself as true because it is unassailable, as opposed to false opinion (Theaetetus, 193c). *Anagnorisis* has therefore to do with a relational process between the one who recognises and those who are recognised. Both in its literary and philosophical form, it remains within the scope of physicality and does not concern the attribution of values or meanings.

III

Identity as a construct

From the forensic person to Hume's 'problem'

According to Manfredi "the accelerations undergone by the changes in modern subjectivity have produced, as early as in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, accomplished theoretical elaborations of the category of recognition, even when the term was still not in use" (Manfredi 2004, 6). I believe, however, that in the seventeenth century the topic of subjectivity and of recognition in relation to identity already acquires philosophical importance along with the emergence of individualism and of attention to the subject. Zarka not only highlighted this importance, but also emphasised – very appropriately, to my mind – how misleading it is to insist only on the way inaugurated by Descartes, which makes the determination of the 'ego' as a subject and the related sovereignty of self-referential subjectivity the interpretative key of the whole development of modern philosophy. Another way also exists, the one walked by natural law, which, in contrast with Cartesian metaphysics, builds on a subjectification of law to reach the "invention" of the subject of law.[2] The most significant contribution in this connection is Locke's. He devotes chapter XXVII of Book II of *An Essay concerning Human Understanding* to an exploration of identity and diversity. After defining human identity in merely physical terms (Locke 1975, Book II, Chap. XXVII, 6, 331-332), he gives a psychological definition of personal identity: a person is "[…] a thinking intelligent Being that has reason and reflection, and can consider itself as itself, the same thinking thing in different times and places; which it does only by the consciousness, which is inseparable from thinking, and a sit seems

[2] See Zarka 2000. Besides Locke, Zarka takes into consideration Grotius, Hobbes, Cudworth and Leibniz.

to me essential to it: It being impossible for any one to perceive, without perceiving, that he does perceive" (*ibid.*, Book II, Chap. XXVII, 9, 335). Hence, it is consciousness to be constitutive of personal identity, but also of the possibility of self-identification. (*ibid.*). Consciousness, therefore, combines lives and actions far away both in time and in immediacy, to construct the same person. As a consequence, self-identification is possible only through reference to our experiences (§ 17, 341), so that personal identity does not consist in the identity of substance, but in the identity of consciousness (§ 19, 342). Also identification by others happens with reference to actions, so much so that there must be a distinction between human being and person. Such a distinction is of fundamental importance in order to understand the origins of the "way" invoked by Zarka. If consciousness constitutes a person and their recognition happens with reference to the actions performed, then law and the justice of reward and punishment have their foundations in personal identity (§ 18, 341). Human law, in fact, does not inflict punishment on madmen (§ 20, 342-343 and § 24, 345). These considerations on identity are a bridge connecting self-consciousness with a definition of the person, so that together they give it shape as a moral subject and law body, since actions and their merit are concerned. It must be said that this definition is not in contrast with the psychologistic approach to be found in the preceding sections of *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*. Rather, it is a consequence of it, making it also possible to introduce a social dimension in recognition: wherever one may find what they call themselves, there somebody else may say they find the same person. With reference to the person, therefore, Locke says: "It is a Forensick Term appropriating Actions and their Merit; and so belongs only to intelligent Agents capable of a Law, and Happiness and Misery" (§ 26, 346-347). Thus, the term person has to do with what one concretely does, with the moral value of actions, but also with the law and with rewards and sanctions in

consequence of our doings. In this sense, "person" defines the moral subject and the subject of law together, and has much to do with the ways in which one is identified and judged both on the ethical and, when necessary, on the juridical level. To sum up, Locke provides a fundamental contribution to a modern re-definition of subjectivity with reference to identity construction processes, to identification, and he casts the basis for a notion of the individual as a socialised being, already in the state of nature, which he examines in *Two Treatises of Government* (*ibid.*, II II, 4-8, 106-108 and *ibid.*, II, VII, 77, 138). Furthermore, the juridical conception of 'person' provides recognition with an attributive characterisation which relates actions to merits.

Hume agrees with Locke on his non-substantialist, non-ego-self-referential notion of personal identity, and he proposes a specific interpretation of the above-mentioned characterisation of recognition. In short, according to Hume, the identity we ascribe to the human mind is fictitious. It is unable to unify the different perceptions coming from the outside world. Each perception entering the mind remains distinct, distinguishable, different and separable from any simultaneous or subsequent perception. As a consequence, "When I turn my reflexion on *myself,* I never can perceive this *self* without some one or more perceptions; nor can I ever perceive any thing but the perceptions. 'Tis the composition of these, therefore, which forms the self" (Hume 1896, "Appendix," 634). According to Hume, attributing an identity is an attempt to unify and stabilise a reality taking on changing and unsettled forms. The identity of things and personal identity are reflected one into the other, either of them requires the other and originates successive egos. Thus, personal identity emerges as an unstable plurality of successive egos in a relational structure. Hence Manfredi is right when he affirms: "recognition is something that is repeated and renewed again and again, each time by exerting

performativity in the form of renewed attributions or re-institutions" (Manfredi 2004, 96).

Up to this point, Hume seems to be missing the intersubjective dimension Locke had attached to the "forensic person" and that is already present in the state of nature, because of human inclination to sociality. In order to understand the relationship between the individual dimension of identity and the social dimension of recognition, or rather, of the recognised identity, in Hume's treatment of this subject, I believe reference must be made to the *impasse* he himself identifies:

> The present philosophy, therefore, has so far a promising aspect. But all my hopes vanish, when I come to explain the principles that unite our successive perceptions in our thought or consciousness. I cannot discover any theory which gives me satisfaction on this head. In short there are two principles, which I cannot render consistent; nor is it in my power to renounce either of them, viz, *that all our distinct perceptions are distinct existences,* and *that the mind perceives any real connexion among distinct existences* (*ibid.*, 635-636).

The problem encountered by Hume, therefore, is how to save an identity principle without making any concessions to a substantialist vision of the ego or to gnoseological realism. Appealing to the "privilege of a sceptic" (*ibid.* 636), he does not reach any conclusions, but he nevertheless casts the basis for a distinction between knowledge and recognition. By reprising the distinction between man and person, theorised by Locke (1975, Book II, Chap. XXVII, 21-22, 343-344), Hume considers as the object of knowledge what is permanent in time (possibly, with varying degrees of intensity) and what makes it possible to perceive also what has changed when recalled by memory, and, building on

that experience, allows for recognition to happen. Hume's conception is non-substantialist and relationist, whereby identity concerns past experiences intended not only in their biological and psychic, but also in their biographical sense. Identity relating to man in his biological and psychic features is an object of knowledge; identity as a system of relations, as a plurality of ever-changing existences does not constitute an objective datum. It displays features that are "established" as being defined in time, and therefore it is the object of recognition. The biographical and relational dimension of recognition represents a fundamental link to explain the intersubjective and attributive characterisation of identity. In the light of this, individuating identity implies three factors: the attribution of a name that is conventional; the attribution of a status concerning one's social standing; the attribution of a role concerning what an individual does or is supposed to do. Thus, identification, intended as an identity-attributing process, presupposes the existence of social relations and is made possible by the consensus of a plurality of persons: "Identity's reliance on procedures related to recognition acts has progressively introduced the figure of the other in its communitarian sense into the identity construction process" (Manfredi 2004, 103). Identity therefore emerges as a construct based on the consensus by many concerning the identity of one – a public image enabling re-identification in time[3] which may combine aspects remaining stable with aspects that may be changed, but that may be traced back to that identity by comparison.

[3] See on the topic Sparti 2003, 151.

IV

The gaze of others

In the introduction to *The Lies That Bind*, Appiah narrates how taxi drivers, in different parts of the world, try to size him up as soon as he gets into their cars. In so doing, they put their expertise to the test. The result of these attempts is interesting because, depending on the locations, he is assigned different labels (Appiah 2019, xi). This exemplifies two relevant aspects peculiar to the identity attribution process: the immediate need to give the interlocutor a label in order to relate to him; the conditioning of contexts, cultures, socially shared stereotypes on recognition and identity attribution.

This and many other examples in Appiah's book help us understand how the attempt to labelling on the basis of belonging is not that innocent, since the question taxi drivers are trying to answer is in fact: "what are you?" (*ibid.*). Such a question implies a transition from identification as a form of cognitive recognition to identity as attributive recognition. In this transition, the gaze of the other establishes a connection between the recognising community and to the one which is recognised.

It was mainly Rousseau and A. Smith who emphasised that "what lies at the root of recognition is not, therefore, an interpersonal relationship, but the consideration of one by many others, society's qualified attention to the individual" (Manfredi 2004, 105).

In *A Discourse upon the Origin and the Foundation of the Inequality among Mankind*, recognition − although Rousseau does not use this term[4] − is strictly linked to civilisation, since it causes the human

[4] See Taylor 1992, III, 35 and 44, where he states: "I thought that Rousseau could be seen as one of the originators of the discourse of recognition."

to become apart of oneself and to become dependent of things and of others. Comparing the savage with the civilized man, it may be noted how the former is less skilful, but self-sufficient (Rousseau 2013, Part I, 17). The savage does not have to use any tricks or devices; the civilised man, on the other hand, has to recur to tools that are external to him to survive. It is a man who, abandoning his natural condition, becomes other than himself, alienated.[5] This alienation is at the origin of the need to relate to others. Civilisation, with its organised common exploitation of the external world through its tools making human activity ever more efficient and productive,[6] produces two successive consequences: the first is mutual dependence for the satisfaction of needs, the second is dependence on other people's opinion, to the point that everybody's life ends up being conditioned by it. Becoming sociable, humans depend on the gaze of others and become slaves of public reputation, which represents a backdrop against which there emerge inequalities, social hierarchies and relations characterised by "[…] a deceitful and frivolous exterior, honour without virtue, reason without wisdom, and pleasure without happiness" (Rousseau 2013, Part II, 104). The civilised man's life is therefore conditioned by appearances or, even better, by how one appears to and is identified by the gaze of others. It is the satisfaction of ever-growing needs through the expansion of consumption and luxury,[7] to make the man who lives according to appearances a slave to the means, and he himself a means. The

[5] According to Starobinski, this analysis by Rousseau foreshadows Hegel's and Marx's; see Starobinski 1998, 55-56.

[6] Rousseau points out that, as long as nobody aspired to works requiring the joint collaboration of many people, man remained in himself. It was above all the introduction of agriculture to impose the need for joint work and mutual dependence. See Rousseau 2013, Part II, 70-72.

[7] See on the topic Forni 1976, 11.

civilised man's condition poses two interesting questions: 1. Is other people's esteem always a negative factor?; 2. Is the civilised man's life condition unavoidable? With regard to (1), Rousseau believes esteem plays a different role with respect to equality. He relates esteem to the attribution of honour which, in the *ancien régime*, as underlined by Montesquieu, requires *préférences* e *distinctions* (Montesquieu 1950, Tome I, Livre III, Chap. 7, 33) thus generating inequalities.[8] Rousseau identifies in the Greek *polis* the societal model that might enable us at least to contain *préférences* and *distinctions*, that is, the perverse effects produced by recognition and attribution of identity on the basis of a modern conception of honour. Obviously this is an idealised model of the *polis* intended as a republic[9] in which citizens are equal as such, and are also mutually dependent, like all civilised men, but their dependence is among equals and expresses itself in the public space. The political expression of this equality is the direct democracy exerted in the *agora*, allowing for the citizen to empathise with the institutions and to recognise the civil virtues of the value of pity, which is the very foundation of morality,[10] of solidarity and of wisdom. The interpretation we may deduce from Rousseau's words is that in a republic like the one he idealises dependence is, in fact, an interdependence that does not lead to alienation because it

[8] To explain the attribution of *préférences* and *distinctions*, Rousseau makes reference to public events such as shows and sports games: in ancient Greece, participation was egalitarian and there were no distinctions, whereas in the modern world, shows are an opportunity for ostentation, in which recognition on the basis of honour reaches a discriminating identity attribution (for example, through seat allocation) and does exclude, as is the case with those who cannot afford buying tickets. On the function of shows, please see Rousseau 2019.

[9] In its Latin sense of *res-publica*, which is the equivalent for the Greek notion of πολιτεία (politeia)

[10] See Rousseau 1990, 92 and 1999, Livre IV, 261-265; 2013, note XV, 219, where Rousseau says, with reference to pity: "[…] produit l'humanité et la vertu".

happens among equals. Such an interdependence is made possible by symmetrical reciprocity and by a shared commitment towards the affirmation of virtue. The virtuous citizen, as the result of an appropriate citizenship education, is not heterodirected, since he obeys to himself as a member of a community the ethical and political values of which, together, are constitutive of the "general will". A similar context makes the search for esteem compatible with freedom and social cohesion because, as Taylor observes, in Rousseau's ideal society "all the virtuous will be esteemed equally and for the same (right) reasons.[…] Paradoxically, the bad other dependence goes along with separation and isolation the good kind, which Rousseau doesn't call other-dependence at all, involves the unity of a common project, even a 'common self'."[11] In this way, Rousseau foreshadows a topic that will be elaborated on by Herder some time later, that is, authenticity towards oneself, which is impossible in a honour-dominated society, where men are conditioned by that gaze of others that enslaves them to opinion and recognises, identifies and esteems them on the basis of *préférences* and *distinctions*. Recognition thus loses its ethical characterisation and is reduced to an order control instrument in a society of necessarily unequal members.

Some years after Rousseau's *Discourse*, Adam Smith publishes *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, where, in spite of a certain language affinity, he develops a theory that is "alternative" to Rousseau's as far as the social dimension of recognition and of attributive identity is concerned. Even in Smith's essay, the gaze of others plays a fundamental role. Manfredi emphasises that, according to Smith, the advantage we aim to obtain when we pursue an improvement of our condition is not only an economic advantage, but also a visibility one. Those who succeed in life obtain consideration, gratification and approval; hence, differences in rank and status are

[11] Taylor 1992, 49; on common self, see Rousseau 1959, 244.

also differences in visibility (Manfredi 2004, 54) and "Society is established and maintained neither by the recognition of virtue, nor by the value of wisdom, nor, least of all, by solidarity towards the weak, but by the attraction of power and by the fascination of fortune and wealth" (*ibid.*, 58). This means that, in Smith's thought, the ethical side of recognition would become marginal in terms of the function of keeping rank and status distinctions to guarantee order and stability. Its role comes down, at the most, to reinforcing social cohesion. In my opinion, Manfredi's interpretation is partial as it does not take into consideration some important elements of Smith's thought: the role of propriety, the relationship among inequality, the division of labour, progress and increased prosperity. That he entitles the whole of part I of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* "The Propriety of Action" is telling. Smith immediately establishes a connection between propriety and sympathy, the latter enabling us to feel happy about the joys of others and to feel sorry for the afflictions of others. The book's incipit is definitely explanatory: "How selfish soever man be supposed, there are evidently some principles in his nature which interest him in the fortune of others, and render their happiness necessary to him, though he derives nothing from it except the pleasure of seeing it" (Smith 2010, Part I, Sect. I, Chap. I, 9). Sympathy, at the basis of the propriety judgement, acquires a social dimension through the medium represented by the impartial and well-informed spectator, the man within, the breast, the great judge and arbiter of men's conduct. Smith therefore identifies two courts of judgement: "The jurisdiction of the man without is founded altogether in the desire of actual praise, and in the aversion to actual blame. The jurisdiction of the man within is founded altogether in the desire of praise-worthiness and in the aversion to blame-worthiness" (*ibid.*, Part. III, Chap. II, 91). The spectator is impartial and sympathetic at the same time: his impartial gaze allows for a conception of him as an average social ego through which the

sense of propriety and of justice corrects the natural inequality of our feelings. The sympathy we feel for successful persons, from which our admiration of them derives, has a twofold function: it encourages us to improve ourselves and, at the same time, represents a source of social cohesion. While emphasising how such an admiration is a source of corruption of our moral sentiments (*ibid.*, Part I, Sect. III, Chap. III, 45-48) Smith also observes: "The distinction of ranks, the peace and order of society, are in a great measure, founded upon the respect which we naturally conceive for the former [the rich and fortunate]. The relief and consolation of human misery depend altogether upon our compassion for the latter [poor and wretched]. The peace and order of society is more important than even the relief of the miserable" (*ibid.*, Part VI, Sect. II, Chap. I, 156). Are we facing inconsistency or aporia? According to Manfredi, neither of them, for the reasons mentioned above. To my mind, there is a different explanation: the impartial sympathetic spectator encourages admiration and respect for the powerful and high-rank persons while mitigating them through moral awareness of their possible degeneration. This allows such a spectator to set limits to these feelings and to conceive of ranks as something that is not given once and for all. In short, Smith's position does not exclude social mobility, so much so that constitutional changes and revisions are to be ascribed to the mobility in rank or of the status of the "subordinate parts" within a state (*ibid.*, Part. VI, Sect. II, Chap. II, 159). Smith's position is still better understood if one considers his analysis of inequality – a central theme in his thought, just like in Rousseau's. Despite the different assessments of its genesis and function, both of them reach the same conclusion: modern society puts an end to the inequalities characterising the *ancien régime*, but produces new ones (Smith 1978, 562-582). The dynamics induced by capitalism "[…] proves progressive and basically egalitarian under some respects, unequal and contradictory under some other.

[…] In Smith, this ambivalence permeates *Wealth* entirely and becomes a dominant trait of the analysed system" (Gioia 2016, 46). On the one hand, wealth is increased, on the other new forms of inequality are developed which trigger a deterioration of social relations. After all, division into social classes is inevitable not only because social conventions set it as a model, but also because the production of social wealth is based on it.[12] The division of labour, becoming more marked and increasingly characterising developed and civilised societies, determines economic growth, but hinders the development of workers' subjectivity, whose vast majority ends up doing a very small number of simple operations, which has a brutalising effect on them: "[…] this is the state into which the labouring poor, that is, the great body of the people, must necessarily fall, unless government takes some pains to prevent it" (Smith 1981, Book V, Part III, Art. II, 782). The division of labour, therefore, represents a point of reference for recognition and identification on the social level, on the basis of the positioning of individuals in productive processes. If you compare what emerges from *The Wealth of Nations* with *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, identity is attributed on the basis of each individual's social status and the appropriateness of actions pointed to by the impartial spectator in consideration of such status.

In short, like Rousseau's, Smith's account implicitly poses the problem of authenticity, but this problem is not developed.

[12] See on this issue Raffaelli 2001, 92-94.

V

Attributive recognition and the allocation of identity 'assets'

Ranging from the forensic person to the function of the average social ego performed by the impartial spectator, it has been so far illustrated that identity is a 'construct', the outcome of recognition processes in which the gaze of others expresses a social consensus on the individual's identity and allows for its re-cognisability over time.[13]

Moreover, the identity produced by attributive and axiological recognition which, starting from Locke, characterises modernity, allocates intangible assets, such as honour, dignity, respect, "identity assets,"[14] on which those who are recognised depend for an indefinite time. A consequence of this is that recognition by others strengthens self-awareness in those who are recognised and enables them to self-identify in the light of such "assets"; another consequence, however, is that they are exposed to changes, variations or even elisions in their allocation. On the positive side of it, attributive recognition confirms status and social bonds and makes a certain degree of inequality socially acceptable. Although Locke and Smith dealt with this matter in different terms, they hold that identity assets should be allocated according to a sort of shared performance principle. Rousseau believes that the State intervention is needed (which also Smith considers), both on the normative and on the institutional level, with the aim of allocating the dignity 'asset' through the control of economic processes and education in the civil virtues. On the negative side of it, attributive recognition may deny somebody the above-mentioned 'assets' due to stereotypes and prejudice used to 'justify' discriminatory

[13] On the construction of public image, see Sparti 2003, 151.
[14] See *ibid.*, 147

individual behaviours and policies. Stereotype and prejudice also generate misrecognition and denial. The former consists in a primary refusal of recognition.[15] The latter, on the other hand, consists in the cancellation of ongoing recognition.[16] Hence, misrecognition and denial contribute to the creation of identity and to the revision of attributed identity. Taylor points out – and rightly so – that misconception "[…] can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being. […] misrecognition shows not just a lack of due respect. It can inflict a grievous wound, saddling its victims with a crippling self-hatred" (Taylor 1992, 25-26) (but this also applies to denial).

VI

Authenticity and *Volksgeist*

In my brief reconstruction of Rousseau's thought, I emphasised the relevance acquired by the civilised man's separation from himself and his difficulty following the moral sense that is within us and that is *per se* the source of our morality. Also Smith believes that appropriate behaviour is to be ascribed to the influence and authority of conscience, to the call from the man within, that is, from the impartial spectator defined as "[…] the great judge and arbiter of our conduct" (2010, Part III, Chap. III, 95). Rousseau and Smith are therefore a landing point for the individualization of subjectivity typical of modernity, for which telling right from wrong, differently from what Locke thought, was not founded on conformity of action to the obligation deriving from the law of nature and rationally deducible from the latter, but on the moral

[15] Consider, for example, discrimination on the basis of race or gender.
[16] This is the case of Nazi or Fascist racial laws.

sense inherent in every human being.[17] Once the normative reference to the law of nature has failed, however, such a landing point poses a problem: how can we possibly be authentic, faithful to our conscience, when we live in a society in which attributive recognition determines identity and the allocation of the 'assets' that go with it, and at the same time we are exposed to misrecognition and denial?

The issue of authenticity, remaining in the background of Rousseau's and Smith's accounts, was interpreted as an ideal by Herder, according to whom everybody has their own measure, their own frame of mind, their own instincts (Herder 1887-1909, VII, I, 291). This diversity, constitutive of humankind, acquires ethical relevance: each life is irreducibly unique and nobody can be compelled to live it according to somebody else's precepts or needs. According to Taylor, this is a "[…] powerful moral ideal that has come down to us. It accords moral importance to a kind of contact with myself, with my own inner nature, which it sees as in danger of being lost." (Taylor 1992, 30). Practising the ideal of authenticity, therefore, means walking the path of self-fulfilment and self-realisation. To my mind, the most significant novelty in Herder's view, in terms of its vast influence,[18] lies in the widening of the authenticity ideal from the individual to the people (*Volk*), in which the individual is recognised and recognises himself or herself.

According to Herder, the transition from 'me' to 'us' is unescapable for the affirmation of authenticity, because it is an inherent characteristic of human beings to be part of a community

[17] A fundamental passage in this process is the theory of moral sense developed by Hutcheson 2004, Treatise II, Introduction, 85-88, Treatise II, Sect. I, 92-93, where Hutcheson affirms: "It is plain we have some secret Sense which determines our Approbation without regard to Self-Interest" (92).
[18] See Larmore 1987, 130 and 1996.

and inherit its traditions which are the only means enabling us to effectively understand what we are and what we should be. Thus, the community is the natural condition in which humans live (Herder 1967, 46, 94, 102-106) so much so that our comprehension of the requirements of morality depend on it. This poses problems of consistency with the theory: how is it possible to practise the way of self-fulfilment and self-realisation if humans in their moral self-understanding are bound by the traditions of the society in which they live? The answer that may be retrieved from Herder's text is that the habitual ways of living and conceiving of the world are not chosen by us, but received by the social reality surrounding us. Our independence is therefore limited. Taking a critical view on cosmopolitan universalism, he states: "The blurred heart of the indolent cosmopolitan is a shelter for no one. Do we not then see, my brothers, that nature has done everything she could, not to broaden, but to limit us and to accustom us to the circumference of our life" (Herder 1887-1909, VIII, V, 203). What we should aim to is a balance between authenticity and appearance, but such a balance is made extremely precarious by the pursuit of an ideal of good life that is only possible within a communitarian social context. As a matter of fact, Herder ends up by referring pluralism to communities interpreted as bodies where the whole encompasses its parts and its parts are an expression of the whole. The precarious balance between autonomy and appearance is cancelled: belonging represents "[…] the heart of all Herder's ideas" (Berlin 1976, 195). The social holism that Herder believed to derive from the Greek *polis* led him to such an overlapping of community, State and nation that the most natural state is thus *one* people, with *one* national character (Herder, 1887-1909, IX, IV, 249-265). Hegel is responsible for the idea that recognition implies an obligation of reciprocity between the individual and the community. Through the master-slave dialectic, he demonstrates that one's identity is determined by the modalities of recognition

adopted by others.[19] On this basis, he develops a theory according to which identity attribution and reciprocity obligation concern above all the relationship between individuals and communities, because the identity that is recognised positions itself with reference to and within the community it recognises. The nation-State is the moral community *par excellence*, the expression of the *Volksgeist*, of the spirit of an entire people, "[…] the actuality of the ethical Idea. […] We should therefore venerate the state as an earthly divinity" (Hegel 2009, § 257, 201 and Addition to § 272, 224-225). This is the basis for the theory of *Sittlichkeit*,[20] according to which institutions not only allow for the possibility of pursuing each individual's moral ideals, but also promote moral development, so that the ideal of authenticity, intended as the affirmation of the deep ego in every human being, is only possible as an expression of belonging to the nation-state.

Apart from the difficulty demonstrating the existence of a deep ego,[21] this essentialist and expressivist notion of the nation-state does not take into account two facts: within states there might be sub-national moral communities; transnational moral communities do exist. As a consequence of this, the value of a moral community cannot be compressed or identified with the nation-state and, differently from the Greek *polis*, the sense of belonging is not mainly or exclusively political. Moreover, in the name of an ethical state, the liberal principle of political neutrality towards

[19] See on the topic Honneth 2008, 15-32.
[20] See, concerning this section, Zolfagharieh 2009.
[21] I think the thesis, upheld by Girard, that authenticity, so intended, is a lie, may be shareable. See Girard 1961.

controversial notions of good life fails,[22] with all the consequences this has on tolerance and individual freedoms.

VII

Two developments of political Romanticism

Differently from Hegel, Herder had taken into consideration the existence within a state of a plurality of moral communities. The central position he assigns to belonging may take two forms. On the one hand, it allows for the possibility of the existence of a plurality of moral communities within a single state. This interpretation has been reprised and developed in various forms by communitarian philosophers to support the idea of a multicultural society and, at the same time, their critique of liberalism. Recognition policies in support of ethnic and cultural minorities should be based on communitarian rights[23] and provide for their environmental protection.[24] Michael Sandel has theorised an even deeper reason in support of the irreplaceable role of communitarian belonging, since the community is the place where it is possible to develop the ideal of authenticity as an expression of such a belonging. The community, in fact, "[…] defines not only what individuals have as fellow citizens, but also what they are, not a relationship they choose (e.g., a voluntary partnership), but a

[22] See Larmore 1987, 104. Referring to Hegel, Larmore says: "As in the case of Herder, a rejection of autonomy as the paramount personal ideal, together with a commitment to expressivism, led to the abandonment of political neutrality, and the espousal of a substantial communitarianism"; see Appiah 2019, 82; on the principle of political neutrality, see Manti 2015.
[23] See on the topic Kymlicka 1995.
[24] See on this issue Taylor 1994, 61-68.

bond they discover, not a mere attribute, but a constitutive part of their identity" (Sandel 1998, 14). This development of Herder's pluralistic intuition is subject to a wide range of critical stances that are impossible to look at here.[25] I will only emphasise how it implies a monistic view of identity which does not take into consideration that everybody, as Appiah and Sen observed,[26] can be characterised by a plurality of identities and forms of belonging and by the prevalence of one over the other depending on the relevant context. Similar considerations apply to cultures. History itself has shown us how they are far from immobility, changing, hybridising.[27] The environmental protection of cultures thus risks to generate artificial barriers, to become an obstacle to dialogue and cooperation. The way forward is that of a clear distinction between cultural freedom and preservation of cultures. On the other hand, policies aimed at a mere preservation of cultures cause a number of problems of which also Taylor becomes aware when he introduces his *presumptive thesis* that only the cultures which are deemed to have given a framework of meaning to a large number of human beings for a long time have a right to survive. Unfortunately, the assessment criteria for establishing this sort of hierarchy of cultures and what the threshold is beyond which a culture does no longer deserve protection are unclear. Moreover, should a comparative method be adopted, as appears inevitable, it would not be immune from ethnocentrism.[28] Taylor's communitarian synthesis thus reaches the idea that somebody − who? – may decide which culture is worthy of survival and which

[25] For an in-depth discussion of this, see Manti 2019, 5-9; on the risks of Taylor's politics of recognition, see Appiah 2019, 96-98.
[26] See *ibid.*, 84-86; Sen 2006, 18-36.
[27] It might suffice to think of Hellenism, Christianity, jazz, as well as phenomena more related to material culture, such as clothing and food
[28] A closer look on this topic appears in Manti 2019, 10-13.

is not: an outcome in contrast with his theory of recognition, which requires equal respect for cultures as expressions of a moral community.

The other development of political Romanticism, in Herder's and, above all, Hegel's versions,[29] was the rise of nationalism in history. Here an analysis of the historical genesis of the many theories of nationalism is not possible; suffice it to say that I intend nationalism as an ideology according to which in each national group basic features may be identified distinguishing it from the rest of humanity and being embodied in the nation-state.[30] Today's variant is represented by populist nationalism. Appiah believes it is the outcome of a reaction to globalisation and to the prospect that "The national age was to be edged aside by the 'network age'." (Appiah 2019, 98). In the political imagination of this nationalism not only is the network finite, but ethnic and religious minorities, such as Roma or Muslims, should also not be recognised as equal within the nation for the sake of protection of national identity. Building on this basis, the "[…] populists claim to represent 100 percent of the people, by dismissing their opponents as inauthentic betrayers of the people or else as foreigners, not part of the people at all."[31] This demonstrates that populism is not characterised by anti-politics, but by a hyperpoliticisation leading to what Schmitt considered the essence of 'political' − the friend-enemy relationship (Schmitt 2009, 25-26). This relationship would emerge as the fight of the "pure people" against the corrupted élite within each State, [32] and between different States as the opposition of values and notions of good life characterising them. What typifies

[29] See also Fichte 1978 and 1808.
[30] The first to adopt the term 'nationalism' was the Abbot Barruel, who referred it to the Jacobites. See Barruel 1800, 184.
[31] Cf. Mueller 2016, 3-4. See Appiah 2019, 99.
[32] See Muddle 2014 and 2004. See also Kazin 2017.

populist nationalism is a holistic approach according to which the people is a homogeneous moral community identifying and narrating itself by exclusion. In this connection, what Revelli affirms seems to me to be significant: "Hence each form of populism is more or less deeply connected with the moral construction of the 'other' as an antithesis compared to which the constitutive values of the reference community – taken as *heartland* – are finally disclosed, the borders of which protect the single individualities challenged in their identity and enable them to find collective comfort" (Revelli 2019, 11).

VIII

The 'invention' of nation

If, as Appiah observes, essentialism referred to identities is generally wrong (Appiah 2019, 27) and this also applies to national identity (*ibid.,* xi-xiv) then how is nation to be defined as an alternative to a tradition of thought having its roots in Herder and Hegel and its recent developments in multicultural communitarianism and sovereignist populism? The hypothesis I regard as most reasonable is that the nation is a construct combining cultural and political dimensions. It was Anderson to put an emphasis on how the nation is above all a mental representation constituting a powerful identification object[33] By defining the nation as an imagined political community, he also identified the contents being the subject of imagination: the limits represented by borders, the communion among citizens, sovereignty, the community, since the nation is conceived as a horizontal brotherhood that goes beyond inequalities (Anderson 2003, 6). The nation is a representation created by the interaction

[33] See on the topic Goio 1994, 205.

among institutions and the transmission of information and experiences deriving from the institutional framework containing and regulating them.[34] Hence the state does not produce culture, but contains it.

Anderson's reflections, however, do not look at a fundamental factor in the identification process, since representation is not sufficient for shaping identification. Awareness of belonging to a community endowed with an identity does not imply that such a belonging is normative, in other words, that it provides such reasons on the level of value that they may justify collective actions by the community or performed on its behalf.[35] The nation as representation and value may be identified by referring to 'national behaviour'. Albertini has underlined its essential features. Once national behaviour is defined as the link operated by individuals between their own (cultural, religious, economic, etc.) behaviours and the name of the nation (Albertini 1980, 58) the feature characterising it is 'faithfulness.' Historically, the link between behaviours that are non-national *per se*[36] with the name of the nation and the transfer of faithfulness to it have been made possible by centralisation and territorialisation, which characterised the construction of modern states. I would also emphasise the pivotal role played by bureaucracy in establishing the value of equality before the law and of its non-arbitrariness.[37] All of this caused the above-mentioned behaviours to be politicised.

[34] Anderson believes communication through the educational system and through the press is fundamental.
[35] See Giddens 1985, vol. 2, 62.
[36] For example, religious or economic behaviours.
[37] See J. Locke 1823, II, XI, § 136, 163 -164. Cf. Larmore 1987, 40-42; Fischer and Lundgreen 1975.

Nation therefore appears as a e collective mental construction that may be traced back to interaction among political and extra-political phenomena. Within the latter, the symbolic dimension is an important factor, which I believe is one of the cornerstones for understanding the phenomenon of integration. We owe to Antony Smith the relevance attributed to such a dimension[38] and its mythical character. Ethnos, intended as an ideal type, would be the *mythomoteur* of the nation. He argues that only through an approach taking into due consideration the symbolic dimension, revolving around a historical comparison of the lasting constitutive elements of ethnic communities and of nations, we may construct an appropriate framework of the historical and sociological relations existing between these communities and nations.[39] Smith's theory is limited in that it considers ethnicity the only interpretative key for everything concerning political identity, so that "[…] the 'ethnic theory' is transformed into a substitute for political theory or of its greatest part […] ethnicity is conveyed to al that has to do with ethnicity for the only reason that it has to do with it." (Goio 1994, 230). Thus ethnicity becomes an ontological reality and ethnic theory an ontology.[40]

[38] "Of course, there is much more to the concept of the 'nation' than myths and memories. But they constitute a sine qua non: there can be no identity without memory (albeit selective), no collective purpose without myth, and identity and purpose or destiny are necessary elements of the very concept of a nation" (A.D. Smith 2009, "Introduction," 3; on the indefeasibility of *mythomoteur*, see *ibid.*, 24-25.

[39] See *ibid.*; the *mythomoteur* was critically analysed by Altan, who identified five themes that are central to the construction of the ideal type of *ethnos*: the *epos*; the *ethos*, the *logos*, the *genos* and the *topos*. See Altan 1995, 21-32.

[40] Illuminating in this connection is Goio's example: "[…] the English are an ethnic group; the Tudors are English; therefore the Tudor monarchy is an ethnic State, and so is every expression of action concerning it, Shakespeare's tragedies, Dowland's music, etc." (*ibid.*, 230-231).

If nation, as has been said, is an invention and nations are invented and reinvented, a more in-depth analysis of the way the identification process concerning them is generated and characterised should be conducted, also including in this process the cultural dimension, in general, and the symbolic dimension, in particular, without falling into essentialism. The phenomenon we should consider is *integration*, which may be defined as a process characterising the way in which the parts of a system are interconnected.[41] Integration is a process that may be interpreted as mainly cultural or mainly political. The former integration type, for example, is typical of Romantic expressivism, whereby the nation-state expresses its *Volksgeist;* the latter takes the form of a representation of integration modalities. In the former case, there is an objective, ontological conception of nation, in the latter, a configuration modality of reality. If such configuration concerns unification and political exchange, it could be said that political integration happens when rulers and ruled share the same power-justifying belief, so that integration may be defined as a state of congruence and proximity between the political attitudes of rulers and ruled (Stoppino 1982, 141). Congruence indicates the degree to which a given justifying belief is shared (Goio 1994, 240) proximity derives from the content of shared ideas and of political values (Stoppino 1982, 141). The limit of the mainly political interpretation of integration lies in underestimating the function that the generation of the shared feeling which makes it possible to live together productively has in the construction of the nation-state (Appiah 2019, 77) while considering what unites and makes it possible to identify in an 'us' and what divides but may be handled on the basis of such identification, thus keeping social peace and the integrity of the state. This implies the sharing on the part of rulers and ruled of visions of society, of the ways in which

[41] See on the topic Etzioni 1968, 74.

existences are intertwined and relationships are structured, of the expectations and notions and normative images on which such expectations are based; in other words, a social imaginary (Taylor 2004, 23-30) also including the way of conceiving of the production and distribution of resources. Natural law and contractualism, in Grotius's and Locke's versions, gave a fundamental contribution to the construction of the social imaginary in modernity, and traditionally represent the conceptual framework providing the best interpretation of the needs emerging from the Dutch and English realities of their time. Such framework also takes on a wider resonance in which identification appears as the process by which an individual chooses to be a member of a *body politic*, being aware that their role is complementary to the role of others, in line with the values governing society and implying, among other things, political neutrality with regard to controversial notions of good life and fiduciary authorisation to rulers. I believe these two aspects are very relevant to the above-mentioned congruence and proximity, which have not been sufficiently analysed in theories of political integration. The principle of political neutrality originates from acknowledging the real existence of cultures, traditions, their incommensurateness and the function they have in everyday life, and makes it possible to set the limits of tolerance enabling individuals and groups to pursue their own interests and life projects. Fiduciary authorisation to rulers concerned, in modern social imaginary, a regulated management of conflict through explicit and shared rules together with judgement on the exercise of the authorisation that could be revoked. In this respect, the Bill of Rights and the American Declaration of Independence are paradigmatic. In short, the idea of national identity does not require that "we are all the same" (Appiah 2019, 86), but that we share, against the background of a social imaginary, some values making sense of our living together in a state and that it is use and habit that corroborate them.

Social imaginaries may be numerous and may change over time. What they all have in common is being a basis for identification and recognition (as well as denial and misrecognition) both inside a nation and among nations. In the light of what has been said, the nation is a construct in which political and extra-political phenomena are combined. National identity emerges as a lie that bind and may be interpreted as an "operative myth" which has made it possible to respond to the needs of government stability at a time when modernity was being established and developed. For this reason, as Appiah claims, the ideal of national sovereignty still stands as a profound source of legitimacy, however obscure and unstable our definition of people may be (*ibid.*, 90).

Conclusions

The analysis of the processes through which individual and collective identities are construed and of a number of theoretical elaborations characterising Western modernity has led me to the claim that nation is a construct, a mental representation able to incorporate the cultural and political dimensions. I have also emphasised the reasons why I do not deem the holistic conceptions of community and nation inspired by political Romanticism viable, not only under a theoretical perspective, but also because of their potential outcomes. On the one hand, identitarian multiculturalism could be, as Schlesinger thought, a disuniting factor, but precisely with the aim of maintaining national cohesion, it may generate situations such as the *Medusa Syndrome*, in which the state affects what it only claims to recognise, thus becoming too intrusive, at least by the standards of a liberal democracy. This Syndrome, as Appiah observes, is caused by the attempt to fulfil an impossible task, since trying to govern identity

is tantamount to trying to govern the ungovernable (*ibid.*, 97-98)[42] On the other hand, sovereignist populism creates forms of discrimination and marginalisation within states, which may take on extremist forms such as suprematism in the US, and which jeopardise peace and social cohesion. As a matter of fact, separation between "us and them" is extremely problematic, since it is difficult to find an agreement on who we are and reference to a common ancestry, to a monolithic and unchangeable tradition or culture, to *Volksgeist* is no less sustainable today than it was in the nineteenth century (*ibid.*, 82-83).

At the same time, an essentially political-institutional theory of nation considering extra political factors such as cultures and traditions[43] to be marginal does not appear totally convincing, as they are relevant aspects in contributing to the construction of that shared feeling that provides sense (not right, as Burke holds[44]), to the shaping of 'us' as members of a nation.

A reflection on these questions seems to be really topical in the face of the circumstances determined by the Covid 19 emergency. In the first place, the pandemic has gained political relevance and contributed to highlight the weaknesses inherent in the integration of which Western democracies are an expression. As Appiah observes, the tolerant, pluralist, cosmopolitan modernity, which is able to question itself, is certainly under attack.[45] In an often confused, but manifest way, new situations of conflict have emerged. Sovranism has put an emphasis not only on the identity

[42] According to Appiah, an exemplary case for the Medusa Syndrome is Singapore.
[43] I am using the plural form because in the 'invention' of nation a plurality of cultures and traditions may converge which may be critically reconsidered and hybridised when integration takes place.
[44] See Compagna 1998, 26-36, and Zorza 1970.
[45] See Appiah 2019, 104; see, also, Maffettone 2020, 105-117.

conflict, but also on the conflict between nation state and international institutions or, alternatively, between national citizenship and 'planetary citizenship.' The weakness and contradictoriness of this position is evident if what has happened, for example, in Italy is taken into account. The perception of common vulnerability has generated a communitarian and identity appeal to the 'values of the nation.' In Italy, flying national flags and singing the national anthem have combined with an emphasis on the values of 'Italianness' as a unique capacity to rise up again during times of serious crisis through a strong commitment to solidarity. At the same time, the request of solidarity has been addressed to Europe and other nations in the perception of a common human condition. The first lockdown was the time of greatest consensus between population and government. The identity call was supported by the congruence and proximity between the political attitudes of rulers and ruled. A lack of trust in government action would weaken such call, but it could, also, strengthen it by opposing the people-nation to the rulers.

The identity of a community, of a people, of a nation therefore plays an ambivalent role: if it is considered from an essentialistic point of view, it may be very dangerous and a source of violence (Sen 2006); if it is considered as the outcome of a recognition process, identity, particularly national identity, may be interpreted as an "operative myth", a construct that enabled us to respond to stability and governance needs at a time when Western modernity and nation-states were established, and also to attempt to (partially) answer the question "who are we"? In this context, national identity is an invention or, in Appiah's words, even a lie, the relevance of which, however, cannot be silenced, since it has historically contributed to the integration process, and may be an important factor of social cohesion, as shown during the first lockdown in Italy. Given its pandemic nature, the Covid

emergency, like other major problems of our time,[46] cannot be tackled on a national basis.[47] An urgency therefore emerges for a reworking of our social imaginery of modernity, which also involves a reinvention of nation and its function in an international framework.[48] Since such a complex question cannot be examined here, I will only outline two perspectives which should go hand in hand with each other. The former concerns a reorganisation of democracies focusing on the issues and the needs of an integration capable of combining representative democracy and forms of participatory democracy;[49] the latter concerns the transfer of parts of sovereignty from nation-states to international entities, such as the European Union, requiring a supranational integration process for the first time in history. The difficulties of the EU and other supranational entities playing a more effective political role is explained by the difficulties encountered by such a process. Without it, however attractive it may be, the idea of a bottom-up, polycentric world governance, based on a multi-stakeholder model and made possible by new international representative entities, beside nation-states, including regional organisations, transnational corporations, NGOs, etc.[50], currently appears as utopian. Since integration plays a fundamental role in the creation of a "shared feeling", Appiah is right when, at the end of his *The Lies that Bind*, he expresses the need of establishing an identification based on the recognition of our sense of belonging to humanity. It should be underlined, however, that nowadays this is the recognition of a biological fact, a sort of contemporary *anagnorisis*. The challenge

[46] By this I mean emergencies such as ecological sustainability, increasing inequality between rich and poor countries, migrations

[47] For a critical analysis of methodological and normative nationalism, see Scuccimarra 2016.

[48] See on the topic Manti 2019, 15-17.

[49] See Manti 2017, 131-156.

[50] See Maffettone 2006, 38-47 and 2020, 119-122.

lies in sharing a *civil ethos* based on the affirmation of a new world conscience revolving around a sympathetic view of the relations among humans and between humans and nature. This perspective, all the more topical in consideration of the pandemic we are experiencing, is accurately summarised by Morin: "For the first time in human history, the universal has become a concrete reality: this is the objective inter-solidarity of humankind, in which the global fate of the planet determines the destinies of individual nations and in which the individual destinies of nations disturb or change the global destiny" (Morin 2004, 204). In short, awareness that the earth is our home country and that the destiny of our species cannot be separated by its position in its environment implies an ethical and political accountability concerning the exploitation of resources, pollution, the model for development to be adopted together with the establishment of the notion of world citizenship.[51] This notion requires the recognition of human rights and the progressive abandonment of a national sense of belonging to reach that of belonging to the human race without this meaning the disappearance of cultural pluralism, which should rather be the basis for the development of intercultural relations. Should the above-mentioned *civil ethos* not be a fundamental aspect of the new social imaginary and, thus, of the integration process it requires, Herder's critique of an abstract and indolent cosmopolitan universalism humiliating the spirit of peoples with its dangerous political implications for the survival and development of liberal democracies will come back into fashion.

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[51] European citizenship can be considered an important step in this sense.

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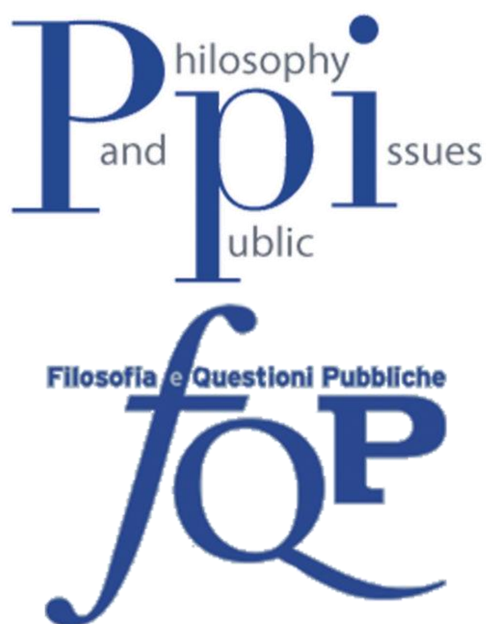
IDENTITY AND LIBERAL POLITICS



PERSONAL IDENTITY AND ITS PROPERTIES

BY

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Personal Identity and Its Properties*

Eldar Sarajlic

Introduction

I hadn't known that I was a Muslim until I turned fourteen. That year, a war erupted in my home country and I was forced to flee my hometown, together with my family and thousands of other Muslims.

Before the war, I lived a tranquil life of a child in socialist Yugoslavia, blissfully unaware of things that will turn my life upside down just a few years later. I was raised in a secular family that was inspired by the modernist ideas of progress, never paying too much attention to religion or ethnicity. But, our ethnic identity was etched in our bodies, independently of our volition and awareness. Our names, surnames, and family histories unmistakably revealed our cultural background, and one day identified us as a target of what became known as 'ethnic cleansing.'

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You can probably imagine my confusion, when as a budding teenager I discovered that I was actually considered a Muslim.[1] Being targeted as such, I embraced the label and made it a part of my personal identity. For me, becoming a Muslim was a way to resist the injustice of ethnic cleansing and fight for my own place under the sun. However, as it often happens with reactive attitudes, once the initial cause ceases to exist, the pressure to continue reacting ceases as well. I spent the next decade searching for my authentic self. By the time I reached mature years, I changed significantly, sometimes even beyond recognition.

My early experience with personal identity and identification gave me a somber introduction to what literature in philosophy and sociology will teach me years later: that personal identities are never truly personal. Being shared, they always exist in a certain political context, which partly determines their meaning and social worth; identities are both subjective and objective. However, this dual character also generates problems for our conceptualization of personal identity, which in turn affects our recognition practices. One of such problems is what I will call 'the identification problem' of personal identity, according to which two scenarios are possible:

1. A person can self-identify as *A* while not being socially recognized as an *A*
2. A person can be socially recognized as an *A* while not self-identifying as *A*

[1] For most Bosnians like me, the label 'Muslim' did not possess exclusively religious connotations. It was both ethnic *and* religious. To be fully a member of the ethnic group, a person was expected to embrace the religion, at least formally.

This is a serious problem for our understanding of personal identity. Various transitional identities, such as transgender, testify to its existence.[2] A person could be recognized (and socially categorized) as a man while self-identifying as a woman (or as both, or as neither). This problem suggests that we should posit the existence of two kinds of basic properties of personal identity: ontological and political. In scenario 1, the person is ontologically (but not politically) an *A*; in scenario 2, she is politically (but not ontologically) an *A*.

In this paper, I will argue that proper understanding of personal identity requires clear delineation of these two properties and their standards of evaluation. Moreover, I will suggest that justified recognition practices depend on proper conceptualization of the relation between these properties.

In what follows, I will propose a way to understand the relation between ontological and political properties of personal identity. I'll start by defining the problem more clearly in Section I.

I

Defining the Problem

The ontological branch of the identification problem reflects a difficulty of understanding what does it really mean to *be* something, like a man, woman, or a Muslim. Obviously, personal identity is not simply a matter of social classification. If it was, there would be no discrepancies between individuals' social classification and their self-knowledge. It is also not a simple matter of

[2] I need to make a clarification and say that identification here is ontological (identifying as an *A*) rather than emphatic (identifying with an *A*). See Hale 2009, 43-66.

psychology or individual preference. Had it been, then people would have chosen their personal identities at will. But, clearly, this is not how personal identities work.

Being an elusive discipline of inquiry, ontology needs an appropriate proxy onto which it can project its claims with an acceptable degree of precision and clarity. I can't think of any other discipline more appropriate for this task than logic. Ontological claims require a fair amount of confidence that things we talk about actually exist. Given that logic could provide us with the greatest possible amount of confidence about the truth of our claims, using logic as a proxy for ontology seems (to me, at least) a reasonable strategy.

If I am right, then one way to tackle the ontological problem of personal identity would be to try formalizing it through an appropriate logical structure. I shall attempt to do that in Section II. If we achieve some clarity about the best logical foundation of our concept of personal identity, then we could perhaps make some progress in understanding its ontology.

However, one could question the relevance of an ontological discussion of personal identity. Given that personal identification always happens in the social and political sphere, why discuss ontology? I wish we could get rid of ontological issues and only discuss the politics of personal identity. That would make things much easier, both for philosophers and the general public. But, unfortunately, that is not possible. Personal identities are often challenged, denied, and falsely asserted. Relying on politics alone cannot help us to adjudicate situations when identity claims clash. We need something to fall back on, and ontology, no matter how elusive, seems the only plausible candidate.

The political branch of the identification problem pertains to the social aspect of personal identification, but more narrowly to

practices of recognition, classification, and distribution. The problem here is to determine the basis of justice for our recognition practices, which could help us evaluate particular identity claims and apportion remedies to individuals whose legitimate claims for recognition have been denied. I shall attempt to do that in Section III. I will argue that the proper recognition practices must reflect a proper logical formulation of personal identity claims.

In practice, ontological and political properties of personal identity are intertwined. Identification is usually considered a social act (proclaiming one's *A*-ness is never isolated from the social context). However, I will argue for the conceptual independence of the two. I believe that thinking about ontology and politics of personal identity as separate will help us gain more clarity in understanding the concept and creating more appropriate liberal practices of social recognition.

I. 1. *Usage of terms*

Since I will be using logical (and mathematical) vocabulary to a degree, I wish to clarify the usage of certain terms, so to avoid possible confusion.

First, I will follow the standards of propositional logic and use capital letters, such as *A*, *B*, *C* to express well-formed propositions. So, for example, *A* could stand for any sentence that is a proposition, conveying a clear and unambiguous information. It could mean "Today is Wednesday" or "I have a cat."

However, since this is a paper about personal identities, I'll often be dealing with propositions containing identity assertions. So, in many instances, *A* will be taken to mean something like "I am a woman" or "Mary is Jamaican." When using propositions

containing identity assertions (which will be defined more clearly in the next section) sometimes I'll take them as proxies for the expressed identities themselves. So, if A is a variable for an identity assertion, I will sometimes refer to A as the identity itself, not just the proposition that asserts it. So, when I write that a person is an A, I mean that some person is predicated by the quality otherwise expressed through proposition A.

To make a distinction between propositions expressing identity content and propositions expressing some other kind of content, I will use lowercase letters, such as a, b, or c to express the latter. So, when I want to express a proposition such as "I was born in Bosnia," symbolically, I may use b to do so. To distinguish these kinds of propositions from variables representing persons, I will reserve the last three letters of the alphabet (x, y, and z) for denoting individuals. So, when I write x is an A or $x = A$, x is a variable that stands for some person (or a group of persons) predicated by A.

Finally, I will follow the standards of probability theory to express the probability that some proposition A is true as P(A). When I assign values to these probabilities, I will use a quantitative, rather than the qualitative method. So, I will use real numbers instead of fractions. So, if a person x is on the fence about the truth of A, then for x, P(A) = 0.50.

II

Logics of Personal Identity

Writing about identity requires adopting a precise meaning of the subject in focus because the term 'personal identity' can be used to refer to more than one thing. For example, it can refer to my unique numerical identity as a certain individual, a child of two

other specific individuals, born on a particular point in space-time. This is John Locke's (1996) and Derek Parfit's (1984) approach to identity.

However, personal identity can also refer to my qualitative identity as a member of a certain group of people, defined by some unique feature that separates this group from others. Unlike numerical identity, the qualitative conception focuses not on what separates me from others, but on what unites me with a specific group of other individuals. It focuses on features some humans have in common with one another.[3]

In this paper, I will focus exclusively on the qualitative conception of identity. I am primarily interested in the logical conceptualization of *shared* personal identities.

There are two possible ways to conceptualize anything within a logical structure. The first way is to determine a set of atomic propositions that will, together with some rules of inference, serve as the basis of further statements. In the context of identity, this would mean specifying some kinds of atomic propositions and take them either as statements of personal identity themselves, or as some other kinds of statements from which identity claims could follow. The second way is to lay out axioms and then try to derive further rules and conclusions from these axioms. In the context of personal identity, this would mean specifying some axioms of personal identification and then deriving particular identity statements from them. In this section, I will consider both approaches.

[3] See comparable approaches in Appiah (2018), Schechtman (2014), Hildemann (2014), Olson (2007), Varga (2015, 2011).

II. 1. *Identity as Predication*

The initial challenge of conceptualizing qualitative personal identity in terms of some logical structure is to distinguish the discourse from ordinary understanding of identity in logic. Namely, the term 'identity' is usually used to refer to the numerical conception. As Nicholas Smith argues:

> In our sense, to be *identical* to something is to be the very same thing as that thing. You are identical to yourself and to no one else, I am identical to myself and to no one else, and so on for every object: each object is identical to itself and to nothing else. So, *two* objects are never identical to one another (in the sense of 'identity' used in logic) because they are different things, not one and the same thing (Smith 2012, 299).

Since the focus of this paper is on the qualitative conception of identity, the best possible way to meet this challenge is to conceptualize personal identity in terms of predication rather than logical 'identity.' A personal identity statement could then be expressed as an atomic proposition of the following form:

$$x = A \tag{1}$$

Let us call this an assertion of personal identity, or *identity assertion* for short. As an expression of the logical structure for identity statements, this proposition could be interpreted to mean any of the following:

- John is a man.
- Mary is Greek.

- Mohammad is a Muslim.
- I am a lesbian.
- You are a philosopher.

In all of these cases, x is a variable denoting a person and A is a variable denoting a quality associated with that person. The perspective from which the proposition can be uttered does not change its logical structure; in all cases, the verb 'to be' is an expression of predication.

While simplicity of (1) seems a desirable quality to represent personal identity as predication, it is unfortunately insufficient to convey the full meaning of the concept. Namely, since personal identities of this kind are shared, there must exist some rules (or quantifiers) that determine the scope of the predicate. We want to be able to know who counts as an A and who doesn't. Given this crucial requirement, no identity assertion could assume the form of an atomic proposition.

Perhaps a better way to express the shared nature of personal identities is to use first-order predicates and express the logical form of shared personal identity like this:

$$\forall x A(x) \tag{2}$$

In this case, the identity assertions are outcomes of a propositional function, which could be interpreted to mean any of the following:

- All inhabitants of Japan are Japanese.

- Anybody born with a penis is a man.
- All Americans with brown skin areBlack.
- Whoever desires same sex partners is gay.
- Every computer hacker is a geek.

This expression is slightly more complex, but the advantage is that it allows us to say that all xs are predicated by A. Unlike (1), in (2) x is not a designator of a single individual, but of a whole group of people who share features described by the predicate A. If we follow this reasoning further, we could say that the relation between all the members of the set of x and A is a relation between a token and a type. If x_1 is a member of the set x, then x_1 is a token of the type A.

The expression (2) is logically equivalent to other kinds of expressions that establish a predicative relationship between x and A, such as the conditional that if something is x then it is an A:

$$x \rightarrow A \tag{3}$$

The practical value of the expressions (2) and (3) for conceptualizing personal identity is that they provide us with a valid rule of inference for any particular x. If they hold true, then we can safely conclude that any x is an instance of A. If $\forall x A(x)$ or $x \rightarrow A$ are true, then any x that exists would be an A.

While this option is capable of representing the shared nature of personal identities, some problems still remain. Most notably, the main issue (deciding who qualifies as an x) is not resolved but just moved one step forward. Moreover, the expressions

themselves do not provide (or reveal) plausible normative ground for including any particular x_i into the set predicated by A, and thus do not work as axioms from which the truth of any particular $x_i = A$ could be derived. This is evident from the identification problem mentioned earlier. There are numerous exceptions to this kind of axiomatic understanding of identity predications that make this route hard to follow. Consider this instance, for example:

Anybody born with a penis is a man.

It is obvious that this predicate function cannot work as an axiom of personal identification. There's too many practical exceptions to it (not all persons born with penises are men). Unfortunately, in the logic of personal identification, we cannot derive the truth of $x_i = A$ from $\forall x A(x)$.

It seems to me that the problem lies in trying to conceptualize personal identity in terms of deductive logic. Within the deductive approach, neither atomic nor axiomatic approach seem good enough to give us a plausible logical framework for understanding identity. Any practical instance of the $\forall x A(x)$ axiom will not be universally true, while any possible atomic proposition will be practically useless for conceptualizing the shared nature of personal identification.

However, this doesn't mean that we should give up trying to conceptualize personal identity according to some logical structure. After all, the intuition that personal identification follows a certain set of rules is universally shared and plausible (we can't change our personal identities at will, and we do share some of our identities with others). Given that intuition, it is worth trying to do come up with a plausible formal framework. In the next section, I will

develop an alternative logical framework that could help us conceptualize personal identity in a different way.

II. 2. *Probabilistic Conception of Identity*

An important step in formalizing the concept of personal identity is to determine the context of identity statements. In what kind of discursive circumstances we assert our personal identity?

If identity assertions cannot function as atomic propositions or universally quantified statements, then they could perhaps be understood as inferences from some other (atomic or elementary) propositions. When I say that I a man, for example, this identity assertion functions as a conclusion to an argument, not as an independent statement. Even when the identity assertion is given on its own (in some social context), the premises are always implied. In other words, when I assert my identity as a man, I do so because I have reasons for doing so. There are some other propositions from which I infer my identity statement.

The inferential nature of identity assertions means that the ground of personal identities is to be found in the relation between different propositions, and not in the propositions themselves. When I say that $x = M$ (for example, "I am a man"), I assert not a simple atomic proposition, but a set of two or more propositions in such a way that my identity assertion is the outcome of an inferential chain that began in some atomic proposition p. For example, let p mean "I was born with a penis." My identity assertion is then an inference from p to $x = M$.

We've already seen in the previous section that universally quantified propositions cannot serve as axioms for derivation of all instances of x because they will not always be true. If the relation cannot be conceptualized deductively, then perhaps a probabilistic

approach could be more appropriate. We could say that every identity assertion contains a degree of uncertainty. "I am a man" could be relatively, instead of absolutely, true. It would depend on the strength of the given inferential relation (as well as on the soundness of the premises).

Although it may sound a bit exaggerated to those certain about their own personal identity, this idea is not far-fetched. We are intuitively aware that personal identities are not fixed and that they evolve through time, as our self-knowledge changes. We may sometimes be mistaken about who we are. Knowledge of our personal identities is

> sensitive to reasons, which means that it is subject to normative assessment (it is veridical). Persons could make mistakes in making assertions about themselves. An inference is part of a reasoning process, and making judgments about oneself is subject to the same errors one is subject to in making judgments about the external world (Sarajlic, 2019, 50).

If we accept this relation as probabilistic, then we could use some insights from the theory of probability to develop this idea further. For example, we could use Keynes' idea of the degree of rational belief, conceptualized as follows:

> Let our premises consist of any set of propositions *h*, and our conclusion consist of any set of premises *a*, then if a knowledge of *h* justifies a rational belief in *a* of degree *a* we say that there is a *probability-relation* of degree *a* between *a* and *h* (Keynes 2013, 4).

If we apply this idea to the concept of personal identity, then we could say that for any identity assertion A there is a set of propositions a that justifies the belief in A to the degree a.

II. 2. 1. *Axioms of Probabilistic Personal Identity*

There are two important things that need to be clarified before a full probabilistic conception of personal identity can be outlined. The first clarification to make is to establish the proper interpretation of probability that satisfies conceptual needs of the task at hand in this paper.

Namely, the theory of probability admits of several foundational views about the nature of probability. The most popular interpretations are logicism, frequentism, and subjectivism (there are a few others, but I'm keeping the discussion limited).[4] Logicism views probability as an instance of partial entailment of the conclusion from the premises. It seeks to validate the probabilistic outcome through a method taken over from deductive logic. Frequentism views probability as a mathematical science aimed at discovering the relative frequencies of certain attributes that exist in nature prior to (and independently of) human observation. In stark contrast to logicism and frequentism, both of which assume existence of objective probabilities, subjectivism defines probability as the degree of belief a in a proposition A by some particular individual x.According to this theory, two different individuals could assign different degrees of belief, a and β, to the same proposition A.

One does not need a more detailed description of different theories of probability to reach the conclusion that some type of

[4] See Gillies (2000) for more.

subjectivism seems to provide the best conceptual framework for addressing personal identity. The main reason for this claim is the fact that the access to propositions that serve as premises to conclusions in identity assertions is often partially or wholly limited to the individuals asserting their identity. I am much better positioned to know some things about my self (or some of its parts) than anybody else. In rare instances, truths about a person will be better known by others, or will be better known through an interaction between individuals, validating some form of inter-subjectivism that takes the subjective position as primary but allows for cases that transcend individual perspectives.

The second clarification to make is to establish more precisely how the main principles of probability will combine with the notion of personal identity in this discussion. I wish to propose the following axioms for probabilistic understanding of personal identity:

i. $0 < P(A) < 1$ for any identity claim *A*. The probability that a person is an *A* can take any real number value in an open interval between 0 and 1. This means that there is a non-zero probability that a person will have any personal identity. For this purpose, we could use Rawls' idea of the 'original position' to describe a situation in which a person could be born in any social position, anywhere in the world, and develop any possible personal identity (Rawls 1999). The scope of possible identifications is theoretically infinite, while the scope of possible social positions is determined by the facts on the ground (one can't be born into a social position that doesn't exist). Similarly, no personal identity *A* will have a value of 1, though the sum of component identities can converge on 1 (see axiom ii). This means that no personal identity will be absolutely certain.

ii. A person could have multiple personal identifications ('component identities') that will uniquely define that person. I will call this the principle of non-exclusivity of personal identity. For example, I could plausibly and non-exclusively be a Bosnian, a philosopher, and a sexually straight man. None of these component identities necessarily contradict each other and can uniquely define who I am as an individual (both numerically and qualitatively). However, since the human capacity for knowledge and action is finite, there is a limited number of component identities a single individual can have. Component identities 'push' each other out in a zero-sum game: the more of one means the less of the other. My compound personal identity A could consist of any number of components A_i, whose prominence in defining me uniquely can vary from time to time, or from context to context. It might be tempting to understand the component identities as binary (one could argue that if I am an American, then I cannot be a Bosnian, or that if I am a man, I can't be a woman), but I'll resist the temptation and argue that none of the component identities are ontologically (if not legally) exclusive. A person could plausibly be both a man and a woman, Bosnian and non-Bosnian, straight and gay, and any other combination of component identities, organized in a consistent manner and converging on the sum value of 1 (or on the certainty that the given person exists and has an identity). The exclusivity of identification is a matter of social organization, not of ontology.

iii. The sample space ω from which premises (events) for identity assertions are drawn contains a countable infinity of possible events that can occur in a person's life. Anything allowed by laws of physics is possible to happen to any person, and could serve as a basis of their identity claim.

iv. The probability that an identity assertion C is true is a always a conditional probability, and it is sensitive to the change in

information (true atomic propositions) the person comes to know. So, for any atomic proposition *g* and any identity proposition *C*, the probability that *C* is true on the condition that *g* is true – expressed as $P(C|g)$ – is given by the Bayesian ratio of the likelihood that *g* is true given that *C* is true, multiplied by the probability that *C* is true, and the probability that *g* is true. Furthermore, the probability that *g* alone is true could be further expressed as the sum of $P(g \cap C)$ and $P(g \cap \neg C)$, or the sum of the probability that both *g* and *C* are true *and* the probability that *g* is true and *C* is not true. In essence, there are no unconditional personal identities.

II. 2. 2. *Identity Genesis*

The stage for a more detailed conception of personal identity is now set. If the preceding qualifications and axioms are sound, then the following description could provide a plausible conception of personal identity. I'll start from the beginning: how does a person acquire a personal identity?

There are two possible ways to interpret the question of identity genesis. One way is to adopt a Lockean perspective and argue that, upon birth, every child is a *tabula rasa*, an empty plate waiting to be filled with identity content. While this is an attractive view, especially for those who wish to argue for a non-deterministic nature of personal identities, there are some challenges of this view. For example, the birth of a child is a material event that occurs within well-defined spacetime confines that instantly provide a certain kind of content to be included in the child's personal identity. Every child is born of some parents, in some part of the world, within some social structure. All of these are 'written' on the child's identity by way of providing the initial position from which the child's identity further evolves. The only way Lockean

perspective could work would be to assume that *tabula rasa* is an identity disposition prior to the conception of each child. More precisely, it would have to assume that each child has an equal probability of being born by any existing parents in any existing social and cultural structure. However, this view is still untenable given that there is no equal prior distribution of possible parents from different social and cultural structures in the world. Some structures are more populous than others. There is a greater probability that the next child will be born by middle class Chinese than by upper class Icelandic parents.

The alternative is to adopt a probabilistic perspective from the outset and tackle these conceptual difficulties head on. According to this view, there are *initial*, *prior*, and *posterior* probabilities of any personal identity. The initial probability is given by the elementary structure of the world's social and cultural default at the time of the child's birth. There is a non-zero probability of a child being born in a culture C_i , given by the axiom i. The value of the initial probability $P(C_i)$ is determined by the ratio of the population size and the natality rate of that cultural group and the sum of the populations and natality rates of all other cultures existing at the time of the child's birth.

The initial probability is relevant for understanding that the ontology of any personal identity is fundamentally probabilistic. We could have been born as anybody else, there is nothing predetermined about who we are as individuals. However, beyond this point, the initial probability has no other practical value. Once the child is born, the event is materialized and the initial probability turns into a determined reality expressible through an atomic proposition. For example, once a child is born in, say, Denmark, by middle class Danish speaking parents, in 2012 (which had the initial probability of some value *a*), this becomes a set of atomic

propositions *d* that can play a role of premises in the child's identity claim *D* further down the road.

As the child grows, her identity evolves against the background of true atomic propositions that describe her factual context. Once the child is mature enough to start asserting a personal identity, her identity assertion *D* has a prior probability of some value *β*, expressed as P(D). As the child grows, new information about her identity is 'collected' through observation, both internal (self-knowledge) and external (knowledge of the external world), which will lead to conditional probability (the probability that *D* is true given that some proposition *n* is true). In this way, the person's knowledge gets constantly updated with the new information. To see this in context, consider how a person's identity develops. As we grow, we learn about ourselves and enrich our identities through the interaction with others. If a person with a certain prior probability of being an artist (say, coming from parents who are artists already, and with an initial talent for art) experiences some transformative events through which she realizes that being a banker is more desirable to her than being an artist, her identity will go through change. Similarly, if a child coming from Christian parents who are believers, with a prior probability of being a Christian believer herself, becomes an atheist after reading Bertrand Russell's *Why I'm not a Christian*, her personal identity has gone through change.

In a fundamental way, all identity assertions are prior probabilities that can, in principle, undergo change as the new information is observed. The posterior probability of *x*'s personal identity that is not a prior probability at some stage, or the probability that is determined once all events in the *x*'s life are taken into account is, in principle, possible only at or upon *x*'s death. Only once *x* has stopped existing, it is possible, in theory, to determine the final posterior probability value of *x*'s personal

identity. This posterior probability plays a very limited role because it is practically impossible: once *x* is dead, there is nobody who could experience the end of all experiences and by doing so be able to determine the posterior probability of *x*'s identity with full authority.

II. 2. 3. *Intersubjectivity of Identity*

As already mentioned, the probabilistic approach to personal identity in this paper allows for inter-subjective agreement on the value of certain probabilistic identity assertions. Although some true atomic propositions are instances of self-knowledge available only to individuals making the identity assertion, there is a proxy indicator: the person's behavior.

To develop this idea further, it is important first to understand identity's teleology, or the role personal identity plays in a person's life. Namely, there are two possible roles identity could play. First, it could play an *intrinsic* role and function as an end towards which individuals strive. For example, I could orient my actions in life in accordance with my own sense of who I am (or who I want to be). My personal identity could serve as a programmatic goal and require conscious effort to 'achieve' it. Second, personal identity could play an *instrumental* role and function as a tool for satisfaction of other aims. For example, my personal identity would be a utility mechanism for achieving happiness and well-being, and not an end in itself.

I believe that the instrumental conception of identity's teleology is a more plausible one. Although I am sure some people see their personal identity as a normative ideal, I think that the intrinsic conception is partial, either in the sense that only a minority of people understand themselves normatively or that only some parts of their identities are normative. In the first case, even

if there are individuals whose entire sense of self is a projection of their will, those individuals might lack authenticity and would not be good examples of proper personal identification. The second case is not controversial nor implausible (we all have aspirations to improve or change some parts of ourselves), but it only pertains to a portion of our personhood and can be plausibly explained by the instrumental conception. According to this view, our personal identity is a tool through which we achieve instances of well-being and long-term happiness. Personal identity is the life form we take in order to be able to satisfy a certain set of our pre-existing desires. The range of life forms we can take is equivalent to the range of available options (both physical and social), specific for each actual individual. I will adopt the gender identity of a man if living as one is more likely to provide me with the maximum happiness and well-being I could derive, as well as if I have access to the option of living as a man. In case I would be more likely to derive more happiness if I identified as a woman, and I had the option as identifying as one, then I would adopt that as my gender identity.

Since personal identity is tied to the idea of well-being in this way, we could use it to achieve some inter-subjective consensus on the value of probabilistic identity assertions. This idea relies on Frank Ramsey's conception of measurement of a person's degrees of belief in a proposition *A*. Since we act in ways we think will most likely realize the objects of our desires, our actions could be taken as *bets* we make on the probability that a proposition *A* is true. Here's Ramsey's explanation of this by way of an example:

> Let us give an instance of the sort of case which might occur. I am at a cross-roads and do not know the way; but I rather think one of the two ways is right. I propose therefore to go that way but keep my eyes open for someone to ask; of now I see someone half a mile away over the fields, whether I turn aside to ask him

> will depend on the relative inconvenience of going out of my way to cross the fields or of continuing on the wrong road if it is the wrong road. But it will also depend on how confident I am that I am right; and clearly the more confident I am of this the less distance I should be willing to go from the road to check my opinion. I propose therefore to use the distance I would be prepared to go to ask as a measure of the confidence of my opinion (Ramsey 1931, 174-175).

Let the cross-roads in Ramsey's example be represented by two identity assertions, *M* and *W*. Let *M* stand for "I am a man" and let *W* stand for "I am a woman." A person *x* at the crossroads is someone who does not know initially which identity assertion will be more likely to realize the object of his or her desires (think of a child who has no pre-social conception of gender identity). Given some evidence (or life experience), expressed through an atomic proposition *h*, the person *x* takes *W* to be likely true to the degree *a*. The strength of *x* belief in *W* is expressed through the willingness of *x* to act as if *W* was true. A person who identifies as a woman will act as if her identity were true to the degree *a*. The stronger her belief in *W*, the more of her actions will reflect that confidence.

X's personal identity can be determined inter-subjectively by looking at her long-term actions and behavior. It is, in practice, impossible to know with certainty whether *x* truly takes *W* to be true to a degree *a*. But, it is not necessary to know this with certainty (even *x*'s knowledge of *W* will be probabilistic anyway). It is sufficient if *x*'s actions are consistent with the degree of her confidence in *W* over a specific time interval.

II. 2. 4. *Ethical Neutrality*

Ramsey's approach to probability is useful for conceptualizing identity in another aspect. Namely, we could say that all identity propositions should be taken as ethically neutral. An identity proposition *A* is ethically neutral if a person *x* takes all possible worlds differing only with regard to the truth of *A* as equal in value. For example, let's say that *x* is confident that the identity assertion *A*, based on the atomic proposition *h*, is true to the degree *a*. Let's also say that there can be different identity assertions, *B*, *C* and *D* that could also be made from *h* to the same degree. Then, *A* is ethically neutral if and only if *x* has no preference between *A*, *B*, *C*, and *D*.

In practice, this means that we should be initially indifferent to what our personal identity turns out to be. Provided compliance with minimal moral standards, we should not assign values to any personal identification we arrive at from the true atomic propositions we come to know. For example, I should be indifferent to what my gender identity is, as long as the inference from a true atomic proposition *p* and my gender identity *M* has an appropriate probabilistic value.

II. 2. 5. *Identity and Change*

From an ontological perspective, identity assertions are outcomes of inferential reasoning. Identity claims are truth apt: they could be right or wrong. They are probabilistic inferences from a set of propositions with an appropriate degree of belief in their truth. Given the fluid nature of existence, in which people learn new truths about themselves and the world, probabilities of certain identity assertions can change. A person *y* can assign a probability of 0.70 to their identity assertion *C* given the truth of some atomic proposition *c*. *Y* 's degree of belief in *C* could change

to 0.30 if *y* learns the truth of another atomic proposition *d* that would, for example, counter (or contradict, or change the relevance of) the content of *c*.

This framework for thinking about personal identity could perhaps be useful in explaining the ontology of non-standard identities, such as trans identities. The phenomenology of trans identity is complex and defies easy classification, but for the purposes of this paper, I'll take into account three different kinds of identity transitions, as outlined by Rogers Brubaker:

> The *trans of migration* (exemplified most clearly by those who surgically and hormonally transform their bodies and formally change their legal identities) involves unidirectional movement from one established sex-gender category to another. The *trans of between* (exemplified by androgyny) involves a positioning of oneself with reference to the two established categories, without belonging entirely of unambiguously to either one and without moving definitively from one to the other. The *trans of beyond* (exemplified by a self-definition as simply trans rather than cis) involves positioning oneself in a space that is not defined with reference to established categories. It involves the claim to transcend existing categories or to transcend categorization altogether (Brubaker, 2012, 72-3).

In the *trans of migration*, the person acts in accordance with the change in the prior probability distribution between the truth of two identity statements, *A* and *B*. If *x*'s prior probability assigns the value of 0.80 to *A* and 0.20 to *B* (causing *x* to act as if *A* were true) and then upon acquisition of a true atomic proposition *b*, *x* changes the probability distribution to 0.30 for *A* and 0.70 to *B*, then *x* has gone through the migration from one identity category (*A*) to another (*B*). In the *trans of between*, *x*'s probability distribution

between *A* and *B* is equal (the value of 0.50 is assigned to both of them). In such a case, *x* personal identity includes both, and *x* is both *A* and *B* at the same time (in accordance with the axiom ii). In the *trans of beyond*, *x*'s probability values for both *A* and *B* are comparatively low, giving *x* little reason to act as if any of them were true. In that case, *x* either has a higher value assignment for another probabilistic identity statement *C*, or is still undecided due to the lack of relevant true atomic propositions from which she could infer a probable identity claim.

III

Politics of Personal Identity

The discussion in Section II focused on conceptualizing identity independently of politics, describing only how identity's ontological properties should be understood. The practical reality of personal identities is, however, always political. How do we see ourselves and others is almost never independent of some social and political context. In this section, I will outline political properties of personal identity. I will focus on two aspects of these properties. First, I will look into how politics serves as an 'input' for generating a personal identity. Second, I will lay out normative benchmarks for how politics should serve as 'output' in identity conceptualization, or how it should regulate recognition and distribution among different identity claims. Finally, I will touch upon some contemporary debates around recognition of transitional identities to indicate how the theory I am proposing in this paper can help us resolve practical problems.

III. 1. *Politics as Input*

Acquisition of any personal identity always happens in a certain political context. Political configurations can become part of personal identities in two ways. First, if identity assertions are probabilistic outcomes of an inferential process in which some atomic propositions serve the role of premises, then politics affects these outcomes by regulating what kinds of propositions can serve as premises in this process. Access to knowledge (of atomic or elementary propositions) is itself subject to political regulation. For example, some societies actively discourage types of knowledge that would, in an ordinary inferential process, lead to personal identities they deem unworthy. The reason why I learned about my Muslim background only when I turned 14 years of age was because the society I lived in up to that point discouraged types of knowledge that could result in such identity assertions. Moreover, non-heteronormative sexual orientations, transitional, and other non-standard and minority identities have often been a target of such political practices around the world. Growing up in such societies, children have been actively discouraged to investigate and respond to epistemic prompts that could have resulted in these kinds of identities, even if those prompts are instances of their proprioceptive self-knowledge. The prevalence of, say, the "gay conversion therapies" is a case in point.

Second, political regulation of identity in the public sphere often includes various value assignments to different identities. For example, some societies have had explicit rules delineating between 'preferred' and 'non-preferred' personal identities, prescribing allowed and disallowed public roles for each. As a striking and evident example, consider the recent history of the American South, where Black and White Americans had different degrees of freedom, which affected how these collective identities, and their social worth, were understood. The assignment of value to

personal identity sometimes takes shape of explicit legislation, but very often of (an intended but implicit) result of myriad other policies, from housing, education, policing, healthcare, and similar. Any policy that affects different identity communities differently, other things being equal, is potentially an instance of political value assignment. In any case, this value assignment plays a crucial role in the process of acquisition and evaluation of personal identities. The phenomenon of racial 'passing,' characteristic of the segregation era in the United States, is an instance of adopting a personal identity in response to variable political value assignment.[5]

III. 2 *Politics as Output*

Given the foundational role of politics in developing and conceptualizing personal identity, discussing justice in recognition must necessarily account for this role. If we consider it outside existing historical contexts, from some sort of Rawlsian "original position," we could argue that justice in recognition should aim at assigning equal value to all (otherwise morally appropriate) personal identity claims. However, since no society is without history of some kind of value assignment, justice cannot be successfully achieved by mere proclamations of equal identity value. The field of personal identities in public sphere is not at level due to variable past value assignments, so the aim of justice should be to first even out this field and only then extend equality of value.

In order to do that, societies must approach this process critically and first reflect on what kinds of values (and for what reasons) have been assigned to various identity groups. The new practices of recognition should then start as practices of restitution

[5] For 'passing,' see Mallon (2004).

of equal value, which can be delivered through various public programs of social and economic support. For example, since non-standard gender or sexual identities had unequal value assignments in the past, leveling the identity field requires public support to the communities centered around these identities today. Similar approach should apply to racial or ethnic identities that have had unequal value assignments in the past.

III. 2. 1 *Hard Cases: Transracialism*

Admittedly, there will be hard cases for societies to resolve. By 'hard cases,' I mean identity claims whose justifiability will not be initially evident, or whose social recognition will be affected by the perceived lack of a firm ontological grounding. One of such cases was the recent 'transracial' claim by a person known as Rachel Dolezal, who although coming from a Caucasian descent, identified as Black. Dolezal's identity claim caused a minor (or not so minor) public scandal, involving the philosophical community as well. Some philosophers, such as Rebecca Tuvel, thought that transracial claims should be taken analogously to transgender ones on the basis of the condition of empathy. Following Sally Haslanger's views of identity (Haslanger 2012), Tuvel argues that it is reasonable for a society to accept someone's identity change only if it is possible for that person to know what it's like to exist and be treated as a member of the category X. Absent the possibility for access to what it's like to exist and be treated in society as a black person or as a man (or as an animal), there will be too little commonality to make the group designation meaningful (Tuvel 2017, 272).

Tuvel's views have been subject to harsh criticism, both academic and political, and I don't mean to take part here in either. However, I wish to include her views into the range of possible

responses to this kind of transitional identity assertion. By doing so, I also wish to go beyond discussing the case of Rachel Dolezal. Instead, I will take this case as an instance of the possibility of racial identity transition as such and discuss options for its social and political recognition. As I see it, there are three possible recognition-centered responses to this kind of identity assertion:

- Recognize the assertion because it is justified,
- Reject the assertion because it is unjustified, or
- Conditionally recognize/reject the assertion on the basis of probability.

I will discuss each in turn. I will take Tuvel's argument as the proxy for the first, Tina Fernandes Botts' argument as the proxy for the second, and my argument as the proxy for the third option.

III. 2. 2. *The Argument for Recognition*

The thrust of Tuvel's argument in favor of 'transracialism' is the analogy between gender and race. She thinks that if a society allows for a transition of gender, it should allow the transition of race. The basis of the analogy is Tuvel's suspicion of claims that there is some innate bodily disposition that defines 'what it's like' to be a woman. This suspicion is justified: accepting an exclusive bodily foundation of womanhood (or manhood) is problematic. As Tuvel suggests, experiences of being a woman are incredibly varied, and it is plausible to assume that every individual experience of womanhood is unique. If that is so, then there is no universal bodily denominator for gender.

However, even if we accept this, it does not necessarily follow that embodiment plays no role in a person's claim to feel like a woman or a man. Gender may be a category of social class built on sexual difference, but that doesn't mean that its existence is exclusively due to social causes. Similarly, it doesn't follow that to feel like a woman and to feel like a White person are equivalent in all relevant respects. Moreover, I think the following two propositions are true:

1. Embodiment plays a causal role in gender self-identification (the claim to feel like a man or a woman).
2. Embodiment doesn't play a causal role in racial self-identification (the claim to feel like a White or a Black person).

We could justify these two claims in the following way. First, we could appeal to the difference between *body image* and *body schema*, as elaborated by Shaun Gallagher (Gallagher 2005), on the grounds of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's work (Merleau-Ponty 2012). Namely, the concept of body image tries to explain the appearance of the human body in one's perceptual field. We perceive our bodies through five senses as something that is separate from the subject that does the perceiving. On the other hand, the concept of body schema explains the ways our bodies shape our perceptual fields. Different features of our bodies affect the way we perceive the world.

The main difference between the two is that the "perceptual content of the body image originates in intersubjective perceptual experience" (Gallagher 2005, 26) while the content of the body schema originates in elements that are not ordinarily available to sensory perception, but that significantly shape the way we are.

Basically, the content of our body image is constituted by our interaction with society.

On the other hand, the content of the body schema is largely independent from social influence; it is given to us by our bodily constitution. The concept of body schema refers to a set of 'sensory-motor functions' that operate below the level of conscious perception. We can, however, become aware of some parts of the body schema through proprioception. In other words, just as we can know the position of our body without having it in our perceptual field, we can also know other bodily features without them being observable by our senses, such as fatigue, hunger, or sexual drive (Wong 2010). Social forces and categories are powerless in determining how we experience our bodies from the inside. While the image is political, the schema is ontological.

We could construct a distinction analogous to body schema and body image, and posit the difference between *sexual schema* and *sexual image*, where sexual schema pertains to the way our body is 'sexed' independently from our consciousness (through hormonal and other automatic internal processes), and sexual image to the way our body appears sexualized to our sensory perception. We access our sexual schema through proprioception and our sexual image through intersubjective perception.

As a product of proprioceptive knowledge, sexual schema is a somewhat vague concept. It does not require existence of certain body parts. Instead, it pertains more to a bodily experience that indicates to the person that acting upon a certain identity assertion is more likely to produce happiness and well-being to the person. If gender aims to represent sex socially, and if sexual self-understanding derives from sexual schema, then individuals could have inner access to true atomic propositions that indicate which gender categories best represent their sexual self-understanding (these gender categories don't have to exist as social forms). In

other words, individuals could have bodily indicators of their gender membership (or indicators that none of the existing membership categories fit). To "feel like a woman or a man" could also mean just this: to know proprioceptively which gender denomination would be more likely to yield more utility to the person. It is a phenomenological concept that escapes full intellectual grasp from the outsider's perspective. The sexual schema is, as Gayle Salamon points out, 'strictly individual,' or subjective (Salamon 2009, 81-98).

Racial identity is structurally different. If it makes sense to talk of proprioceptively accessible atomic propositions that inform one's gender identity, it doesn't make sense to imply the same of race. The amount of melanin in one's body does not, independently from the political context, shape one's perceptual field. There is no 'color schema' that could serve as the baseline for the identity fit between the person and the category. One cannot know proprioceptively one's skin color. Therefore, racial identity exists only as a 'racial image,' an act of identification generated by the political assignment of value to certain bodily features.

Although both gender and race are social constructs, they are not constructed in an entirely analogous way because they function differently as identities. On the basis of distinction between sexual image and sexual schema, it is plausible to assume that gender identities would in some form exist even if we did not have the gender norms that currently inform our societies. However, it is not plausible to assume that under similar conditions racial identities would exist. Given their different relation to the underlying ontology (schema) and politics (image), gender identity claims seem more grounded in how things really are rather than how things are politically constructed.

III. 2. 3. *The Argument for Rejection*

So, Tuvel's analogy between gender and racial identity does not work. Does that mean that there cannot be transition of racial identities? Perhaps we could reject the transracial claim on the basis of hermeneutical argument, such as the one espoused by Tina Fernandes Botts, who claims that racial identity is nothing more than a context-dependent intersubjective social category. Namely, Botts suggests that transracialism is unintelligible because the hermeneutical understanding of race does not allow for racial transition. She suggests that race is defined by society, which is simply the way things currently are (in the United States). For her, it is a fact that racial identity is

> a category of being that is context-dependent and generated collectively through an intersubjective dance between individuals and the worlds they inhabit, and between individuals and other individuals (Botts, 2018, 321).

Botts claims that racial identity is nothing other than this. The current social consensus says that a person's ancestry defines their race, and that's where the story about race and transrace ends. One cannot change one's ancestry; hence, one cannot claim a racial identity that contradicts the existing social consensus on race.

However, this argument has certain problems. First, there is a tension between Botts' overall hermeneutical position and the claim that race is determined by ancestry. Intersubjective positions and context (crucial for hermeneutics) are dynamic and subject to change, but ancestry isn't. If the current American consensus changes, what will happen to the claim about ancestry? For Botts, ancestry is constitutive of racial identity, so it is not clear what role it would play in case societal consensus changed (similar point was

made by Tuvel). The tension is between constructivism, which is inherent to hermeneutics, and naturalism, which is inherent to ancestry-based claims.

Second, it is not clear that hermeneutics offers the best shield against the claim that transracialism is politically possible. One could say, for example, that if the definition of race is based on societal consensus, then wasn't Rachel Dolezal's transition (and Tuvel's defense of it) just an attempt at influencing this societal consensus and changing its contours? If we are hermeneuticists, shouldn't we in principle be open to actions that (re)construct the "intersubjective dance between individuals and the worlds they inhabit?"

In order to resolve some of the problems in both Tuvel's and Botts' accounts, I will argue that the probabilistic concept of identity can give us the normative guidance needed to evaluate racial (or any other) identity transformation. If the acts of self-identification are processed appropriately, then societies are obliged to extend them legal and other recognition. The question about the recognition of identity transformation can be successfully answered through the probabilistic norms of self-identification. 'Transracialism' should not be accepted on the basis of analogy with other trans claims, nor should it be rejected outright because it doesn't reflect our current social consensus on race. The proper liberal response to it should be more nuanced.

III. 2. 4. *The Argument for Conditional Recognition/Rejection*

If we accept the claim that the probabilistic value of some identity assertions can be established intersubjectively, then we could, in both theory and practice, evaluate a transracial identity claim on the basis of the atomic propositions it includes in its inference chain, as well as the inference chain itself.

The way to do that is not without complexity, but it is fairly straightforward and could be done if we determine some things beforehand. Namely, different types of identities will consist of different types of atomic propositions. Some propositions are shared among many identities, while others are specific to each identity type. Depending on the type, unique or shared atomic propositions will vary in inferential relevance, or 'weight.' For example, racial or ethnic identities will include (and assign comparatively great weight to) propositions stating facts about the individual ancestry, while gender identities will assign great weight to propositions about persons' proprioception, or their 'inner' sense of gender identification. Every particular identity will depend on a unique configuration of atomic propositions and their corresponding variable weights.

So, in order to evaluate an identity assertion, we have to determine its unique configuration and calculate the probabilistic value of its atomic propositions. To complete the evaluation, we need to compute the probability of the identity assertion being true (its prior probability) given the truth of these atomic propositions (its conditional probability).

For example, let's consider the following hypothetical scenario. Let ω (the universe of propositions) for some person x include a set of propositions c_i (a unique configuration consisting of individual atomic propositions q, r, s). This means that x has the elements of c_i as the basis of her identity assertion. Let there be two possible identity assertions x could make from the configuration c_i, B and W. Let the prior probability of B and W for x be the same, $P(B) = P(W) = 0.50$ (for example, imagine that x does not have a prior preference toward either of them). Let the propositions have the following interpretation:

q = "I feel q."

r = "I look like an r."

s = "My ancestors are s."

Furthermore, let's suppose that the likelihood that c_i will cause x to identify as B is 0.70 and to identify as W is 0.10 (imagine that 70% of persons identifying as Bs would hold c_i to be true and only 10% identifying as Ws would do the same.)

The strength of x's B-ness can, per axiom iv, be calculated using Bayes' rule, as a ratio of the likelihood of c_i given B multiplied by the probability of B, and the probability that c_i is true in either case, B or W. Using the hypothetical probability assignments, that would give us $P(B \mid c_i) = 0.58$.

This calculation shows that even if x is nearly certain that her atomic propositions from the configuration c_i are true, her (and ours) overall confidence in her B-ness should still be far from absolute certainty (although at around 58% it is still high, granting sufficient reason to believe it).

There are several things that might raise doubts about x's B-ness. First, in case x is not sufficiently confident about the truth of the propositions making up the configuration c_i, she (and us) might be doubtful. The Bayesian model proposed here operates with x's near certainty about c_i. Second, an unequal prior probability distribution between B and W might (but does not necessarily need to) indicate that x internalized some prior value assignments towards B and W. For example, x might believe that identifying as a B might be more beneficial for her, or instrumental for achievement of some her other desires.

The biggest problem in evaluating propositional configurations such as c_i is, of course, establishing their value intersubjectively.

Some of them could be established independently of x's opinion, like s. However, how can anyone know x's feelings of q or objectively judge whether she really looks like an r? Well, as indicated before, although we cannot access emotional states of other people, we can take x's behavior as the proxy for the strength of her conviction that she feels q. We could, for example, determine whether x actions in a certain time interval correspond with the conviction of feeling q and to what degree. While this may sometimes be challenging, it is certainly not impossible to do. There is less certainty with propositions like r, though we could rely in part on the societal consensus about physical or bodily cues about some identities (however, we should approach this with caution, given the political nature of aesthetic standards and bodily indicators).

The preceding analysis does not aim to be exhaustive, but to provide an outline of what the evaluation of transitional identity claims could look like. Any identity claim, be it transitional or not, will depend on a universe of relevant atomic propositions, accompanied by some probabilistic values. Instead of blanket recognitions or rejections, societies could design recognition policies centered around the critical probabilistic approach and make decisions in hard cases using the methodology outlined in this section. Given the fact that hard cases of identity transition do not happen that often, applying the method should not be particularly cumbersome.

The virtue of this method is twofold. First, it offers a fairly high degree of precision, enabling us to quantify the ways people make identity assertions using simple insights of the probability theory. Second, it provides for meaningful flexibility, very much needed to formalize something that is already in flux. The probability method allows us to update and change our beliefs about identity assertions

on the basis of available evidence, without losing precision or accuracy of thought.

However, it is important to emphasize that despite this method's use of mathematical and logical concepts, we ultimately can't have certainty in claims about personal identity. The utilization of probabilistic calculus should not trick one into believing that we have finally "unlocked the secret" of personal identification and came up with a fool-proof formula. We should not fetishize mathematics and think that probabilistic statements such as $P(B) = 0.58$ mean anything more than that, all things considered, we seem to have a fairly strong reason to believe that B is true for x. Quantification of probabilistic claims is not a shortcut to truth; it is merely a measure of the strength of specific epistemic reasons we happen to have at a given moment in time.

Conclusion

In this paper, I attempted to conceptualize personal identity in terms of two constitutive properties: ontological and political. In the first part of the paper, I suggested that the ontological properties could be best expressed using a logical structure. I discussed a few possible logical vocabularies for this purpose and concluded that an inductive framework provides the best tools for this. I utilized insights from the theory of probability to show that identity assertions are probabilistic propositions, made through an inferential process from some atomic propositions.

In the second part, I discussed the political properties, both in terms of inputs to identity acquisition, as well as in terms of outputs, as policies for recognition of different identity claims. In order to provide context to the conceptual development of identity, I discussed a 'hard case' of racial identity transition.

The aim of the paper was not to provide an exhaustive view about personal identification, but to offer some initial steps in developing the concept further. Personal identity we share with others is notoriously hard to conceptualize. Perhaps a useful step forward is to think about it in inductive terms and use principles of probability to shine more light on the most intractable problems in its conceptualization.

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POLYSEMY IN THE PUBLIC SQUARE
RACIST MONUMENTS IN DIVERSE SOCIETIES

BY

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Polysemy in the Public Square
Racist Monuments in Diverse Societies

Andrew Sneddon

Introduction
Removalism and Preservationism

Public monuments are complex features of public spaces in contemporary democracies.[1] Consider the statue of Sir John A. Macdonald that was once in front of City

[1] Wikipedia has an extensive article on contentious Confederate monuments in the United States: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Removal_of_Confederate_monuments_and_memorials. Dan Demetriou and Ajume Wingo discuss the South African post-apartheid experience with racist memorials (2018). For a Canadian case, see news stories about the statue of Sir John A. Macdonald in Victoria, British Columbia. An example: Anthony 2018. On June 7, 2020, at the time of the writing of this paper, protestors, participating in the global anti-racism demonstrations in the wake of the killing of George Floyd by Minneapolis police, toppled the statue of Edward Colston from the city centre of Bristol, UK, and dumped it in the harbour: Farrer 2020, Olusoga 2020. Although he was a benefactor to Bristol, Colston was a slave-trader directly responsible for the

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Hall in Victoria, British Columbia. This statue had both retrospective and prospective functions, as do all such monuments. It was a public, official reminder of Macdonald's achievements. Where these are good, the memory is also straightforwardly good. Macdonald was Canada's first Prime Minister and a central architect of Canada as an independent country; these are historical achievements worth celebrating. But Macdonald's legacy is not without blemish, so memorials to him serve also to remind us of the bad, and this is not necessarily unproblematic. Macdonald actively and cruelly controlled the Indigenous Peoples of Canada, especially in the West.[2] The placement of this statue in front of City Hall was an exacerbating feature of this mixed message. Requiring 21st century First Nations Canadians to walk past his monument to access civic services in Victoria made them face his legacy rather intimately. It is understandable that some would not welcome this.

The prospective function of such monuments is at least as important as their historical function. Statues of historical figures serve, ideally, to convey a shared sense of nationhood, of culture, and perhaps even of citizenship. When they work well, they serve social unity by forging a thick sense of social cohesion.[3] However, monuments can also serve to divide. They can preserve and even exacerbate cultural divisions. The message of Victoria's statue of Macdonald is not simply that all in this vicinity are Canadians, but also that some Canadians see others as, well, other, and as less

sale of approximately 85-100000 slaves. On June 10, 2020, protesters toppled, and then police removed, a statue of Jefferson Davis in Richmond, Virginia. Davis was president of the Confederacy 1861-1865 (Beaumont 2020).

[2] Hopper 2018.

[3] Dan Demetriou presents the forging and reinforcement of social cohesion as the most important consideration in favour of leaving racist monuments *in situ* (2019). He casts this as a distinctively conservative concern, but progressives have reason to emphasize cohesion as well. See., e.g., Kymlicka 2015.

worthy of respect and protection than their fellow citizens. There is both a good vision of Canada and membership in Canadian culture here and a troubled and divisive one.

Complicating matters is the fact that not all people see all the messages that monuments send. Some people saw the statue of Sir John A. Macdonald as just about the origins of Canadian confederation, others saw it only as an insult to Indigenous Canadians. And when two people are indeed attuned to all various meanings of a statue, they do not necessarily weigh them in the same manner.

In the light of all this, it's no wonder that there is both public and academic debate about the moral and political status of such monuments. The challenge, in part, is how to sort through synchronous yet diverse interpretations of contentious monuments. So-called "preservationists" hold that such monuments belong in public spaces; where they are already found, we should preserve them. "Removalists" call for their removal from public spaces. The statue of Macdonald was placed in front of Victoria's City Hall in 1982. It was removed in 2018 after at least a year of discussion with local First Nations groups about the problematic aspects of Macdonald's legacy (Woo 2018). Removalists won this case, but other monuments remain after similar public debate. There has been vociferous discussion about statues of Robert E. Lee in Richmond and Charlottesville, Virginia. At one point the Charlottesville monument was shrouded, but a judge ordered the veil removed in 2018. The Governor of Virginia announced on June 4, 2020 that the Richmond statue would be

removed, but a judge blocked the removal on June 8.[4] Both remain in place as of the time of writing these words

I

Two Errors

Removalist and preservationist positions take various forms. It should be clear that these monuments are complex. However, simple forms of removalist and preservationist positions are sometimes taken, especially in public debate (rather than academic). Some preservationists insist just on the good – i.e., that some statue is at least a fitting reminder of a worthy historical figure and perhaps also a tool for giving local citizens a sense of community and culture. Some removalists argue that all that matters is the bad – i.e., that some memorialized figure was a racist, if not a slaveholder or even a supporter of genocide, and that hence he (typically) ought not to be celebrated. In addition, the on-going problem (be it harm or risk or insult; more on these below) due to the display of the statue in question is sometimes offered as exacerbating the disvalue of the monument and hence as further justifying its removal.

There's no denying that these simple preservationist and removalist positions give voice to legitimate considerations. However, they make a conceptual error in their very simplicity. Indeed, they make the same conceptual error. We have seen the complexity characteristic of these monuments. This is what makes them objects of public discussion: if they were simple, there would be nothing to discuss. However, the simple preservationist and

[4] 1) https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-52920610; 2) https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_E._Lee_Monument_(Charlottesville,_Virginia)#Proposed_removal; 3) Stracqualursi 2020.

removalist approaches neglect this complexity and over-emphasize just one aspect of the monuments under scrutiny.

In particular, monuments of racist historical figures are complex symbols. It is *as symbols* that they bear (dis)value. Given this, it is worth considering their symbolic nature. Generally, C.S. Peirce's account of the nature of representation applies to symbols.[5] For something to be a symbol, it must stand for something to an interpreter, and there must be some particular ground for the interpretation of the symbol. Convention, stipulation, resemblance and causal connection can all function as the ground of interpretation of a symbol; there may be other possible grounds as well. Simple preservationists interpret statues of racist historical figures in one way, on one ground; simple removalists interpret them in another way. The conceptual error that these positions make is to insist on monosemy where there is in fact polysemy. They do this either directly, by insisting that there's just one way to see these monuments, or indirectly, by insisting that a particular interpretation is all that matters.

Besides the conceptual error, these simple positions make a political error as well. The simple preservationist position concerned only with history and the forging of group cohesion says that *this* is who *we* are (and, sometimes, that *this other thing* is who *you* are, but this is not a necessary feature of these positions). The simple removalist position says that *our* ancestors were oppressed by this person and that *we* are harmed or insulted or put at risk by the display of this image. In other words, both simple sides interpret these complex symbols via an understanding of their own identity. To insist on understanding a complex monument through

[5] Peirce worked on his theory of signs for his whole career. We need not go into Peircean details for present purposes. A good sense of the nuances of Peirce's work is found in Atkin 2013.

the lens of a particular identity (be it national, regional, racial, ethnic, or whatever) is a *de facto* power move. It amounts to saying *we and not you* get to say what's what here, to set the terms of discourse. This is a betrayal of the liberal commitment to equality and neutrality regarding understandings of what counts as good in life. This is why I cast it as a mistake.[6]

II

Identity: Psychology and Ways of Living

Identity should figure centrally in debate about the moral and political status of racist monuments. However, it should do so only in a politically acceptable and conceptually defensible manner. In particular, claims made about identity in these discussions must be conceptually compatible with and politically receptive to the polysemy of these statues.

Here is my suggestion: such conceptually and politically acceptable territory can be found if we distinguish different sorts of claim that might be made about identity. On one hand, we can speak of "psychological" identity (PI)–i.e., of how people conceive of their character, their personality, their understanding of themselves and the broader world. Let's say that PI is determined by the beliefs, desires, emotions, and attitudes that people have about who they are. On the other hand we can speak of identity in terms of what I will call "ways of living" (WoL) – i.e., of the kinds of lives people want to live, or, even stronger, as the kind of life to pursue. PI claims are individualistically focused – they are about properties of individual people. "Way of living" is here used in a

[6] I take a liberal political framework for granted in what follows. I will note some places where this assumption particularly matters.

deliberately vague manner, but we should interpret WoL claims as more widely focused. These claims are centrally about behavior, both individual and in patterns, much of which will be conducted in essentially interpersonal contexts. Ways of living are naturally associated with ethnic and national groups, but they come in a wider variety of forms than this. Religious groups, political ones, philosophical commitments, sporting interests, artistic tendencies, culinary preferences, individual quirks: all can take the form of ways of living. Whether they are politically relevant will depend on contextual contingencies. Note well: the issue is the sort of interpretation of identity that we should make in political discourse. It is not the metaphysical issue of how to understand personal identity.

Something like but not exactly the same as the distinction between PI and WoL is found in contemporary political thought about identity. For instance, Akeel Bilgrami distinguishes between "subjective" and "objective" identity (e.g., 2006, 2015). The subjective identity of a person is determined by how she conceives of herself (Bilgrami 2006, 5) or by what she identifies with (Bilgrami 2015, 521). Objective identity is independent of such self-conception or identification. While there may be objective aspects to ways of living–a topic to which we will return in Section IV – these are not necessarily independent of how a subject conceives of herself. So both PI and WoL belong most properly on the subjective side of Bilgrami's ledger. The difference is that identity conceived of in terms of PI is private, a matter of how one thinks, whereas identity conceived of in terms of WoL is public, a matter of how one behaves.

Here is an example to sharpen what is meant by PI and WoL as interpretations of common talk of identity. Imagine someone who has grown up in an observant Catholic family in a broader Catholic community. However, this person has lost her religious faith: she

no longer believes in gods, miracles, the supernatural, *etc*. Nor does she lament her change in belief; she is content to be free of those concerns. Given her connections to her family and community, however, she keeps her disbelief to herself. She still attends church, says the words and makes the movements characteristic of public prayers and rituals, marks the religious holidays that all her neighbours mark, and more. Partly this is a matter of habit, partly of fitting in, but in an important sense this woman still wants to do these things. She sees these kinds of behavior as worth performing, just not in the same way that she once did.

What should we say about who this woman is? I'm inclined to think that the answer is multifaceted. On one hand, it makes sense to say that she is an atheist. She is a closeted atheist, but this is still a way of being an atheist. An important set of her beliefs and preferences concerns her withdrawal of endorsement from religious concerns. This is identity with a narrow focus on PI, the psychological aspects of who people are. At the same time, this woman continues in a Catholic way of living. She does the things that Catholics do, and she does so in a manner publicly indistinguishable from her believing neighbours.

If we lean *really* heavily on the difference between PI and WoL, we would say that there is a complete gap between them for this woman. This might lead us to identify identity with PI: this woman is an atheist, not a Catholic. There is something to this. However, we need not insist on such a rigid division, and hence we need not say that this woman is *really* an atheist, and *not really* a Catholic. For one thing, this woman's WoL is only partly a matter of discretion and social conformity. It has psychological aspects as well: she still sees and feels, e.g., the spring season to be the time to do Easter things. We can expect this woman's Catholic context to shape the beliefs and preferences that she has even as an atheist. It is sometimes said that there are no atheists *per se*, but rather Catholic

atheists, protestant ones, Jewish ones, and so on. What this person rejects is at least her previous Catholic understanding of the nature of god. She might also reject more abstractly construed religious notions, but her disbelief need not be explicitly about these. For another thing, why should we not say that this woman is a kind of Catholic? If to be a Catholic is to do certain sorts of things, then she satisfies this criterion. Indeed, the sincerity of the belief of someone who claimed to be a Catholic while never doing any Catholic-style things – that is, without doing anything characteristic of a Catholic way of living – could well be in question.[7] So, while there is some pressure to equate identity with PI, I think that we should resist this inclination.[8]

In the light of all this, consider someone facing a statue. Imagine that this person says, "I see this in this way," or, "I feel this about this statue." These are statements of belief and feeling. If it made sense to interpret them as rooted in the person's identity, then we would be using psychological aspects of identity to provide the grounds of interpretation of the monument. Such claims tend to be conversationally inert, as even these abstract remarks suggest; it's pointless, even rude, to question them. They are statements of how something is, psychologically, and hence they are not naturally

[7] Since she does Catholic things, one might well question this woman's sincerity with regard to atheism. But to insist that she is not really an atheist either is to lean too far in the other direction.

[8] This is not a knockdown argument, of course. Someone who wants to equate identity with individualistically construed psychological states can interpret the argument to come in a more stringent manner than it is offered here. I will argue for interpreting identity, and hence identity politics, in terms of discourse about ways of living. Instead, it could be taken as an argument for replacing the discourse of identity, and hence identity politics, with claims about ways of living.

open to requests for justification. Explanation might be useful for making clear the nature of the feeling or view in question (or other details about an interpretation grounded in a psychologically construed context), but that would be the likely end of conversation about the remark about the statue. When identity is conceived in terms of such psychological items, remarks that invoke identity can function as a conversation stopper.[9]

The claims sketched so far are first-person singular ones. Such claims can be made for both removalist and preservationist positions. Consider "As an African-American, I feel insulted by this monument" and "This statue speaks for my Canadian values" as respective examples. I suspect that PI claims will typically be made in the singular first-person, but they need not be. PI issues can be the grounds of third-person interpretations of monuments as well. "Those people see me as a second-class citizen" and "Opponents of this statue have no respect for history" are examples, again of both removalist and preservationist sides. Moreover, PI claims need not be synchronous, although they often will be. When the monuments in question are old, there is room for PI-based interpretation of the originators of a statue. This can be done by both removalists and preservationists. When one is the target of a third-person PI attribution, there is some room for

[9] One of the most vivid forms this takes is in claims of offense. To claim that a racist monument offends one is, on its face, to offer one's feelings as legitimate grounds for change and/or redress in an interpersonal sphere. Such a claim is rarely an opening for a complex discussion about the monument in question, although, strictly speaking, it could be. See Sneddon 2021 for an extended examination of the nature and significance of offense. Demetriou & Wingo describe a group of offense-based objections to racist monuments (2018, 344-7). In overlapping territory, Jeremy Waldron (2012) takes pains to reject offense-based interpretations of the problem with hate speech in favour of a diagnosis of the obstacle such speech erects to full and equal living in democratic societies.

conversation, but not much. One can deny the claim, or one can accept it as it is, or one can claim that it is misleading as it stands but worth proper reinterpretation. Once such clarifications are made, they can either be accepted as sincere or rejected as insincere, and that's about it: conversation ends.

Now let's consider invocations of ways of living instead. Rather than individualistically construed psychological items, WoL claims focus on actions, either singly or as patterns, and the shared world in which contentious monuments are found. In principle, and as with PI claims, WoL claims can be made in both the first and third person, and they can be deployed for both removalist and preservationist purposes. However, since WoL claims often focus on an essentially interpersonal domain, many of them are first-person plural, including those in favour of a monument, those against it, and even some apt for use by either side. "This statue makes it hard to be a Jew around here" is likely to be used as a first-person complaint about a monument, but it could be used by an anti-Semite in favour of preservation of a statue. "We shouldn't live in ways that include images like that" is inclusive of all people in the relevant locale, regardless of sympathies for the monument in question. Likewise for its negation: "We should have public monuments to our shared history." The third person statement, "Those people are trying to drive us out of here" is most likely to be used by opponents of a newly erected monument, but it could be used by preservationists objecting to the removal of a long-standing monument. "Those people are trying to return to the way they lived in the past" is purely third person, but "Those people are trying to return to the way we lived in the past" is first person plural in an important sense. The latter statement is most likely to be used by removalists who fear a return to an oppressive social arrangement, but it could be used by someone who laments attempts to setback recent departures from a more egalitarian past.

Crucially, such claims naturally invite scrutiny and requests for justification. A claim that a statue makes a certain sort of life difficult, or that we should collectively live in a way that includes public historical monuments, trains the attention on spaces and activities shared by interlocutors. There is nothing odd or rude about asking about the nature of the obstacle purportedly faced due to a statue, or about why we should choose to live with public monuments rather than without them. Where PI claims tend to stop discussion, WoL claims tend to keep it going.

A couple of nuances are worth noting in passing. First, such claims as, "Those people are trying to drive us out of here" have an explicitly psychological component–the "trying", in this case–as well as a public, action component. Second, consider such claims as "There should be public monuments to our shared history." Strictly speaking this is ambiguous. I think that the best interpretation will typically be one in terms of action – i.e., about at least having monuments but more likely also endorsing, seeking, and erecting them – and hence about a way of living. The status of a claim as about a way of living need not be obvious. However, a PI interpretation may be apt sometimes: "I want there to be public historical monuments." Both of these nuances serve as reminders that the distinction between PI and WoL concerns will not always be crisp.

III

Assessing Claims about Ways of Living

Given all of the above, I suggest that discussion about racist monuments should be either pursued explicitly in terms of ways of living or, what is more likely, interpreted as being about ways of living that are being pursued jointly and overlappingly in a shared space. Although it is in principle possible for an understanding of

a way of living to pertain only to private spaces, this is deeply unlikely. Instead, we perform our ways of living to some significant degree in essentially shared spaces. Since WoL claims tend to be about ways of behaving in public,[10] they are naturally open to requests for justification. To insist on PI claims mattering in discourse about shared spaces is at least to risk a version of the political error already noted: fairness requires openness to request for justification in public discourse, yet PI claims resist justificatory probing. The preservationist, whether simple or complex, advances one understanding of a way of living; the removalist offers another. The discursive and practical issue now is how to adjudicate such disagreements about ways of living.

We have already seen one way that ways of living contribute to discussion of racist monuments: by providing particular grounds of their interpretation. To over-simplify: The white Anglo-Saxon protestant history buff sees Sir John A. Macdonald's statue as a tribute to a Father of Confederation and hence as fostering a way of living that remembers such achievements and pursues the continuation of the values found there, such as unity across cultural (French vs English) and geographical (Canada is vast!) differences. The Indigenous Canadian sees it as reminder of (all but) attempted genocide and hence as constituting a way of life involving different and unequal classes of citizens, and insensitivity to race-based suffering and loss. These interpretations are over-simplifications if only because there is no reason to think that there's a single white Anglo-Saxon protestant or Indigenous Canadian understanding of this statue. Putting this aside, the starting point for anything like

[10] Some interpret discourse about "public" spaces as necessarily political. I don't mean this, even though political themes and relations matter for the present topic. By "public" I mean "shared". See Adut 2018 on these issues.

adequate and productive public discussion about such statues will require the collection and public consideration of such interpretations. In some cases, perhaps even many, this will involve the formal articulation of such interpretations from rather more inchoate starting points. Interestingly, this in turn will amount to formulation of a conception of the way of living in question. The more the starting point is unarticulated, the more that this process will require reflection on and even constitutive decision about the very nature of the way of living in question. There is no reason to expect people to be operating will clear-eyed understandings of their own ways of living; I suspect that none of us do completely.

As I say, the formulation and collection of such interpretations (both of monuments and of ways of living) is only the first step. The second is to reflect on the relevant claims about the meaning of the monuments and the ways of living, and to adjudicate their differences as much as possible. Here we find another opportunity for ways of living to frame discourse about racist monuments: by constituting reference points for finding the relevant terms of justification. Such terms of justification can be grouped into two classes of questions. These questions are directed primarily but not necessarily exclusively at the interpretations of the monuments in question collected in step one.

The first set of questions raises issues internal to a particular way of living. For a monument understood in a specific way, we can ask what it, taken in this way, is doing for the way of life of the proponents of this specific interpretation. Is it centrally important to this way of living, or is it relatively peripheral? For instance, suppose that a statue is endorsed for preservation on the basis of the significance of living in places where there are public markers of historical achievements of various kinds. We should ask whether this particular statue is vital to such public marking in this locale. Would another, non-racist monument do the historical job that is

emphasized here? Are there already many such monuments in this region, such that the job of doing public marking of history is well distributed across them? Or are there very few, such that this statue is doing a lot of the emphasized work?

Part of what is being probed by these questions is the feasibility of the monument for executing the function identified for it in the interpretation in question. Dan Demetriou emphasizes the forging of social cohesion as the most significant preservationist consideration (2019). This is at least as much a prospective function as it is a retrospective one of marking history, so questions about the suitability of a particular monument understood in a particular way for carrying out this function are particularly apt. The more contentious a monument is, the less suitable it will be for bringing about social cohesion, at least of a wide-ranging variety. I have focused on the statue of Sir John A. Macdonald in Victoria because I'm Canadian, but the length and extent of the discord over this statue pales in contrast to that found for the Virginia statues of Robert E. Lee. The ability of statues of Lee to bring about social cohesion of a wide sort should be thought to be less impressive than that of the now-removed statue of Macdonald. Indeed, rather than wide-ranging social cohesion, we should inquire as to whether these statues are more apt for creating or exacerbating existing social divisions. Statues of Lee can be expected to unite those who see themselves as proud descendants of the confederacy, but they cannot be reasonably expected to include those who see themselves as living in a way continuous with that of African-American slaves under the same regime. Or, they cannot be reasonably expected to include them in the same way; they might be included but with an uneven, even oppressed status. "Cohesion" is an evaluatively neutral term; some of the ways in which it might be brought about will take the unwelcome form of the extension of the chains of the past, rather than the welcome form of the hand-holding of solidarity.

The same sorts of questions should be raised for removalist claims. Removalists contend that racist statues are problematic in one or more ways because of what they symbolize. So, we should ask whether a particular interpretation conveys a serious problem or a mild one. Travis Timmerman argues that the most significant moral problem found in the public display of racist statues is the emotional suffering that they cause (2019). To assess such a worry some empirical data are needed, to establish that people do indeed suffer due to a given monument, understood in the way advanced in some removalist claim. Then we need to probe a little deeper and inquire as to whether the suffering is serious or superficial. Mild discomfort is one thing, traumatizing distress another (both morally and psychologically speaking). Then, as with preservationist considerations, we should ask whether removal of the statue in question would alleviate the suffering. The empirical details collected can reveal nuances that bear on this issue. If the statue is the whole of the problem, then removal might indeed do the job, as the remaining site now lacks the cause of the way-of-living-based suffering. But if the particular statue is not the whole problem – e.g., if there are others in the area that are equally problematic, or if the area itself is a source of suffering, as a former slave plantation might be – then its removal might not really address the suffering in question.

Emotional suffering is not the only relevant sort of moral problem that can be the grounds of a removalist argument; turning to other considerations is illuminating regarding ways of living and the interpretation of public monuments. Besides suffering, one might claim that a statue ought to be removed because it insults some people who live near it. The moral significance of insult does not derive solely from the suffering that it causes. One can be insulted, and this can be problematic, without one even knowing about it. Let's say, roughly and for practical purposes, that an insult is an expressive failure with regard to the moral status of a person

directly or indirectly characterized by the expression in question. That statues are expressive should not really be in doubt, given that all agree, at least implicitly, that they are symbols that send messages either via the intentions of their creators or via their public display by their originators or through other channels, including but not limited to public stipulative and/or conventional appropriation. That such symbols can be insulting should also not be in doubt. For instance, remarking not about racist monuments but about cartoons of Muhammed, Hamid Karzai, then-President of Afghanistan, claimed that "Any insult to the holy prophet (peace be upon him) is an insult to more than one billion Muslims." (*New York Times* 2006; quoted in Neu 2008, 207). Put in terms of ways of living, the claim would be that such symbols are insults to those who live a Muslim way of living. Presumably, statues of Muhammed would be seen by Karzai as a similar sort of insult. Accordingly, that statues of Robert E. Lee, John A. Macdonald, Edward Colston, or Cecil Rhodes (see Demetriou & Wingo 2018) might be perceived as insulting to African Americans, First Nations Canadians, Black people in Britain, or Black Africans (respectively) is quite plausible.

When such a claim is advanced as a reason to consider removing a statue, we should ask versions of the questions that we have already seen. Is the insult delivered via disrespect of something central to one's way of living, or via something relatively peripheral? A statue that can be taken as an insult due to the way it characterizes, explicitly or implicitly, an arcane and little known Christian symbol would perform its insulting function through something peripheral to the ways of living of most Christians, but a statue that delivered an insult through the symbol of the cross would address something centrally important to, arguably, all possible Christian ways of living. Likewise, we should ask whether the insult is mild or grave. Historical and even aesthetic contingencies will matter here. Finally (for now), we should ask

whether removal of the statue would provide redress for the insult. It often will, it seems to me, but we ought not take it for granted that this is the case.

Insults are tricky, morally speaking. We tend to think that they matter morally, and yet, when we come to think about why, it can be difficult to articulate a plausible serious moral problem with them. However, in practice insults, especially the kind presented by racist monuments, are not merely expressive failures concerning the moral status of those characterized, even indirectly, by the statue. They can also have material consequences or, more subtly, threaten to have them. That is, something that is plausibly taken as insulting can also often be plausibly taken as posing a risk. Risk can be problematic independently of the direct consequences of the insult, or other action, in question. For instance, if you put me at risk by your manner of driving, such that I regularly worry about my safety and have to spend extra time and resources to protect myself from you, then my life is made worse by your putting me at risk even if you never hit me with your car. Even worse, clearly, is the combination of me taking these costly measures and you still managing to hurt me. An insulting monument can be a source of risk, and typically the risk will be due in large part to the insulting nature of the monument. This is the sort of thing that Jeremy Waldron emphasizes (without particular attention to racist statues) in *The Harm in Hate Speech* (2012). Roughly, his concern is that public speech that erodes the assurances of some people that they are respected as equal members of society can erode their ability to function publicly as equal members of society. Likewise, a statue that commemorates attempts to oppress, to enslave, even to exterminate groups of people identified in a particular way hardly sends a benign message regarding people seen as having a way of living continuous with the historical targets. To both these people themselves and to those who do or might hate them, the message is that not all are equal here, nor will they be treated as such, and

even that efforts might be taken to decrease their social status, including at the most extreme their physical safety.

Accordingly, when the risk that a statue putatively poses is offered as a reason to remove it, a suite of questions arises. How serious is the risk? The relative centrality of the symbolic characterization of the target of the risk might well not matter much to this. Rather, social contingencies will matter more. A statue that overtly denigrates First Nations Canadians might not pose much of a risk in a locale where there is widespread and institutionalized respect for them. A statue with a very obscure insult to African Americans might be a source of a significant risk if the local surroundings contain other sources of risk–unreliable laws and policing, animosity among the citizenry, and so on. These considerations affect the feasibility of addressing the risk by removing the statue in question. Ironically, where there is the greatest risk, it seems to me that the effect of removal is likely to be unimpressive. Still, this method of mitigating risk might well still be worth it, all things considered (more on the extent of "all" below).

I have focused on removalist arguments that deploy ideas about harm, insult and risk. In principle, however, such concerns are available to preservationists as well. Timmerman's concern is that the public display of a racist monument can cause emotional suffering. However, so might the removal of the monument. A potential and likely difference between these arguments is that the display of a monument is an on-going affair, whereas the removal of a monument is a temporally brief event. Still, those who remember a beloved monument now gone might find exposure to its absence a cause of distress. The public display of a racist monument is a standing insult to certain ways of living. The removal of such a statue can be an insult to other ways of living. Finally, just as a racist statue can pose a risk to the social standing

of some people, its removal can pose a risk to the standing of others. I shall return to these points once more considerations about the conversation about monuments and ways of living are in place.[11]

So far I have been identifying questions that might be asked about monuments on the basis of their interpretation in the light of particular ways of living. Ways of living provide another set of questions germane to assessment of these monuments, however: these are questions external to particular ways of living. There are three subsets of external questions. One thing that should be done is to assess the collection of interpretations as a whole: are some of these more or less apt than others? Are some interpretations more or less central to the nature of monument than others? We should not expect clear answers in all cases; interpretation of complex symbols is not something that is done once and for all, so periodic reinterpretation should be expected, even welcomed. Nevertheless, this does not imply that all interpretations are necessarily equal. It's implausible to argue that an image of a swastika is not about Nazis, that an image of a cross is not distinctively Christian, and that a statue of someone who sold slaves should not be taken as a reminder of this. These images, especially in complex forms, might also signify other things, but polysemy is compatible with the relative centrality of some meanings and unimportance of others. Robert E. Lee is much more a symbol of the confederacy and the institution of slavery than John A. Macdonald is of oppression of aboriginal Canadians, although they are both these sorts of symbols. It's not unrealistic to think that, for some cases, the removalist or preservationist position will be found superior to the alternative simply because of the symbolic nature of the monuments in question.

[11] See Sneddon 2016 on symbols, risks, and insults.

Another subset of external questions raises what I shall call "objective" concerns regarding the interpretations generated by the ways of living in question. These concerns are objective as they are not generated by particular ways of living and, indeed, apply to all of them. One sort of question concerns the truth/falsity of interpretation. Imagine a removalist who claims that a commemorated historical figure pursued genocide of Indigenous North Americans, or a preservationist argument that represents someone as an important political figure. Showing that these interpretations are false ought to matter. Some public and academic discord over racist statues seems to turn on differences in ideas about the historical facts, so getting clear about just who did what is directly relevant. This does not mean that historical accuracy can be expected to settle issues. It won't for figures with a complex history. Colston *really was* a slave-trader and *really did* a lot of good for Bristol; knowing this does not imply anything specific about his statue. Nor will a clear view of history settle complex interpretative issues. For one thing, where stipulation and appropriation are involved, a monument can be reinterpreted by the standards of those with a particular way of living such that it has a new meaning. Such new meanings are likely to be relatively peripheral, but they need not be: they could become a central way of seeing the image in question. For another thing, the grounds of interpretation of a monument need not be strictly dictated by the physical or pictorial qualities of the monument itself. Suppose that a racist group puts up a monument to someone who was not a racist. Targets of this group who know of the origins of this monument could well see it as racist, as it signifies, in part, the public clout of this racist group.

Concerns about truth and falsity of interpretations of monuments are, let's say, "theoretical" concerns, as they have to do with the accuracy of various beliefs. There are also objective "political" concerns to be addressed – i.e., concerns having to do

with power arrangements among people who live together. The people in question are to be grouped in terms of the ways of living acknowledged to be relevant to whatever monument is under scrutiny. The central political issue is whether the presence or absence of racist monuments in public spaces gives the people in the relevant locale a fair chance at participating in the public sphere as members of their respective ways of living. The problems posed by statues can be due to their location as much as their meaning. A large part of the problem with Victoria's statue of Sir John A. Macdonald was its spot at the door (!) of City Hall, requiring people to pass very close by in order to get access to civic services. A racist monument stuck in a dark corner of town where it is unlikely to be noticed functions differently than this. Cultural and institutional contingencies matter as well. Where a society is fraught with racial divisions, a statue of a famous racist poses a live practical problem. But in a society where such racist problems are genuinely mild, the display of such a monument poses much less of a problem to the public participation of people who identify with the way of living of the targets of the racist figure. Likewise, if there is an institutional initiative of ameliorating racist problems – e.g., of unifying South Africa post-Apartheid or of carrying out Justin Trudeau's declared interest in improving Canada's relations with First Nations Canadians – then the public display of monuments of historical racists can function as an unwelcome obstacle to these projects. Since such projects aim at vouchsafing the status of racialized citizens as political equals, stumbling blocks for these projects are equally impediments to political equality. Where there are no such initiatives, then such statues cannot be such obstacles either, for better and for worse.

There is one more subset of external questions to address. Besides issues either a) pertinent to relations between particular ways of living, or b) objective with regard to ways of living, there are issues that c) have been (and continue to be) the product of

political discussion among ways of living. Interpersonal discourse about how to live together has generated some results. Such things as the relevance of harm as a justification for interpersonal interference in behavior, the significance of freedom of speech, and the legal importance of formal equality have the status of reasonably well-shared touchstones for on-going political discourse. To be sure, the details of these reference points are vexed, and their very status as achievements is tenuous. Regardless, we find in such a group of (sort of) agreed upon liberal values the materials for assessing the contesting claims about monuments generated by ways of living.[12] To a certain extent, raising these questions can involve asking whether a way of living itself is worth fostering or preserving in a particular form. If a *sine qua non* of a particular way of living is a repudiation of wide freedom of speech, or a suspension of endorsement with regard to a view of citizens as equals in the eyes of the law, then political discourse about racist monuments that addresses these values might deliver the verdict that a particular way of living cannot be allowed to continue to be pursued in particular place. There is no *a priori* reason to expect all removalist and preservationist arguments to be consistent with either the pursuit or the ideals of liberal democracy.

IV

Must We Endorse Our Own Ways of Living?

Identity claims have a natural place in discussion of the moral and political status of racist monuments. My claim has been that,

[12] Since I am constraining my attention to liberal political contexts, this sort of issue is external to particular ways of living. But if we were considering wider political possibilities, then this sort of issue would be internal to a liberal way of living. My thanks to a referee for pushing me on this issue.

in order to be theoretically and politically acceptable, these claims should be understood in terms of ways of living (WoL) rather than in terms of the beliefs and desires we have about ourselves – i.e., identity psychologically construed (PI). PI claims are focused on individuals, whereas WoL claims concern behavior in the wider, shared world. Still, we ought not to divorce way of living claims from psychology *too* deeply. This gives rise to a theoretically subtle and practically important question: in order to have a way of living, must we recognize and endorse it as such? Since "way of living" is here offered as a framework for understanding identity, this question can be reframed: must we recognize and endorse features of our own identity in order for them to be such features? What makes me me?[13]

There is reason to be pulled in both directions on this question. On one hand, there is much to be said about centrally interpreting identity in terms of what shows up in our self-conceptions. We might well think that nobody has a better epistemic perspective on our identities than ourselves. "You don't know me!" is recognized as a legitimate if juvenile claim in interpersonal, politically relevant discourse. The implication is that the speaker knows herself because her identity is evident to her. The more that identity is understood in terms of beliefs and desires, the more that such a view is plausible.

On the other hand, there are various things to be said in favour of the view that our identities are not necessarily obvious to us, and that hence we need not recognize or endorse something for it to be part of who we are. If our identities are due, whether in small or large part, to biology, or to history, or to cultural surroundings, then we can have an identity (to whatever extent) without recognizing it as either who one is or the product of one or other

[13] Bilgrami gives extended attention to endorsement and identity (2006, 2015).

of these sources. The more that identity is understood in terms of ways of doing things rather than in terms of the contents of a private psychological space, the more that this is plausible. The identities of very young children are illustrative of the issues here. The more that we want to say that such children don't have identities, then the more we will be able to say that who we are depends upon our reflective recognition of our own identities. The more that we want to say that such children have specific identities, then the more we will be able to say that identity does not require reflective recognition: it is given and discovered, not made. The more that we want to say that such children are forming their own identities or figuring out who they are, then the more complex and nuanced is the array of theoretical possibilities open to us, including both individualistically construed psychological aspects and publicly located behavioral ones.

Here is why this issue matters. If we must recognize and endorse an identity-constituting way of living in order for it to be our own, then other people have very little power to impose ways of living on us in ways that affect who we are. The weaker the reflective psychological constraints on such ways of living, the more they can be imposed on us by others.

Symbolic aspects of ways of living are particularly important to think about here, and not just because my topic is the polysemy of racist monuments. There is some reason to think that ways of living tend to be symbolically facilitated. That is, evaluatively loaded symbols matter, at least, to many ways of living; they might even partly constitute them. Can a Christian way of living be completely divorced from the symbol of the cross? I have my doubts. Hamid Karzai's remark about cartoons of Muhammed suggests that certain ways of symbolizing Muslim concerns are deeply insulting to people with a Muslim way of living: the production and display of symbols of this sort are inconsistent with

unproblematic coexistence with Muslims. Where there is this sort of symbolic power, there is also the possibility for some people to shape the way of living of others by deeply influencing their symbolic environment. When a certain symbol matters to *your* way of living and *I* affect how you interpret it, regardless of whether you welcome or even recognize this effect, then I have shaped your way of living. The more deeply and extensively some people do this to others, the more we might want to say that a way of living has been imposed via such semantic power.[14]

This provides the materials for a general removalist argument. Consider racist statues in public spaces. The presence and interpretation of such monuments affects the ways of living of the people in the vicinity via symbolic processes. The statues are interpreted in various ways by all who deal with them. Part of the meaning of these symbols is the messages conveyed both to and about those who are identified as belonging to the targeted way of living. These messages are, in part, "Here is how you will be seen and treated around here." and "Here's how you are expected to act/react around here." The targeted people are forced, with and without recognition, to interpret their own social standing in the terms shaped by these public monuments. This amounts to the imposition, at least in part, of a way of living on these people. Since the monuments in question are in the public sphere, a sphere over which, by liberal standards, no group has a prior right of control, they are politically problematic. Any way of living which endorses or, worse, insists on the public display of these monuments inherits this problematic status.

[14] Glenn Loury argues that the very idea of race is subject to such symbolic effects (2002, 2003). If he is correct, then anyone with a racialized way of living is open to the shaping of their identity *qua* racialized by those who wield power over how race in general and their race in particular are interpreted.

The case is different for ways of living that call for removal of such statues. When these monuments are removed, the power of some to impose ways of living on others is reduced. One might think that this involves problematic imposition of a way of living upon those who call for the statues to be preserved, but this is not the case. The way of living that is imposed on those who would display the statue is only one that cannot really be avoided in any liberal society: that of acting in ways in the public sphere that respect others as equally deserving participants in that sphere. The others whose equality is vouchsafed by removal of the statue are not thereby given disproportionate control over how to live in this essentially shared space. The removal of a barrier to such equality might well be received as an unwelcome imposition by those who once had extra control over this space, but this implies nothing about whether the imposition is illegitimate.

Are there any materials with which to construct a general preservationist argument? While Demetriou might be correct that social cohesion is the most important consideration in favour of preserving racist monuments, it cannot function as a general reason favouring preservation everywhere. When monuments rigidify intra-community divisions – e.g., between African-Americans and White Southerners – then, while they might foster sub-community (i.e., sub-city, state, country-level) cohesion, they will simultaneously erode unity at a higher level. Instead, I think that the value of freedom of expression is more promising for furbishing the materials for a general preservationist argument. Statues are expressive objects; in societies that explicitly value freedom of expression (as all should), there is a general reason to favour permitting a wide array of forms of expression. Historical monuments clearly fall into this array, for both their retrospective and prospective functions.

Which of these two standing arguments should take priority? Rather than the preservationist position based on freedom of expression, it is the general removalist position based on equality in public spaces that should be prioritized. The general removalist argument rests on the idea that no people have priority over others, *ceteris paribus*, in genuinely shared spaces. Thus, the nature of these spaces constrains ways of living from the outside: ways of behaving must be shaped to respect the interpersonal equality of rights of access to and use of public spaces. By contrast, the value of free expression derives from the ways in which such freedom serves our interests, whether as speakers, as auditors, or as bystanders. Human interests are diverse, so sometimes they must be balanced against each other. Different individuals and groups–i.e., different ways of living–strike different balances among the weights given both to these interests and to the means of serving them, including expression. Where ways of living meet and disagree about these weights, it is legitimate for the people in question to negotiate how to live together. This will require compromising about how to value such things as freedom of expression in shared spaces. This amounts to the devising of a shared way of living, at least in part. In short, the specific value of freedom of expression at particular times and places is internal to ways of living and the shape that these give to the interests from which the significance of expression is derived. Hence it is subject to such external constraints on ways of living as those imposed by the interpersonal nature of shared spaces, rather than being more fundamental than these constraints.[15]

[15] Shared participation in public spaces is more fundamental since I am taking a liberal political framework for granted. Things are less clear where we imagine such a framework to be itself in question. It is theoretically possible for people to value free speech more than political equality. While this might be practically

This general removalist argument is hostage to two ideas that deserve further examination and defense. The first is the one that I have raised but not settled: whether we can have ways of living imposed upon us. I am inclined to think that we can, but the issues are complex and I will not insist on the final word here. The second under-defended idea is that we cannot legitimately, or even practically, avoid the way of living of, let's say, the democratic citizen in a diverse space in liberal political contexts. I am confident that the issues relevant to this contention are also complex. Without being able to work through these ideas, this general removalist position is offered only as *prima facie* and suggestive.

Conclusion

Verdicts, Symbols, and the Slippery Slope

If we stand back from the details, here's what all of the above amounts to. Racist monuments are found in public spaces. People of various kinds share these spaces; by liberal standards, they are equally entitled to this. Our historical, cultural, political and expressive lives are complex, so these statues have a less-than-obvious moral and political status. In order to determine which statues, if any, should be removed and which, if any, should be preserved, we need information about how these statues enter people's ways of living: how they are understood, what effects they have, and more. Where there are conflicts between what these symbols do for the various people who share the space in which they are found, we need to do the hard work of thinking about which understandings of these statues seem the best-founded and which effects seem the most important to allow or prevent. Where

unlikely, I imagine that history can offer us examples of actual societies with such an arrangement.

a racist statue isn't terribly important to anyone but poses a large problem, and especially where its historical accuracy is wanting, then it should come down. Where a racist statue is beloved and doesn't pose much of a problem, especially when its historical lesson is otherwise accurate and worth applauding, then it should remain.

Particularly important are statues that don't fall in these neat categories. Where a statue is both *deeply* valued and *deeply* problematic, and when other considerations are also in balance, then its moral and political status should be thought to be unclear, but only for now. The temporal qualification is important, as it reminds us of the complex polysemy of these monuments and hence of the lively and on-going interpretations and reinterpretations of their meaning. So long as people live complex lives in the space in which such monuments are found, they will assess and reassess just what they symbolize. There's no natural end to such symbolic interpretation. There is no ceiling on the number of grounds of interpretation that may be brought to bear on these monuments by the people dealing with them. Grey cases can become clear, and vice versa. We should expect a growing case for the removal of monuments that are currently accepted, I predict. All of this is to say that the nature and significance of the messages sent by racist monuments are essentially contestable. Accepting this requires that we receive the products of the discourse about these monuments in a spirit of intellectual and political humility. No decision either for or against the removal/preservation of a statue should be thought to be once-and-for-all. This requires that removed statues not be destroyed. Destruction is incompatible with humble acceptance of the polysemy of complex monuments.

I see this as a moderate position. It allows for either preservationist or removalist positions to be persuasive at a given

time. However, it is consistent with, at any given moment*, all* actual preservationist or removalist arguments being accepted. This is just to say that it is consistent with a call to remove all currently contentious monuments. Some will not see this as moderate. What is seen by some as a moderate position is one that divides nicely between those statues that ought to be removed and those that ought to be preserved. The failure to provide such a dividing line is thought to put us on an undesirably slippery slope: if we do not have a way of distinguishing once and for all which monuments should be kept and which should be removed, we open the door to losing them all, which (so the concern goes) would be to lose too much.

Timmerman thinks that his considerations of emotional harm can be used to divide between the statues that ought to be removed and those that should remain. The statues that cause significant harm should be removed. Those that do not cause grave enough emotional suffering should remain (2019). However, as Timmerman recognizes, this is a fragile position. For any preserved statue, it might come to cause more significant harm in the future. In that case, Timmerman accepts that it ought to be removed. Thus, Timmerman's own position will not appease those who fear the road towards general and complete removal. But the situation is even graver for such worries than Timmerman allows. The reason that these statues might come to cause even more emotional suffering is some new manner in which they are interpreted. Their power to cause suffering is due to their symbolic nature. But, as we have seen, suffering is not the only possible moral problem with these monuments. At the very least there is also insult and the risk to political equality that they pose, and these problems also arise due to what such monuments are taken to mean. No stable stopping point on the slippery slope is provided by focusing on harm, only a doubly partial one.

Demetriou and Wingo suggest that the slippery slope can be avoided if the post-apartheid approach of South Africa is followed. According to them, only the most offensive and least beloved statues should be removed. Racist monuments that are preserved should be relabeled to make their good and bad aspects clear. New non-racist monuments should be added to the public sphere (Demetriou and Wingo 2018, 11-12; Demetriou 2019). There is much to like about this recommendation, but it too fails to block movement down the slope. Take the idea of the "most" offensive statues: this is practically self-defeating, as once statues are removed, there is a new batch of "most" offensive ones remaining. If we focus instead on "egregiously" offensive statues, then the hard interpretive issues that I have emphasized come to the fore. What counts as offensive, and to what degree, depends on how the monuments in question are understood. What is innocuous now can look much different in the future (and vice versa). As time goes by, even the approach sketched by Demetriou and Wingo is open to resulting in complete removal of racist statues from the public sphere.

The deep reason for this is twofold. First, as I have emphasized, racist monuments are polysemous, and hence their meaning is essentially contestable. Since their good and bad powers are due to particular interpretations of what they mean, the moral status of racist monuments inherits this essential contestability. There is no firm ground to be found in this territory, despite the wishes of those who dislike slippery slopes. Second, although in principle the various considerations that might be canvassed when thinking about these monuments could result in preservation of them all, there is a standing and important consideration supporting general removal of racist statues, and hence the slope is more likely to draw us in this direction. The particular reason is this: the racist monuments in question are found in public spaces. These spaces are ones to which everyone has equal right of access, and over

which no one has any prior right of control. By these standards, racist monuments are necessarily problematic: they send messages of inequality, of unequal right of participation in public spaces, and of the legitimate shaping of the behavior of some people in these spaces by others whether they like it or not. Removal of items that send such messages from these places will always be an improvement by the standards set by the political nature of these spaces. I hope that the discussion above suffices to show that considerations of the nature of our shared spaces is not all that matters in discourse about ways of living and racist monuments. However, that these considerations always matter should not be forgotten either.

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IDENTITY AS THEATRE?
APPIAH, GOFFMAN, AND THE DRAMATURGY OF SELF

BY

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Identity as Theatre?

Appiah, Goffman, and the Dramaturgy of Self

Yussef Al Tamimi

Introduction

This paper identifies the benefits and weaknesses of viewing identity as a form of theatre. Kwame Anthony Appiah (2018, 2005) repeatedly refers to collective identities as 'scripts' for everyday life. Identities help us 'perform' and 'act' the different 'roles' that we have in our lives. This account of how people interact borrows many terms usually found in the theatre: performances, roles, acts, scripts. Together, these dramaturgical elements comprise a personal story of who we are, where we come from, and who we want to be. This view of the self corresponds with an idea about identity that is prominent and popular in modern culture, namely that our identity is a narrative identity. What are the merits of looking at identity through this dramaturgical lens? What ideas do these metaphors reveal about identity? Why is the narrative

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conception commonly accepted in contemporary culture? And what are the drawbacks of looking at identity as theatre?

In this paper, I want to draw on Erving Goffman's dramaturgical theory to address these questions. Dramaturgical analysis was popularized by Goffman in the 1960's, and soon became a foundational sociological theory. The similarities between Appiah and Goffman are striking. Both emphasize that social identities create normative expectations and how these identities are not material possessions but rather conducts and behaviours enacted by the individual in daily life. Moreover, Goffman prefigures an important element of the current debate on identity by claiming that there is a moral right to recognition. But there are also differences. Goffman brings to bear the role of emotions, which is an understated element in Appiah's account. Goffman's micro-analysis illuminates how established social roles, similar to Appiah's scripts, create understanding and expectations as people try to manage their performance in social encounters.

The paper begins by addressing (Section 1) two central themes in the theatrical account of identity: the relation between identity and truth and between identity and narrative. Next, it examines (Section 2) Appiah's account of social identities as scripts and elaborates on three of its features (labels; norms of behavior; norms of treatment). It then presents (Section 3) Goffman's micro-level account by way of clarifying how social identities function in everyday lives. Here we get a better view of three aspects that characterize the connection between identity and social scripts (established social roles, normative expectations, and the moral right to be accepted). Finally, the paper shows (Section 4) how these three aspects bring emotions (specifically, embarrassment) into the picture, and argues that the concept of narrative should be approached critically as a product of modern culture.

I

Identity, Truth, and Narrative

Theatrical accounts of identity draw some kind of connection between identity and theatre. The emphasis put on elements from theatre can vary widely, but two themes tend to occupy these accounts; one is a particular relation between identity and truth, the other between identity and narrative. Firstly, if identity consists of various roles and performances, the question arises if there is a true self 'behind' the outward performances. Secondly, though a person's daily roles vary greatly, they are typically seen as part of one narrative structure, a personal story about who we are. This section introduces these two themes, truth and narrative, in relation to identity. As it turns out, the two themes are intertwined, because the narrative view of identity comes with its own philosophical commitments on truth.

The idea that identity is a performance akin to theatrical play is deeply rooted in literature and language. The very origin of the word 'person' has its roots in *persona* which stands for 'mask' in Latin. It appears intuitive that, to some extent, each of us performs a certain role that shifts according to the social situation we find ourselves in; we act differently and adopt different scripts around our parents and our friends, are serious with our boss, dreamy around our crush. Who a person is appears to consist of different roles and characters that people adopt depending on who they are with and where they are.

The roles that make up an identity raise a question that goes to the very core of philosophical disputation: are these roles mere representations and fictions distinct from one's true self? The idea of a mask suggests that the mask covers over something that is deeper or more profound. An actress takes off her mask after a performance and then returns to being her 'true' self. Is this the

same for the different roles of our identity? The debate over truth versus representation has waged since antiquity, also in relation to identity and the self. Plato is the most marked exponent of dualism, seeing in the immaterial soul a true self distinct from the material body. Aristotle rejected such dualism and viewed the soul as related to the body in the same way as form is to matter, integrated into a unified whole person (Barresi and Martin 2011, 35).

In modern times, an influential account connecting the self to performance is found in Jungian psychology. Carl Jung emphasizes the artificial nature of the persona or mask and that it is important not to succumb one's authentic self wholly to the outward persona. Crucially, however, Jung regards the persona as a healthy component of the individual because it enables people to flourish in society by adhering, at least outwardly, to shared norms and behaviours (Jung 1953). Therefore, Jung is decidedly Platonic in his outlook, seeing the outward persona as distinct from the authentic self (Weldon 2017). In a similar vein, Jean-Paul Sartre gave his famous example of the waiter. The waiter is a typical profession where we assume that a mask is worn. The mask conceals who the waiter really is and what they truly think, else running the risk of coming across rude or offensive. Restaurants where owners and waiters do not wear a mask are expressly praised for being authentic and giving the customer the experience of feeling at 'home', that is, at least, only if the unmasked owner is pleasant. But Sartre's concern is not with the waiter who drops his mask, but rather with the waiter who is 'too much' of a waiter, one who plays the role too eagerly: "His movement is quick and forward, a little too precise, a little too rapid" (Sartre 1969, 59). This waiter, Sartre says, is inauthentic and an actor in bad faith. The waiter 'plays at' being a waiter, thereby denying his own freedom to act outside the mechanically prescribed performance of the supposed proper waiter. Moreover, the act can take on excessive forms, making the very action that is being performed

difficult to realize. Sartre illustrates this with the student who is so busy seeming attentive at a lecture that he forgets to actually pay attention: "The attentive pupil who wishes to be attentive, his eyes riveted on the teacher, his ears open wide, so exhausts himself in playing the attentive role that he ends up by no longer hearing anything" (*ibid.*, 60).

With Sartre, we see cracks appearing in the Platonic divide between mask and self. Sartre's illustrations introduce something normative in the mask: masks that are mechanically performed are less authentic than others. Hence, not all performances are artificial, but some can be truer than others. The sociologist Erving Goffman takes this intuition a step further. For Goffman, masks can even be considered the truer self. At times, the performance a person gives in a certain role is a role that the person strives to live up to. A mask can be the self that the person truly wants to be and through the performance comes to believe that they are (Goffman 1971, 19). For instance, a person who wishes to see themselves as helpful rather than selfish might offer their help to others in an effort to cultivate and 'grow into' a caring character. This view accepts that the self itself is often a site of contradictory and conflicting motives and aims. This interaction between the mask and the self comes closer to the Aristotelian view of the self; the mask and the self are inseparable in the same way that substance cannot be without form, a poem cannot be without its lyrical devices, or a speech without rhetoric. Without presentation, the self amounts to nothing comprehensible. Goffman's position is discussed in detail in Section 3, but first we will introduce the theme of narrative identity.

A theme that enters in modern debates and was absent in discussions on the self in antiquity, is that of narrative.[1] Despite the various roles we play in daily life, these roles all belong to ourselves. The performances are part of one unitary structure, a personal narrative about who we are. Many contemporary theorists of identity share this narrative view of identity, the idea that there is some link between narrative and selfhood (Schechtman 2011, 395). Charles Taylor is a prominent advocate of the narrative view. Taylor argues that human life is always in the process of becoming. We assess our lives relative to what is valuable to us, and since we are continuously challenged by new experiences and grow more mature, our self-image is under constant change and revision (Taylor 1989, 47-52). In other words, the self is situated against a horizon or background of meaning – "suspended in webs of significance," as Clifford Geertz has it (1973, 5) – that gives weight and significance to the choices people make, the daily roles they fulfil, and the actions they perform. Understanding a person's identity thus involves grasping how their life is woven into an unfolding story. In the same vein, Paul Ricoeur suggests that identity comes about through plotting one's life story, which is continuously being redrafted as we face new life events. The narrative form meets this essential human need, and is in fact necessary, because it allows the heterogenous circumstances, incidents, actors and interactions of life to come together in a meaningful way (Ricoeur 1984, 65-66). Narrative, therefore, is a fundamental component of being for many people.

[1] This may have to do with the fact that in ancient philosophy the question whether the self is a fiction never arose (Barresi and Martin 2011, 42). It was from Locke's account of personal identity that the suggestion arose that the concept of the self may be a useful fiction to support the continuity of individual identity. Subsequently, Hume argued that the idea of a persisting self over and above personal experiences is an illusion and compared the mind to a theatre in which perceptions make their appearance and vanish (Hume 1975, 253).

The idea that life is a narrative has become well-established in the public imagination. The idea draws acceptance in fields across psychology, philosophy, therapy, popular media, and spawned a range of self-help work, a storytelling industry, and inspirational literature. By way of example, take Nobel Prize laureate Toni Morrison's address to college students in 2006:

> You are your own stories and therefore free to imagine and experience what it means to be human. (…) The theme you choose may change or simply elude you, but being your own story means you can always choose the tone. It also means that you can invent the language to say who you are and what you mean. But then, I am a teller of stories and therefore an optimist, a believer in the ethical bend of the human heart, a believer in the mind's disgust with fraud and its appetite for truth, a believer in the ferocity of beauty. So, from my point of view, which is that of a storyteller, I see your life as already artful, waiting, just waiting and ready for you to make it art. (Morrison 2006, 215)

The connection between identity and storytelling clearly has a strong foothold in our culture. In Section 4 of the article, we will discuss what makes this connection so amenable and straightforwardly understandable to the public ear.

Identity as a form of theatre thus raises compelling questions about truth and narrative. The link between truth and narrative goes further, though. It is not simply fortuitous that the thinkers mentioned in this section develop a narrative view of the self in relation to identity. A specific, phenomenological conception of truth underlies these theories. At the core of this conception is a first-person perspective on what one's experiences and identity amount to. It rejects objectivistic approaches whereby the person distances themselves from their own experience to determine who

they are. The idea that knowledge about ourselves arises by "looking inside" ourselves for something that is already there, is rejected. This Cartesian idea assumes that there is a 'real' identity behind our acts and appearance in the world. Such a disengaged view of the self is rejected by proponents of the narrative view (e.g. Taylor 1989, 162). Rather, a person's identity arises through their history, experiences, values and ideals, which are continuously being retold and reshaped as life progresses and the story unfolds. Though much can be said about the hermeneutical and phenomenological accounts of truth that underlie the narrative view, this introduction of the themes served to move to the topic of theatrical accounts of identity. In the next section, Appiah's view of collective identities as scripts for people's everyday lives is discussed.

II

Identities as Life Scripts

This section examines the notion of identity laid out by Kwame Anthony Appiah in *The Lies that Bind* (2018) and *The Ethics of Identity* (2005). An important aim for Appiah is to understand how collective identities work. His main objective is to push back against the idea of essentialism. Essentialism is the view that each person in a group has some core or essence in common (2018, 26). Appiah contests that there is any deep similarity at the core of collective identities, whether ethnic, sexual, religious or otherwise, that binds people of that identity together. Rather, identities are continuously morphing and changing in accordance with the social setting people find themselves in.

However, despite their fluctuating and anti-essentialist character, collective identities have an important anchoring function in people's lives. Collective identities, Appiah argues,

"provide what we might call scripts: narratives that people can use in shaping their projects and in telling their life stories" (2005, 22). What does it mean that collective identities 'provide' scripts? What Appiah points to is that in making our life stories, these stories are interwoven with and moulded by collective narratives that are not fully within our sphere of influence. In other words, the way our life stories unfold is partly shaped by attachments, such as family or ethnicity, that we find ourselves in. Appiah writes: "We do make choices, but we don't, individually, determine the options among which we choose" (*ibid.*, 107). Collective identities thus structure possible narratives of the individual self and provide models for telling life stories. Collective narratives are, in a way, 'sources' for our individual stories. For example, Appiah explains, gay identities may organize lives around the narrative of coming out; Pentecostalists structure narratives around being born again; and black identities in America often engage oppositional narratives of self-construction in the face of racism (*ibid.*, 23). The collectives that provide these scripts do not have to be longstanding religious or ethnic groups and can sometimes be formed in a prompt transformation. A recent example is the MeToo-campaign, which provided for many survivors of sexual assault a script through which to interpret and cast past experiences into a renewed personal narrative. Moreover, a script does not have to pertain only to a small, minority group but can affect how a large swath of society develop their self-understanding. An example is the so-called 'loss of innocence' of a child entering adulthood. The narrative of loss of innocence is only intelligible within a cultural script where childhood is wedded to innocence, and would not make sense in a culture with a view of children as inherently desiring and sinful (for instance in 17th century Puritan belief, see Bernstein 2011, 4).

Appiah explains how collective identities function as 'scripts' for everyday life by elaborating three shared features (2018, 10-12).

First, collective identities come with *labels* about who they apply to. Characteristics and criteria are given about who belongs to a group and why. These characteristics are often deeply contested, but there is some degree of understanding on how to identify those to whom the labels apply. Appiah also calls these labels "social conceptions" (2005, 67). Secondly, identities give us reasons to *behave* in a certain way. Identities have normative significance for people in the sense that they come with norms of identification: rules about how one should behave given their identity. Thirdly, identities give reasons to others to *treat* us in a certain way. People might be helpful to others or cautious depending on what identities the other is assigned. Thus, identities are labels that shape how people behave and treat others. This is how identities affect the everyday lives of people.

The three features of social identities roughly correspond to three psychological 'truths' that Appiah distinguishes. Firstly, the labels that identities provide come with the risk that people are prone to *essentialism*. As mentioned above, essentialism is the idea that everyone in a group has a shared characteristic or essence. Appiah rejects the idea that identities indicate anything innate: "There isn't some inner essence that explains why people of a certain social identity are the way they are. (…) And most of the things that most people do aren't done *because* they are women or men, of this or that ethnicity or race or religion." (Appiah 2018, 29). There are two elements here that we might want to tell apart: that a group has some essential feature and that someone does something because they are a member of that group. The former is a matter of stereotype, for instance "all liberals trust The New York Times." Meanwhile, the latter involves reducing someone's motivation to the group they belong to. This can occur even if we acknowledge that there are no essential traits in a group, for instance: "you trust The New York Times just because you are a liberal (even though I recognize that not all liberals rely on the

same media).” Though motivation is often reduced to an essentialist stereotype about the group, the two can nevertheless be separated. Both aspects are contained in Appiah’s notion of essentialism: stereotype and motivation.

The second component of identity, behaviour, is connected to the fact that people have a *habitus* shaped by their various identities. Appiah, following the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, defines habitus as “a set of dispositions to respond more or less spontaneously to the world in particular ways, without much thought” (*ibid.*, 21). We have habits, ways in which we conduct our bodies and speech, that are inculcated from a young age and depend on the different identities that we belong to. For example, the clothes that we learn to wear and consider normal hinge greatly on interlocking identities of class, ethnicity, creed and gender. Our habitus influences our conscious behaviour but shapes many unconscious behaviours as well. One’s sense or taste for what clothing is good-looking or refined is deeply affected by their habitus. Essentialism also comes into play here; the way habits reveal the different identities that a person belongs to can invite to reduce one’s behaviour to their identity. For Appiah, this remains a pitfall to avoid.

Thirdly, identities are sources for different ways of treatment, and this is related to the psychological observation that we have *clannish* tendencies. People are inclined to distinguish between in-groups, who belong to the same identity they belong to, and out-groups, those that do not belong to the same group. We treat these groups differently, Appiah writes, in that we prefer our own kind and take more easily against outsiders (*ibid.*, 31). This tendency might have an evolutionary explanation; reliance on group members could have been an adaptive strategy to survive.

Put succinctly, collective identities function as scripts for everyday life in three ways: by shaping how we are labelled, how

we behave, and how we are treated. These traits are linked to three observations about how people engage with identities: identities may come with essentialist biases, distinctive habitus, and clannish tendencies.

There are two relevant ways in which Appiah's account of identity is distinct from the discussion in Section 1. Firstly, Appiah has two uses for the term 'narrative': narratives refer to both collective identities, such as family stories or national histories, which are scripts feeding into our sense of who we are, and that individual story itself. Our personal stories are interwoven with other narratives, of other individuals as well as collectives. Narrative thus takes on both a collective and individual significance. The double use of narrative mirrors Appiah's understanding of identities, which can be personal and collective. The main difference between these two is the social practice of labelling. According to Appiah, social categories such as race only exist owing to social practices associated with the racial label. On the other hand, personal attributes such as cleverness work independently of social construction (Appiah 2005, 23). One could ask whether this distinction between personal and social identities holds, and whether personal attributes can turn into social categories and vice versa. What is clear is that, for Appiah, the study of narrative is mainly focused on collective identities, because only collective identities function as scripts.

Secondly, Appiah makes a distinction between identities based on whether they can be chosen. Some identities, Appiah argues, are based on conventions and a person can choose to adopt that identity. It is these identities that Appiah regards as 'roles' that a person may wish to play or adopt: "You can choose whether or not to play a certain conventional role, and, if all there is to an identity is a conventional set of behaviours, and you are capable of them, then you can chose whether to adopt the identity" (*ibid.*, 69-

70). On the other hand, there are identities whose criteria include things over which a person has no control. Sexual orientation and racial identity are two examples that Appiah considers part of this category, because they "are responding to a fact (about desire or ancestry) that is independent of their choices, a fact that comes, so to speak, from outside the self" (*ibid.*, 70). This distinction is tricky, as Appiah immediately acknowledges. Referring to the example of Sartre's waiter mentioned in the previous section, Appiah notes that even the waiter takes on an identity, or a profession, that "has a function outside himself." What this means, and where the line is drawn between roles that are based on conventions and those that are not, is unclear. Moreover, it is debatable whether convention is indeed something that a person does control, rather than a complex set of norms that a person feels compelled to act on.

Precisely these thorny questions are key in the dramaturgical theory of Erving Goffman. Goffman's incisive analysis of everyday situations is an interesting intervention on the issues Appiah's discussion raises and can contribute to a deeper understanding of how identities work as scripts in everyday life. His account of identity is discussed next.

III

The Presentation of Self

The previous section discussed Appiah's idea that social identities function as scripts for people's individual narratives. It was explained that this happens through labels and norms of behaviours and treatment. However, the process by which collective identities work as scripts and shape the life of the individual remained quite abstract. It is worthwhile to think more carefully about scripts in order to get a concrete idea about how

identities work into one's everyday life. The idea of scripts portrays identities in a particular storytelling way: identities function as scripts with social roles which are performed in the story of life. This narrative way of understanding the self has led many authors to compare life to art, literature and theatre. In sociology, this paradigm finds its most convincing expression in the American sociologist Erving Goffman, who used the theatre as a metaphor to examine everyday life. Where Appiah describes how scripts work at an abstract level, Goffman provides a description of micro-level social encounters such as eating at a restaurant or going to the doctor. This unique way of analysing everyday life leads to an account of human behaviour that sheds additional light on how collective identities work as life scripts.

Goffman argues that when people interact with others, they try to manage the impression others have of them (1959, 15, 26). For instance, a doctor puts on a professional demeanour to make the patient feel at ease about their expertise. A family visiting another for dinner may try to appear orderly and loving to come across as relatively well-functioning, while the host family is attempting to do the same. Even inside one's own home, stepping outside one's room and interacting with others involves changing one's demeanour and comes with certain roles and performances. The same goes for social identities. For instance, a person with a bicultural background visiting their family or friends from one cultural background might, in order to save themselves the embarrassment of being seen as 'too assimilated' into the other culture, perform some additional affinity with their family's culture.

These various roles that people enact are not roles supplementing who they 'truly' are, they are in fact central and fundamental to their identity. Citing the sociologist Robert Ezra Park (1950, 249), Goffman states:

> It is probably no mere historical accident that the word person, in its first meaning, is a mask. It is rather a recognition of the fact that everyone is always and everywhere, more or less consciously, playing a role. (…) It is in these roles that we know each other; it is in these roles that we know ourselves (Goffman 1971, 30).

Identity and masks are thus inexorably connected. Goffman's analysis of this connection is intricate and wide-ranging, but we will focus our attention on three aspects that relate to Appiah's identity scripts: established social roles, normative expectations, and the moral right to acceptance.

Firstly, central to Goffman's analysis is that performances are achieved by controlling one's 'front'. Goffman defines the front as "the expressive equipment of a standard kind intentionally or unwittingly employed by the individual during his performance" (*ibid.*, 22). The 'expressive equipment' that can be employed in performance has two parts: the setting and the personal front. The setting comprises the background items, the physical lay-out and the decor, such as the workplace or the living room, where the performance is played out. The personal front includes the items and characteristics that we associate with the individual: sex, age, ethnicity, size and looks, facial expressions, accent, and so on. As much as there is a front, there is also a 'backstage.' This is where the role one fulfils can be dropped, like a waiter in the kitchen of a restaurant or lawyers in a backroom before going into a meeting with clients. This is not necessarily a place where people are their 'true' selves; rather, it is where they prepare for their role, unwind after performing, and look back on their performance and evaluate it. Moreover, the division between the front- and backstage is not necessarily physical, but can also be virtual. In our Covid-19 era we are all too familiar with this: there is always a moment of checking

ourselves, adjusting, and a slight shift in character, before we click 'Start video' on a Zoom call.

The fact that the front can be employed, as Goffman says, 'intentionally or unwittingly' is crucial. For instance, a commuter can deliberately pull out a copy of *The Brothers Karamazov* on the train to appear interesting and well-read. But other performances are less calculated because they come in roles that are imbued with social norms and traditions. On the same train, a woman might, without giving it any thought, sit with her legs and knees neatly aligned instead of aggressively 'manspreading'. Hence, though a person can create their unique performances, many are shaped by social norms and conventions. These *established social roles*, Goffman says, usually already come with a particular front (*ibid.*, 27). It is here, in Appiah's parlance, that collective identities offer 'scripts' and expectations for how people think and behave in their daily interactions. Collective identities such as ethnicity, gender, creed or race offer various roles and ways of expression that are performed in daily life. These collective identities are therefore not material possessions, but rather ways of conduct that are affirmed in daily encounters, as Goffman highlights: "To *be* a given kind of person, then, is not merely to possess the required attributes, but also to sustain the standards of conduct and appearance that one's social grouping attaches thereto" (*ibid.*, 81). Social identities are not things that people have, but materialize in interactions and performances. As Appiah suggested in a similar vein, social identities come with certain rules of behaviour, or habitus, which include norms of conduct, presentation, and speech. These norms can be so detailed and deeply embedded that they are often performed unwittingly.

Since the various social roles that a person has can come with prescribed fronts, people generate *normative expectations* about the behaviour and appearance of others. Goffman notes that based on a person's social identities we quickly make assumptions as to

"what the individual before us ought to be" (1986/1963, 12). This relates to Appiah's norms of identification that were mentioned before: social identities come with expectations about how a person will behave. These norms are often based on stereotypes that we have about a social category. We not only have these expectations of those outside our own social groups, but also, and perhaps more so, of members of our own group. For instance, an academic philosopher might expect of her colleagues that, at the very least, they have read Wittgenstein's *Investigations*. Goffman notes that these normative expectations are, in effect, demands; they are demands about how a member of a group should be. If incongruence exists between our expected appearance and actual reality, either the expectation or the image of reality will have to be adjusted.

The third connecting feature between Goffman and Appiah exists where Goffman addresses the moral character of performances. According to Goffman, there is a fundamental dialectic that underlies all social interaction. On the one hand, when a person presents themselves before others, there is an expectation that others will treat that person in an appropriate manner. Goffman calls this principle a *moral right to be accepted* as we present ourselves (*ibid.*, 24). This formulation comes very close to the right of recognition advocated over recent decades by the likes of Appiah, Charles Taylor and Axel Honneth. As Goffman notes elsewhere: "One builds one's identity out of claims which, if denied, give one the right to feel righteously indignant." (Goffman 1956, 271). On the other hand, according to the second principle, others have a justified expectation that a person with a certain social characteristic and presentation is indeed who they claim they are. This is because, when entering into an interaction, there is a common understanding that both parties are seeking to gather information about the other from all the sources available to them, both spoken and unspoken. In other words, there is an expectation

that people are not deceiving one another by presenting themselves as someone they are not.

Numerous contemporary identity issues can be analysed through the lens of Goffman's dialectic. For instance, debates over the pronouns to be used for transgender or non-binary persons revolve essentially around the principle of acceptance. There is a moral demand to treat, and in this case address, people as they seek to present themselves. The second arm of the dialectic, on the expectation created by people's impressions, is also cause for ample controversy. One example is the discussion over cultural appropriation. Here the interesting question is not only about giving a misguided presentation of oneself, but also whether assuming certain social characteristics and items that belong to dominated groups can be considered an oppressive impersonation. Goffman's two principles thus offer a novel and interesting way of reformulating contemporary debates on recognition. Goffman's formulation stresses not only the right of the person with a certain identity, but also sheds light on how performances might create legitimate demands by others. This raises important questions on whether there are duties tied to a right to recognition and, if so, what these duties entail, an often overlooked topic in the recognition debate.

To summarize, this section discussed three notions that are central to Goffman's dramaturgical analysis: established social roles, normative expectations, and the moral right to acceptance. These notions enrich Appiah's account of identity in several ways. Firstly, the established social roles provide a framework for how collective identities can enter into individual lives as scripts. Secondly, the normative expectations created by social roles fit into the idea that identities involve norms of identification. Thirdly, the moral right connected to daily performance is a valuable contribution by Goffman to the longstanding debate on the right

to recognition. In the next section, we will argue that these three notions build up to a contribution on the role of emotions in identity, a theme that is understated in Appiah's work.

IV

Identity, Emotions, and Narrative

IV. 1. *Identity and embarrassment*

The previous section discussed three notions of Goffman that enrich Appiah's account of social identities: established social roles, normative expectations, and the moral right to acceptance. In Goffman's work these notions build up to an important reflection on the role of emotions in daily life. Given that emotions are significant for Goffman, it is useful to consider how they fit in the theatrical account of identity. This is all the more significant because, in Appiah's work on identity, emotions do not feature as components of his theory. Emotions are absent or, perhaps more accurately, their presence is implied and understated. This section examines the significance of emotions in Goffman's work, especially the emotion of embarrassment, and relates this to Appiah's account of identity. Finally, the section reflects on how the concept of narrative is significant for both identity and emotions.

A key question left unanswered in the previous section's discussion of Goffman's work is: why do people seek to manage their impressions on others? This psychological question leads Goffman to consider the role of emotions in everyday life. As mentioned above, Goffman argues that there is a basic dialectic at work in social interaction: people wish to be accepted as they present themselves and others expect a person to present themselves for who they are. The question thus arises what

happens in case of misrecognition, that is, when the performance of a person fails or others do not accept their presentation. In the many examples of everyday situations that Goffman gives, the main motive of managing one's performance is to avoid feeling embarrassed. Goffman calls these instances where embarrassment arises 'incidents'. Goffman says: "When an incident occurs, the reality sponsored by the performers is threatened. The persons present are likely to react by becoming flustered, ill at ease, embarrassed, nervous, and the like. Quite literally, the participants may find themselves out of countenance" (Goffman 1971, 206). It is therefore the possibility of embarrassment that drives the drama of social life. The main consequence of a failure to be accepted as one presents oneself is embarrassment. For this reason, Goffman points to the central importance of being tactful in interactions. Preventing embarrassment for ourselves and for those we interact with is a critical part of workable social relationships. This need to prevent embarrassment is driven by a "desire, above all else, to avoid a scene" (*ibid.*, 224). Goffman argues that embarrassment is a constant threat to social interaction and that the need to prevent it is cross-cultural (*ibid.*, 25; cf. Schudson 1984, 636).

There can be several ways for embarrassing incidents to occur with regard to one's social identities. First, someone might fail their performance causing their mask to 'slip'. Take the example of the bicultural person mentioned earlier, who emphasises different parts of his personality depending on which family members or friends he is with. It might be the case that many cultural references or words in a different language will go over this person's head, but he will be able to mostly avoid commenting or just smile and go along with the conversation. When he is pressed for a comment and there is no way to glean the meaning of a word or reference, however, this may lead to an embarrassing situation. The embarrassment here is contextual and augmented by the fact that it is tied to a social identity that the person is seeking to perform –

or in Goffman's terms, the reality that he is sponsoring. In other words, not knowing a foreign language word or cultural reference in itself is not what is embarrassing. But since the person is trying to maintain an image of being culturally aware in front of his family members, the situation will feel like a character slip. Another way for a failed performance to take place is when others are unwilling to accept one's presentation. This can be the case for a transgender person, also mentioned earlier, where others decline that person's claim to belonging to a certain gender. Sometimes a person's presentation of self will be seen as an infringement on the collective they claim to belong to. Infamously, this happened with Rachel Dolezal, whose performance as a black woman was condemned by a large number of the African American community for being insulting after it turned out that, in fact, she was not black.

Now, taking embarrassment as the only emotion involved with social identities is clearly reductive. Goffman connects embarrassment in a triad together with shame and humiliation (Scheff 2004, 237; Scheff 2016, 35). Embarrassment thus links to a range of emotions which differ in levels of intensity that are involved when a person's identity is at stake. Yet, there are plenty of situations where many other emotions are at play. For instance, not granting due recognition to a transgender person can lead to feelings of anger and injustice, but also depression and anxiety. Other emotions are also at stake in ethnic and religious identities. For instance, during the civil strife in post-2003 Iraq, having a certain name could indicate a person's affiliation to a particular creed. Here, being misidentified is a source of fear, and embarrassment would be the last thing on a person's mind. Embarrassment is, therefore, only one of many emotions involved in the process of identity. Nevertheless, the reason for Goffman to discuss more mundane life situations of embarrassment is to demonstrate that managing one's social identities is an everyday

practice. The way social identities work by virtue of being scripts that are acted out in daily situations has a microscopic effect on how people behave, interact, and feel. Embarrassment thus serves as a starting point from which to explore the role of emotions, encouraging additional work to understand and theorize the many other emotions that people feel in relation to their identities.

There are two reasons why expounding on emotions in the context of identity more than what has been done thus far in the literature, including Appiah's, can be valuable. Firstly, the contemporary debate on the recognition of identities is greatly improved by a deeper understanding of how and which emotions are involved. In connecting embarrassment and shame, Goffman comes close to the view of Axel Honneth. Honneth develops a theory of recognition and places shame at the centre of the emotional experience of having one's identity misrecognized. Shame is, for Honneth, "the most open of our moral feelings," because it involves a lowering of one's feeling of self-worth and an experience of being of lower social value than one had assumed (Honneth 1995, 137-138). This emotional response can be triggered, Honneth argues, when, in a social encounter, a person's identity is questioned and disrespected: "Hence, the moral crisis in communication is triggered here by the agent being disappointed with regard to the normative expectations that he or she believed could be placed on another's willingness to respect him or her." (*ibid.*, 138). Like Goffman, Honneth argues that there are normative expectations regarding a person's presentation that they can justifiably anticipate others to respect. Moreover, both Honneth and Goffman recognize the emotional interests that are at stake when a person's identity is involved. It was argued above that Goffman's reliance on embarrassment overlooked other emotions. The same criticism can be levelled at Honneth, whose sole reliance on shame as the most open of the moral emotions seems unsubstantiated and demands further scrutiny.

The second reason to explore emotions is that, like social identities, emotions are also often scripted and tied to a narrative. The most lucid philosophical articulation of this view is that of Peter Goldie. According to Goldie, emotions are not merely brief reactions but "complex, episodic, dynamic and structured" (2000, 12). Emotions, on this view, are enduring attitudes or episodes that are structured, or more specifically, are embedded in a narrative structure. Emotions arise in a way that is intelligible in light of a person's past experiences, beliefs and character. Therefore, to make sense of emotional experiences, it is necessary to see them as part of a larger unfolding narrative, not isolated symptoms. Goldie, in agreement with Taylor's view mentioned in Section 1, sees people's lives as following a narrative structure, that is to say, they comprise "an unfolding, structured sequence of actions, events, thoughts, and feelings" (*ibid.*, 4, 13). A feature of narrative is that it captures the way things matter to people, and emotions are central to understanding people's relation to things in their lives. Goldie calls this the "emotional import" which reveals the meaningfulness of a situation, place, person or thing to a person's life. Echoing Taylor, one's personal narrative and identity thus reflects what is meaningful to a person.

A similar view is advocated by Ronald de Sousa, who develops a perceptual model of emotions. Here, emotions are considered neither cognitive thoughts nor mere appetites and feelings. Rather, De Sousa likens emotions to a kind of perception, in particular in that emotions perceive values: emotions direct our attention to things that are important and valuable for us (1987, xv). This is a more general trend in the philosophy of emotions, which increasingly sees emotions as sources of salience, that is, emotions renders salient different things (Brady 2013, 16). For instance, anger can limit a person's ability to make rational decisions and accept counterevidence, but can open one's eyes to an injustice that is taking place. It follows that emotions are not either positive or

negative, but of a complex makeup, each with its own epistemic benefits and epistemic weaknesses. As such, emotions are mental phenomena that, by directing attention to what matters and is potentially significant or valuable, are essential for guiding action. In perceiving values, however, emotions are not arbitrary or subjective. Emotions are rather held to certain standards of appropriateness, which is why we can, at times, think of a person's emotional response as being appropriate given the circumstances or not. For instance, someone who is laughing and joking whilst breaking up with their partner is usually regarded as acting out of place. These standards of appropriateness are set by what De Souza calls paradigm scenarios: social situations in which the significance of an emotions is first understood and learned. This is where De Souza refers to the "essentially dramatic structure" of emotions: "The key idea is that our emotions are learned rather like a language and that they have an essentially dramatic structure. The names of emotions do not refer to some simple experience; rather, they get their meaning from their relation to a situation type, a kind of original drama that defines the roles, feelings, and reactions characteristic of that emotion" (De Souza 1987, xvi). Therefore, norms of emotional behaviour are set by scenarios with their own appropriate roles, feelings and expressions.

Narrative thus proves a persistent and useful concept; it is central for understanding both identity and emotions. Firstly, Appiah argues that social identities offer narratives that people merge into the personal stories about who they are. Goffman demonstrated incisively how these roles are performed in everyday life. Subsequently, emotions were found to be key in motivating and shaping behaviour in social interaction. These emotions themselves are also scripted and come in structured dramas with roles and feelings that are suitable for a given situation. Therefore, narrative as a concept illuminates how complex processes like identity and emotions function in human lives.

IV. 2. *The inescapable narrative*

The story of narrative is not all positive, however. There are individual and social implications attached to the view of human life as a narrative. It was mentioned in Section 1 that the idea of life as a story finds relatively unproblematic acceptance in common culture. Why does this idea appear to suit the particular cultural moment of our time so well?

Cultural theorist Eva Illouz suggests that narrative is a highly effective mode of organizing the modern self because it speaks to several deeply embedded elements of modern culture. Narrative enables us to succeed at goals that are accepted as paramount in contemporary life, such as self-actualization, sexual liberation, and professional success. This has to do with the form of narrative: narrative allows one to plot their story retrospectively. With a goal in mind, for instance romantic intimacy, a person can find in their past the obstacles as well as the means toward achieving that objective: Why do I have difficulties achieving intimacy? What are the obstacles that hindered me on earlier occasions? In a narrative, "the 'end' of the story initiates the story" (Illouz 2008, 173). Illouz thus argues that the narrative form allows the individual to retroactively construe the reasons and motives for one's successes and failures. Illouz summarizes this mode of thinking as follows:

> Past and present events, spoken or unspoken problems, figures of the past and current relations would now all be connected in a seamless narrative of identity in which the self would seek its lost 'origins,' neuroses, and secret desires. The process of telling the story of one's self would be the process of exercising a new art of personal memory, transforming the past into a ghost that perpetually haunts, structures, and explains the present" (*ibid.*, 46-47).

Illouz is not all optimistic about this feature of modern life. The psychologization of the self expands the realm of what is considered treatable through individual means of medicine and self-help. This benefits a self-help and pharmaceutical industry that banks on finding individual solutions to looming social and structural problems. The recognition, categorization, and institutionalization of mental behaviour, for instance through the DSM, cemented the authority of psychological discourse in public and made "emotional health a new commodity produced, circulated, and recycled" (*ibid.,* 171). The current proliferation of mental health apps and their partnership with business firms is a clear instance of emotional health and industry becoming entangled. Emotional success is thought essential for better work performance and the burden of having a stable mental life is placed on the individual, rather than the workplace conditions themselves.

Besides overt industrial interests, Illouz argues that intertwined with the psychological narrative discourse are motives of self-interest, efficiency and instrumental calculation, all of which make up a routine of 'emotional capitalism' (*ibid.*, 59-60). In narrative, responsibility is placed first and foremost with the individual as the starting point for change. Take a recent study in the United Kingdom showing that professional, middle-class Brits often misidentify their origins as working class (Friedman et al. 2021). In other words, privileged people often frame their experience and life as an upward story. This indicates an internalisation of meritocratic values of hard work and struggle. People thus contribute to the success story of meritocratic capitalism by making their story sound like meritocracy works. The experience of self-authorship is in itself an attempt to attribute control to the self. This experience might be shared by many, or could merely be an 'emotion of authorship' that some people possess while others feel that their life "just happens" (Strawson 2015, 287). Whether

widely shared or not, the idea of being a master of one's narrative creates a significant responsibility that falls on the individual.

Another oversight of the narrative approach has to do with the performativity of emotions. Naming an emotion often causes one to feel that emotion. This active component of naming, known as affect labelling in psychology, actually brings feelings to life and makes one go through the emotion. For instance, realizing and articulating that one is angry can bring about feelings of irritation and spite, even if the reason for the anger has long passed. Emotion requires motion. This means that emotions not only guide our attention, as De Souza and Brady argue, but we also shape our emotions. Moving one's emotions in this way can also be triggered by a broader social current. Sara Ahmed recalls the death of Princess Diana, where feelings of grief in the general public prompted many individuals to feel grief, leading to accusations that such grief was inauthentic (2004, 9).

To take the example of Goffman's interactions, a shortcoming in his illustrations of social encounters is that the feelings of embarrassment seem to come out of nowhere and come to us naturally, from the 'inside out'. For Goffman, when someone fails to enact a social role, that person will somehow immediately feel embarrassed. But clearly this is often not the case. At times feelings of embarrassment only come to us once we recognize, perhaps through the suggestion of a friend, that what occurred was a faux pas. Only then does embarrassment come into play. This is not just a matter of us 'understanding' at a later time that what occurred was embarrassing. More often than not, feelings are complex, fuzzy and contradictory and there is no straightforward emotion that can be distinguished. Naming the emotion compartmentalizes these contradictory feelings and directs one's attention to the emotion label.

Therefore it is naming, articulating and admitting that a situation was embarrassing that makes the embarrassment come to life. The same applies to other emotions, such as fear, anger and envy, in that articulating them has a performative effect. Here too, Illouz warns that there is a danger in trying to stir the emotions too much: "Pianists or social actors who become too intensely aware of themselves and of the rules they use, of their bodily and emotional movements, play their social score awkwardly, without the flow and fluency that distinguish virtuosity from rote learning. In short, mental awareness of one's emotions is not always possible, nor is it always desirable" (Illouz 2008, 207). The undesirability of too much emotional awareness, Illouz suggests, lies in a creeping rationalist assumption that articulating and going 'intelligently' about one's emotions is a superior condition. This assumption, again, corresponds to objectives of regulation and disciplining that boost economic interests.

It is useful in this connection to think of Judith Butler's criticism of Goffman in her seminal essay on gender performativity. Butler argues that, in the case of gender, it is more accurate to think of gender as an 'act' rather than a 'role' (1988, 528). This adjustment underlines her central claim that in performing one's gender, one materializes and brings gender identity to life. Gender is performatively produced through behaviour. This criticism does not seem entirely fair to Goffman though since, as noted above, he does indeed emphasize that identities are not material possessions but exist by way of our conduct. What Butler is concerned about, however, in a way that Goffman is not, are the unconscious processes at work in performativity. The valuable lesson to be taken from Butler is that identities (and emotions) do not simply occur but are shaped by social and cultural processes.

We can extend Butler's criticism of Goffman to morality. In as much as emotions for Goffman seem to have no historical or

social precedent, neither do they have a moral one. The feelings of embarrassment lack a moral context in which the Goffmanian individual is situated. This weakness is the reason why Alasdair MacIntyre, who is perhaps the foremost proponent of the narrative approach, strongly rejects Goffman's ideas: "The unit of analysis in Goffman's accounts is always the individual role-player striving to effect his will within a role-structured situation. The goal of the Goffmanesque role-player is effectiveness and success in Goffman's social universe is nothing but what passes for success." (2007, 115). MacIntyre's complaint is part of a broader critique of the modern, liberal self. The liberal self is typically neutral, rational, and unencumbered. For MacIntyre – who is often classed as communitarian, but ironically so against his will (*ibid.*, xiv) – the self which lacks moral orientation toward the common good is unable to live in accordance with human virtues. The liberal self thus resorts to instrumental and calculating conduct, doing "nothing but what passes for success." The broader implication of the liberal self-orientation is that society as a whole lacks directedness towards a common good, leading instead to market-driven instrumentalization, efficiency-based policies, and social fragmentation. Illouz and MacIntyre are both critics of a neoliberal mode of existence where morality has been replaced by markets. The detrimental role that narratives have in entrenching this mode should be at the forefront of any critical effort.

The relevance of these considerations for social identities is that they bring out a crucial dilemma in Appiah and Goffman's theories. On the one hand, Appiah's account of scripts suggests that social identities provide certain ready-made roles and performances and narratives that the individual can enact. The same is true for the established social roles discussed by Goffman. In this sense, social identities relieve the individual of having to create their own impressions at all times and means that both performer and audience can rely on certain normative expectations

that come with different roles. The risks attached to this function of identities, primarily stereotyping, essentialism, and tribalism, were discussed earlier. On the other hand, the notion of scripts is connected to a narrative account of identity that comes with its own vulnerabilities. The individual acting out various roles carries the burden of being authentic, creative, and narratively coherent and stable. It is not by chance that the actor here is conceived as an artist and life as a work of art (Appiah 2005, 107; see also Taylor 1991, 61). The creativity that is required when life is a story that each individual tells about themselves generates a responsibility on the individual that is possibly outsized. Appiah therefore rightly rejects the life-as-art metaphor because we do not simply make up any self we choose. This shows what kind of dilemma the theatrical metaphor poses to identity: it illuminates many aspects of social behaviour, but at the same time overlooks the historically and morally situated self.

The concept of narrative, therefore, needs to be critically approached in so far as it functions to cast an odious neoliberal mindset deeper into our lives. Questions need to be addressed such as: What kinds of narratives do people tell about themselves and about society, and what do the particular narratives say about the modern self? What is the structure of these various narratives? Are there societal and industrial pressures insisting on people to conceive of their life as a narrative and to improve upon it, and why? Who gains from an increasingly lucrative narrative industry, and who are the ones that lose out? Answering these questions will help create a more critical understanding of the role of narrative in our time and to distinguish both the beneficial effects it has as well as its adverse features.

Conclusion

This paper explored Appiah's idea that social identities function as scripts in people's everyday lives. Identities do this, Appiah suggests, by shaping how we are labelled, how we behave, and how we are treated. To get a more concrete idea of how identities function as scripts, Goffman's theory of dramaturgy was introduced. There are striking similarities between the ideas of Appiah and Goffman: both emphasize that social identities create normative expectations, that there is a moral right to recognition, and how identities are not material possessions but rather conducts and behaviours enacted by the individual in their everyday life. Goffman's work contributes the metaphor of theatre which illuminates how established social roles, similar to Appiah's scripts, create understanding and expectations as people try to manage their performance in social encounters.

The central motivation for people to be understood in the way they present themselves is to avoid embarrassment. By considering the emotion of embarrassment, Goffman adds a crucial element to the analysis of social identities. It was argued that taking into account the emotions contributes to debates in recognition theory and that other emotions, besides embarrassment, need to be explored. A drawback of Goffman's analysis is that a person's feelings of embarrassment appear to come out of nowhere. There are cultural, historical and moral factors that shape and delineate embarrassment. These factors are absent in Goffman but need accounting for.

Throughout the paper, narrative proved to be a central concept. Narrative is pivotal in any theatrical account of identity and many contemporary theorists place narrative at the heart of understanding both identity and emotions. For Appiah, the concept has a twofold function: social identities provide narratives that are incorporated into the narrative of the individual.

Meanwhile, philosophers of emotion increasingly also view emotions as tied to narrative, providing roles, feelings and expressions that circumscribe the appropriateness of specific emotions. Narrative as a concept thus carries a lot of weight and its connecting function between both identity and emotion warrants further exploration. At the same time, the final section of the paper pointed toward the adverse features of narrative that function to promote motives of self-interest, efficiency and instrumental calculation. The widespread public acceptance and popularity of the idea of narrative therefore has to be examined as a cultural phenomenon specific to modern society. Where narrative obscures or neglects structural problems, the story needs investigating.

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