SYMPOSIUM

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.

Massachusetts Institute of Technology

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