

SYMPOSIUM
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THE BULLSHIT THAT BINDS
REFLECTIONS ON KWAME ANTHONY APPIAH'S
THE LIES THAT BIND, RETHINKING IDENTITY

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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.

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 Englishman but an Anglophile. Someone who loves England but whose roots prevent him 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 where 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 identity 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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