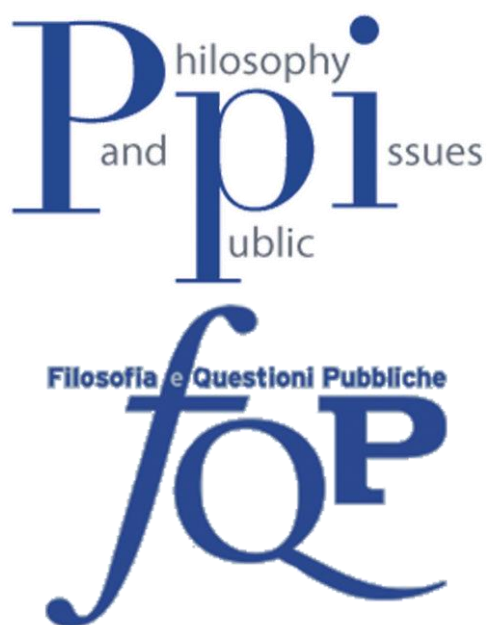


IDENTITY AND LIBERAL POLITICS



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 ethnonationalists 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/>

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 I 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 Spanish²⁷ – 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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