

## Philos 117AC, Fall 2017

Main texts:

Kwame Anthony Appiah, "Race, Culture, Identity: Misunderstood Connections"  
Tommie Shelby, *We Who are Dark*, Ch. 6 "Social Identity and Group Solidarity"

### Ascription and Identification:

In some cases:

- A. It is more a matter of free, deliberate choice whether one *identifies* as a K: views oneself as a person of kind K, views it as appropriate to X, or X's accordingly.
- B. There is no basis for *ascribing* K to one—to count or label one as a K— independent of one's viewing oneself as a K.

For example, the "garçon de café." He chose that line of work, and if he never chose it, no one will say to him, "You're a garçon; act like one!"

In other cases:

- A. It is less a matter of choice whether one views oneself as a K, views it as appropriate to X, or X's accordingly.
- B. There is a basis, B, for counting someone as a K, independently of their viewing themselves this way or acting accordingly.
  - For example, race. And also "all the major forms of identification that are central to contemporary identity politics: female and male; gay, lesbian, and straight; black, white, yellow, red, and brown; Jewish-, Italian-, Japanese-, and Korean-American." "I don't recall ever choosing to identify as a male; but being male has shaped many of my plans and actions."
  - "In fact, where my ascriptive identity is one on which almost all my fellow citizens agree, I am likely to have little sense of choice about whether the identity is mine"
  - "If, on the other hand, I fall into the class of those for whom the consensus on ascription is not clear—as among contemporary so-called biracials, or bisexuals...—I may have a sense of identity options"

Sometimes Appiah seems to suggest that in order to avoid *identifying as a K* one must *conceal that one has the basis B for being ascribed as a K*.

- "Thus if I am among those (like the unhappily labeled "straight-acting gay men," or most American Jews) who are able, if they choose, to escape ascription, I may choose not to take up a gay or a Jewish identity; though this will require concealing facts about myself or my ancestry from others."

But it's not clear why this should be. (Granted, if others don't count you as a K, then they won't expect that you will therefore identify as a K, and you don't need to fear that you'll disappoint their expectations. But there's no problem if you don't care about disappointing their expectations.)

### *Appiah's ambivalence:*

Suppose that, historically, people belonging to K have been viewed as inferior, treated unjustly. One way of opposing this, of bolstering one's respect for oneself and other Ks, of demanding respect from non-Ks, is to view being a K not as something to be ashamed of, but something to be embraced and celebrated.

- "These old restrictions suggested life scripts for the bearers of these identities, but they were negative ones. In order to construct a life with dignity, it seems natural to take the collective identity and construct positive life scripts instead."

Compare how "queer pride" disarmed the derogatory epithet.

Appiah is sympathetic. But still he worries that this dynamic may make it the case that in order to resist racism, for example, one will have to view oneself as black, embrace a view about how blacks are supposed to act, and act accordingly. And this may be limiting, a kind of unfreedom.

- "What demanding respect for people as blacks or as gays requires is that there be some scripts that go with being an African-American or having same-sex desires. There will be proper ways of being black and gay: there will be expectations to be met; demands will be made. It is at this point that someone who takes autonomy seriously will want to ask whether we have not replaced one kind of tyranny with

another.”

Again, Appiah *is* sympathetic!

- “If I had to choose between Uncle Tom and Black Power, I would, of course, choose the latter.”

But still he thinks that this comes at a price.

### **A duty of solidarity?**

Appiah’s complaint, that the pressure to “follow the script” objectionably limits freedom, seems weaker if people have a *duty* to follow the script. (Compare: It’s not an objectionable limit on my freedom that I have to keep my promises.)

As Shelby points out, it is often claimed (typically by other blacks) that blacks do have a duty to follow the script, to embrace a *thick* black identity. Again the example is of African-Americans, but the phenomenon applies more broadly.

*Thin conception of black identity:*

- Thin blackness makes one vulnerable to antiblack racism.
- Little choice about thin blackness. Even someone who “passes” is still thinly black.

*Thick conceptions of black identity:*

Racialist, Ethnic, Nationality, Cultural, Kinship

*Is there a duty to embrace a thick identity?*

First, it is claimed that blacks have a duty to solidarity with one another in combatting racial injustice. This comes in two varieties:

1. *Classical nationalism:* Blacks have a distinctive national identity, should realize self-determination as a people (Du Bois).
2. *Pragmatic nationalism:* Black solidarity is just a means for pursuing racial justice.
  - a. Are blacks *obligated* to commit to PN? This might be so, if black solidarity is a necessary means to racial justice. *Everyone* is obligated, whether or not they choose to be, to take the *necessary means* to racial justice. But Shelby leaves open whether black solidarity is necessary for racial justice
  - b. At very least, Shelby suggests, if someone *chooses* to commit herself to PN, then she has obligations of solidarity.

Then the question is what is necessary for black solidarity. Classical nationalism and some forms of pragmatic nationalism insist on:

*Collective identity theory:* a shared, *thick* black identity is a necessary and effective means to black solidarity.

It’s clear why CN insists on CIT. But why would PN insist on CIT? Because thick identity motivates, fosters trust, etc. it is a *necessary means* to pursuing racial equality through black solidarity.

Shelby argues that blacks should reject a PN that requires CIT. This is because CIT is:

- a. Limits personal freedom: Appiah’s point
- b. Unnecessary: compare loyalty among union members
- c. Leads to conflict and so can be self-defeating: arguments over what belongs to the culture; disagreements along lines of class, gender, age. Compare: If our aim is to stop witch-hunts, is it a good idea to get bogged down in arguments about who is an “authentic” witch?

Instead, all that is necessary for PN is:

- i. a common experience of antiblack racism as *thinly* black
- ii. a commitment to bringing it to an end.