

*Wer bin ich? Der oder jener?
Bin ich denn heute dieser und morgen ein anderer?*

Who am I? This one or that one?
Am I then this one today and tomorrow another?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "Wer bin ich?"
(1945)

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Introduction



Over the years and around the world, taxi drivers, putting their expertise to the test, have sized me up. In São Paulo, I've been taken for a Brazilian and addressed in Portuguese; in Cape Town, I've been taken for a "Colored" person; in Rome, for an Ethiopian; and one London cabbie refused to believe I didn't speak Hindi. The Parisian who thought I was from Belgium perhaps took me for a Maghrebi; and, wearing a caftan, I've faded into a crowd in Tangiers. Puzzled by the combination of my accent and my appearance, once our ride is under way, taxi drivers in the United States and the United Kingdom regularly ask me where I was born. "In London," I tell them, but that's not what they really want to know. What they mean to ask is where my family came from *originally*. Or, more bluntly: what are you?

The answer to the question of origins—the *where* question if not the *what* question—is that I come from two families in two places pretty far apart. By the time I was born, my mother had lived in London off and on since her childhood, but her real home was far away—in atmosphere, if not in distance—on the edge of the Cotswold Hills, where she had grown up on a farm in a tiny village on the border of Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire. Her grandfather had a genealogist trace his ancestry back through eighteen generations of his forefathers to a Norman knight in the early thirteenth century who lived

less than twenty miles from the place where my mother was born some seven hundred years later.

As a result, while my mother was, in a sense, a Londoner when I was born, she was at heart a countrywoman who just happened to work in London . . . though she had spent a fair amount of time living abroad during and after the Second World War, in Russia, Iran, and Switzerland. Not surprisingly, perhaps, given her international experiences, she found a job at an organization in London that was working for racial harmony in Britain and its empire, largely by supporting colonial students. It was called Racial Unity. That was how she met my father, a law student from the Gold Coast. He was an anti-colonial activist, the president of the West African Students' Union, and a representative in Britain of Dr. Kwame Nkrumah, who was to lead Ghana to independence in 1957, just a few years after I was born. You might say she practiced what she preached.

The other side of my family, then, came from Ghana: more precisely from Asante, a region in the heart of the modern Republic of Ghana. My father's lineage, as he taught us, could be traced back to Akroma-Ampim, an eighteenth-century general whose successes in battle had won him the right to a great tract of land on the kingdom's edge. He was a member of the military aristocracy that created the Asante Empire, which dominated the region for two centuries; and his name is one of the names my parents gave me. My father raised us with stories of his family. In a sense, though, it wasn't really *our* family. Just as my mother's people, being patrilineal, thought you belonged to your father's family, my father's, being matrilineal, thought you belonged to your mother's. I could have told those taxi drivers I had no family at all.

This book is full of family stories because I want to explore the ways in which narratives like these shape our sense of who we are. Each person's sense of self is bound to be shaped by his or her own background, beginning with family but spreading out in many directions—to nationality, which binds us to places; to gender, which

connects each of us with roughly half the species; and to such categories as class, sexuality, race, and religion, which all transcend our local affiliations.

I've set myself the task in this book of discussing some of the ideas that have shaped the modern rise of identity and trying to see some of the mistakes we regularly make about identities more clearly. Philosophers contribute to public discussions of moral and political life, I believe, not by telling you what to think but by providing an assortment of concepts and theories you can use to decide what to think for yourself. I will make lots of claims; but however forceful my language, remember always that they are offered up for your consideration, in the light of your own knowledge and experience. I'm hoping to start conversations, not to end them.

What I won't offer is an explanation of why identity talk has exploded through my lifetime—a fascinating question, but one for intellectual and social historians. Instead, I'm going to take the modern prevalence of ideas about identities as a given but challenge some of our assumptions about them. I aim to persuade you that much of our contemporary thinking about identity is shaped by pictures that are in various ways unhelpful or just plain wrong. Getting to pictures that are more helpful and closer to the truth won't *settle* any political questions. But I think it can make our discussions more productive, more reasonable, even, perhaps, a little less antagonistic. That, at any rate, is my hope. Sensible discussions about matters that profoundly engage our passions are essential if we are to live together in concord.

For much of my adult life, three features have mattered most when I meet someone for the first time: I am a man, I am not white, and I speak what used to be called the Queen's English. These are matters of gender, race, class, and nation. It is a natural enough thought nowadays that these are all characteristics of the same general kind. They are, as we now say, matters of identity. And we all assume that

identities like these will shape not just other people's responses to me but also my thoughts about my own life.

Five of the chapters that follow are focused on one species of identity: creed, country, color, class, and culture. But it will help to say something right at the start about the most obvious of the questions raised by this disparate list; namely, what on earth do they all have in common? How, in short, do identities come into being? My own thinking about these matters has led me over the years to an answer that has guided me in the explorations that follow. It is one philosopher's answer to a double question: what are identities and why do they matter? That will be the task of the first chapter—to explore the manifestations, the mechanisms, and the motives of the multiple systems of classification human beings employ.

Some collective identities being highly situational, “we” in this book typically means my readers and I, all of us connected in some way with patterns of ideas to be found among educated people in every continent. For the intellectual temptations I am trying to combat are temptations I have experienced regularly myself. Because I imagine readers in many places, I have sometimes explained what some of them will already know: what “confirmation” is to an Anglican, who a Hindu god is, what “Sunnah” means to Muslims. In a book about a wide range of identities, it's natural to expect a wide range of fellow readers, who will have different experiences and be knowledgeable about different things.

My main message about the five forms of identity that take us from Chapter Two to Chapter Six is, in effect, that we are living with the legacies of ways of thinking that took their modern shape in the nineteenth century, and that it is high time to subject them to the best thinking of the twenty-first. The European and American intellectuals who founded modern anthropology in the later nineteenth century tended to think of religion as centrally about the things we believe; and that idea has percolated into the general culture. But I'm going to argue that at the heart of religious life across space and time

are matters other than creed. And, once you see that creeds are not so central, you'll also have to accept that scriptures—as sources of belief—matter less than many people think.

When it comes to modern states, shaped by a form of nationalism that also arose through the nineteenth century, law and common sense suggest that peoples have a right to determine their own fates. We speak of self-determination and autonomy, about independence and freedom. But, as I'll argue, there's something wrong with our models here, too, starting with the answers we've given to a fundamental question: what makes a bunch of people into a nation?

Race has been a source of trouble in human affairs since the contours of the modern ways of thinking about it became dimly visible in the rise of new scientific ideas about human beings as parts of the natural world. These ideas grew explosively in the nineteenth century, as did the cultural authority of biology, the new science of life. Much of the elaborate scientific superstructure that grew up around race was dismantled in the past century, as anthropologists and biologists worked out the implications of Darwin's and Mendel's ideas, and discovery upon discovery was made in evolutionary theory, population biology, and genetics. But the world outside the sciences hasn't taken much notice. Too many of us remain captive to a perilous cartography of color.

The issue with class, which I discuss in Chapter Five, is not so much that we have a picture of it that is mistaken as that we operate with a set of pictures that is incoherent and inconsistent. And the most influential solution we've devised to the problems posed by class may, like the leeching and cupping of eighteenth-century physicians, worsen the condition it means to remedy.

I won't try to summarize the multiple mistakes we make about our broader cultural identities, not least the very idea of the West. So let me just say here that they're manifest in the temptation to imagine that people's origins make them either inheritors of, or outsiders to, Western civilization.

Throughout the book we'll see how gender—which must be the oldest form of human identity—subtends and shares the problems of other identities. Thinking more clearly about gender, the project of feminist philosophy for more than a generation, helps us think about other identities. That's why gender is central to the first chapter, which lays out some of the general picture of identity I rely on. But every identity has its own distinctive misconceptions.

In each of my five test cases, we fall into an error I'll describe in the first chapter: of supposing that at the core of each identity there is some deep similarity that binds people of that identity together. Not true, I say; not true over and over again. How plausible I can make this thought will depend upon arguments, but also upon details and upon the scores of stories that illustrate my claims. There's no dispensing with identities, but we need to understand them better if we can hope to reconfigure them, and free ourselves from mistakes about them that are often a couple of hundred years old. Much of what is dangerous about them has to do with the way identities—religion, nation, race, class, and culture—divide us and set us against one another. They can be the enemies of human solidarity, the sources of war, horsemen of a score of apocalypses from apartheid to genocide. Yet these errors are also 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.

ONE



CLASSIFICATION

Why am I me?

Stendhal,
Le rouge et le noir (1830)

TALKING IDENTITY

Until the middle of the twentieth century, no one who was asked about a person's identity would have mentioned race, sex, class, nationality, region, or religion. When George Eliot writes in *Middlemarch* that Rosamond "was almost losing the sense of her identity," it's because Rosamond is faced with profoundly new experiences when she learns that Will Ladislaw, the man she thinks she loves, is hopelessly devoted to someone else.¹ Identity here is utterly particular and personal. The identities we think of today, on the other hand, are shared, often, with millions or billions of others. They are social.

One looks in vain for talk of such identities in the social science of the early twentieth century. In *Mind, Self, and Society*, published in 1934, George Herbert Mead outlined an influential theory of the self as the product of an "I" responding to the social demands of others, which, once internalized, formed what he called the "me." But in that great classic of early twentieth-century social thought, you'll never find the word "identity" used in our modern sense. Talk of identity really takes off in developmental psychology after the Second World War, with the influential work of the psychologist Erik Erikson. In his first book, *Childhood and Society*, published in 1950, he uses the term in more than one way; crucially, though, he recognizes the importance of social roles and group memberships in shaping one's sense of self, which he called, in psychoanalytic language, an "ego identity." Later on, Erikson explored the crises of identity in the lives of Martin Luther and Mahatma Gandhi, and published books with titles like

Identity and the Life Cycle (1959), *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (1968), and *Dimensions of a New Identity* (1974).

Erikson, who grew up in southwest Germany, told a tale of his own origins that sits right at the heart of our contemporary notions.

My stepfather was the only professional man (and a highly respected one) in an intensely Jewish small bourgeois family, while I (coming from a racially mixed Scandinavian background) was blond and blue-eyed, and grew flagrantly tall. Before long, then, I acquired the nickname “goy” in my stepfather’s temple; while to my schoolmates, I was a “Jew.”

I’m guessing that, while his Jewish confreres did use the Yiddish word for a gentile, those German kids didn’t always use a word as polite as “Jew.” His biological father had been a Dane named Salomonsen; his adopted father’s name was Homburger. But at some point he took the last name of Erikson, which, as his daughter once observed drily, suggested that he was father to himself. In a sense, then, he was his own creation.² Identity, we can surely conclude, was a fraught issue for him personally.

In his first book, Erikson offered a theory as to why, as he put it, “we”—and given our subject, it’s worth noticing that he seems to mean “we Americans”—“began to conceptualize questions of identity.” He thought that identity had become a problem in the United States because the country was “trying to make a super-identity out of all the identities imported by its constituent immigrants”; and, he continued, “we do so at a time when rapidly increasing mechanization threatens these essentially agrarian and patrician identities in their lands of origin.”³ It’s a good story. But I do not believe it. As we shall see throughout this book, identity, in our sense, was a problem long before we began to talk about it in this modern way.

If Erikson, weaving between personal and collective forms of iden-

tity, gave the term broad currency, the influential American sociologist Alvin W. Gouldner was among the first to offer a detailed definition of social identity as such. "It seems that what is meant by a 'position' is the social identity which has been assigned to a person by members of his group," he wrote in a 1957 essay. And he proposed an account of what this means, practically, in social life. First, he thought, people "observe or impute to a person certain characteristics," which allows them to "answer the question 'Who is he?'" Next, "these observed or imputed characteristics are . . . interpreted in terms of a set of culturally prescribed *categories*."

In this manner the individual is "pigeonholed"; that is, he is held to be a certain "type" of person, a teacher, Negro, boy, man, or woman. The process by which the individual is classified by others in his group, in terms of the culturally prescribed categories, can be called the assignment of a "social identity." The types or categories to which he has been assigned *are* his social identities. . . . Corresponding to different social identities are differing sets of expectations, differing configurations of rights and obligations.⁴

As you'll see, I think that Gouldner got a lot right.

Appeals to identity swelled through the sixties and, by the end of the seventies, many societies had political movements grounded in gender and sexuality, race, religion, and ethnicity (even as class politics frequently receded into the background). In more than a few places, regionally based movements that sought to undo often long-established states spoke the language of national identity. In Europe alone, there's Scottish, Welsh, Catalan, Basque, Padanian, and Flemish nationalism; near the end of the twentieth century, Yugoslavia collapsed into a collection of distinct countries; there are rumblings in Brittany, Corsica, and Normandy . . . and that's far from a complete list.

A LITTLE THEORY

I have been writing and ruminating on questions of identity for more than three decades now. My theoretical thinking about identity began, actually, with thoughts about race, because I was genuinely puzzled by the different ways in which people in different places responded to my appearance. That wasn't so much the case in Asante, where, so it seemed to me, one local parent was usually enough to belong. Jerry Rawlings, Ghana's head of state from 1981 to 2001, had a father from Scotland; he wasn't chosen by the people originally—he came to power twice through coups d'état—but his fellow countrymen eventually elected him to the presidency twice. Unlike my three sisters, born, like my father, in Asante, I have never been a Ghanaian citizen. I was born in England, before Ghana's independence, with an English mother, and showed up in Asante at the age of one. So I'd have had to apply for Ghanaian citizenship, and my parents never applied for me. By the time it was up to me, I was used to being a Ghanaian with a British passport. My father, as president of the Ghana Bar Association, was once involved in writing one of our many constitutions. "Why don't you change the rules, so that I can be both Ghanaian and British?" I asked him. "Citizenship," he told me, "is unitary." I could see I wasn't going to get anywhere with him! But, despite my lack of that legal connection, sometimes, when I do something noteworthy, I am claimed, at least by some, for the place that is home to half my ancestry.

The story in England was complex, too. In my grandmother's village, Minchinhampton, in Gloucestershire, where I spent much time in my childhood, those we knew never appeared to doubt our right to be there. My aunt and uncle lived in this picturesque market town in the West of England, too. My aunt had been born there. My grandfa-

ther had spent time as a child at a house in the valley, which belonged to his uncle, whose mill had once woven cloth for the tunics of British soldiers and green baize for billiard tables. My great-grandfather, Alfred Cripps, had briefly served as the member of parliament for Stroud, a few miles to the north, and *his* great-grandfather, Joseph Cripps, had represented Cirencester, a few more miles east, for much of the first half of the nineteenth century. And there were Crippses in that area—some buried in Cirencester churchyard—dating back to the seventeenth century.

But the skins and the African ancestry I shared with my sisters marked us out as different, in ways we weren't always conscious of. I recall going to a sports day, a few decades ago, at a school in Dorset I'd attended as a preteen, and coming upon an elderly man who had been headmaster in my day. "You won't remember me," I apologized, as I introduced myself to him. Hearing my name, he brightened and took my hand warmly. "Of course I remember you," he said. "You were our first colored head boy." When I was young, the idea that you could be properly English and not white seemed fairly uncommon. Even in the first decade of the twenty-first century, I remember the puzzled response of an older Englishwoman who had just heard a paper on race I gave at the Aristotelian Society in London. She just didn't understand how I could really be English. And no talk of thirteenth-century ancestors in Oxfordshire could persuade her!

In America, once I got there, things seemed at first relatively simple. I had an African father and so, like President Obama later, I was black. But the story here, too, is complicated . . . and has changed over the years, in part because of the rise of the idea of mixed-race people as an identity group. Color and citizenship, however, were quite separate matters: after the Civil War no sensible person doubted you could be black and American, at least so far as the law was concerned, despite a persistent undercurrent of white racial nationalism. I'll say more about the ideas of race that shaped these experiences later, but I

hope it's clear why I might have ended up puzzled about how to make sense of them.

When I turned, over the years, to thinking about nationality and class and culture and religion as sources of identity, and added in gender and sexual orientation, I began to see three ways in which these very disparate ways of grouping people do have some important things in common.

LABELS AND WHY THEY MATTER

The first is obvious: every identity comes with labels, so understanding identities requires first that you have some idea about how to apply them. Explaining to someone what Ewes or Jains or *kothis* are begins with some suggestion as to what it is about people that makes each label appropriate for them. That way, you could look for someone of that identity, or try to decide, of someone you'd met, whether the label applied.

So, the label "Ewe" (usually pronounced eh-vey or eh-wey) is an ethnic label, what social scientists call an "ethnonym"; which means that if your parents are both Ewe, you're Ewe, too. It applies, in the first place, to people who speak one of the many dialects of a language that is called "Ewe," most of whom live in Ghana or Togo, though there are some in many other parts of West Africa and, increasingly, around the world. As is typical of ethnic labels, there can be arguments about whether it applies to someone. If only one of your parents is Ewe and you never learned any of the many dialects of the Ewe language, are you Ewe? Does it matter (given that the Ewe are patrilineal) if the parent was your mother rather than your father? And, since Ewe belongs to a larger group of languages (usually called "Gbe" because that's the word for language in all of them) that shade off into one another, it's not easy to say exactly where the boundaries between Ewe people and

other Gbe-speaking people lie. (Imagine looking for the boundaries of Southern speech in America or a cockney accent in London and you'll grasp the difficulty.) Nevertheless, large numbers of people in Ghana and Togo will claim that they're Ewe and many of their neighbors will agree.

That's because of the second important thing identities share: they matter to people. And they matter, first, because having an identity can give you a sense of how you fit into the social world. Every identity makes it possible, that is, for you to speak as one "I" among some "us": to belong to some "we." But a further crucial aspect of what identities offer is that they give you reasons for doing things. That's true about being a Jain, which means you belong to a particular Indian religious tradition. Most Jains are the children of two Jains (just as most Ewes are the children of two Ewes), but there's much more to it than that. And anyone can join who is willing to follow the path set by the *jinas*, souls who have been liberated by conquering their passions and can spend a blissful eternity at the summit of the universe. Jains are typically expected to heed five *vratas*, which are vows or forms of devotion. These are: nonviolence, not lying, not stealing, chastity, and nonpossessiveness. (Like taboos, which are also central to many identities, the *vratas* define who you are by *what* as well as *who* you are *not*. There's a lot of "Thou shalt not's" in the Ten Commandments, too.)⁵

The detailed content of each of these ideals depends, among other things, on whether you are a layperson on the one hand, or a monk or nun on the other. The general point, though, is that 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." They do that, in part, because they know they live in a world where not everyone is a Jain, and that other people with other religions may have different ideas about how to behave.

Though there are Ewe religious traditions (lots of different ones), being Ewe isn't, by contrast, a religious identity, and doesn't come

with the same sort of specified ethical codes. Ewes can be Muslim, Protestant, or Catholic, and many practice the traditional rites that go by the name of voodoo. (Like the Haitians, they borrowed this word from the Fon peoples, who are their neighbors. It means “spirit.”) But, all the same, Ewe people sometimes say to themselves, “As an Ewe, I should . . .” and go on to specify something they believe they should do or refrain from doing. They do things, in short, because they are Ewe. And this, too, depends, in part, on their recognition that not everyone is Ewe, and that non-Ewes may well behave differently.

People who give reasons like these—“Because I’m a this, I should do that”—are not just accepting the fact that the label applies to them; they are giving what a philosopher would call “normative significance” to their membership in that group. They’re saying that the identity matters for practical life: for their emotions and their deeds. 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.

But just as there’s usually contest or conflict about the boundaries of the group, about who’s in and who’s out, there’s almost always disagreement about what normative significance an identity has. How much can one Ewe or one Jain legitimately ask of another? Does being Ewe mean you ought to teach the Ewe language to your children? Most Jains think that their religion requires them to be vegetarian, but not all agree that you must also avoid milk products. And so on. While each Ewe or each Jain will have done things because of their identity, they won’t always do the same things. Still, because these identities sometimes help them answer the question “What should I do?” they’re important in shaping their everyday lives.

One further reason that’s true is the third feature all identities share: not only does your identity give *you* reasons to do things, it can give others reasons to do things *to* you. I’ve already mentioned

something people can do to you because of your identity: they can help you just because you share an identity with them. But among the most significant things people do with identities is use them as the basis of hierarchies of status and respect and of structures of power. Caste in South Asia means some people are born into a higher status than others—as Brahmins, for example. These are members of the priestly caste, who are “polluted” by contact with members of castes that are regarded as lower. In many places in the world one ethnic or racial group regards its members as superior to others, and assumes the right to better treatment. The English poet Shelley, in “Ozymandias,” refers to the “frown / and wrinkled lip and sneer of cold command” on the stone face of the sculpture of a long-dead Pharaoh. The royal ancestry of this “king of kings” would have meant that he was used to obedience. Dominant identities can mean that people will treat you as a source of authority; subordinate identities can mean you and your interests will be trampled upon or ignored.

And so an important form of struggle over identity occurs when people challenge the assumptions that lead to unequal distributions of power. The world is full of burdensome identities, whose price is that other people treat you with disrespect. *Kothis* in India know this very well. They are people who, though assigned a male identity at birth, themselves identify as feminine, and experience erotic attraction to men who are more typically masculine. And *kothis* have been subjected over the years to insult and abuse, and to rejection by their families; many of them have been forced by their marginal position into sex work. In recent years, emerging ideas about gender and sexuality—about homosexuality, intersexuality, and transgender identity, and about the complexity of the connection between biological sex and human behavior—have created movements that seek to alleviate the social exclusion of people whose gender and sexuality fall outside traditional norms. The Indian Supreme Court has even declared that individuals are entitled to be recognized as male, female, or third-gender, as they themselves decide.