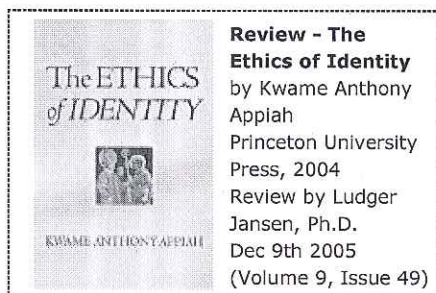




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## PHILOSOPHY



**Review - The Ethics of Identity**  
 by Kwame Anthony Appiah  
 Princeton University Press, 2004  
 Review by Ludger Jansen, Ph.D.  
 Dec 9th 2005  
 (Volume 9, Issue 49)

Individualism is part and parcel of classical liberalism. It is the individual that matters morally, and it is the individual for which liberalists postulate the right of an autonomous choice of its own way of life. But how does this connect to the fact that humans depend on others for both their physical and psychic survival? How does it connect to the fact that we pick our choices mainly from the role models that are available in society? Such are the questions that are discussed in *Ethics of Identity*.

With this book, Princeton philosopher Appiah presents an abundance of information and good arguments for anyone who wants to get to know the field. Though densely argued, the book has also a narrative side. As a part-time author of crime-novels, Appiah knows how to tell a story, and he efficiently uses narration to get across his points. On many occasions Appiah's own family history provides illustrations for the phenomena he is discussing. Born in England to an English mother and an Asante father and raised in Ghana, Appiah graduated in Cambridge/England and has since taught Philosophy at a number of renowned American universities.

The book even starts off with a narration. Appiah begins by narrating the life of John Stuart Mill, who at the same time is the arch-defender of liberty and, through his own biography, conscious of the importance of a

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person's identity for a good life. But even personal identity involves social aspects, or so Appiah argues: "To value individuality properly just *is* to

acknowledge the dependence of the good for each of us on relationships with others. Without these bonds we could not come to be free selves, not least because we could not come to be selves at all." (21)

A collective identity is defined by Appiah as "the collective dimensions of our individual identities" -- and these collective dimensions of our individual identities "are responses to something outside our selves", "they are the products of histories" (21). They all provide "what Ian Hacking has dubbed *kinds of person*: men, gay, Americans, Catholics, but also butlers, hairdressers, and philosophers" (65). What we make use of when we construct our own personal identity are just these "kinds of person available in one's society" (21): those notions that "provide loose norms or models, which play a role in shaping our plans of life" (22). Therefore, collective identities, in Appiah's eyes, are "scripts": "narratives that people can use in shaping their projects and in telling their life stories" (22) -- and society is the big "scriptorium" (21) where such notions are created and copied.

Not every collective term represents a social category: "There is no social category of the witty, or the clever, or the charming, or the greedy." Appiah argues that there is "a logical but no social category of the witty", because people who share this property of being witty "do not constitute a social group" (23). But Appiah does not present an account of what is or is not to count as a social group. Thus his argument has a loose end here. Throughout the book Appiah is scarcely interested in groups as such, but rather in the individuals that belong to certain groups and how they see themselves. Sometimes, as in this case, it would have been helpful, had Appiah considered groups as collective entities in their own right.

For Appiah, social categories are connected with social expectations: "Because we have expectations of the butler, it is a recognisable identity" (66). According to Appiah, if "L" denotes a collective identity then L has the following structure: First, there is a term, i.e. "L", available in public discourse for the bearers of this identity. It suffices that there is "a rough overlap in the classes picked out by the term 'L' so there need be no precisely agreed boundaries" (67). Second, this label "L" is internalised by at least some of its bearers. Third, there are "strong narrative dimensions" connected with this label. And fourth, there are "patterns of behavior towards L such that Ls are sometimes *treated as Ls*" (68), both by people who consider themselves as Ls and by others: That someone is an L might be a reason for action, and therefore such collective patterns of identity matter for moral philosophy.

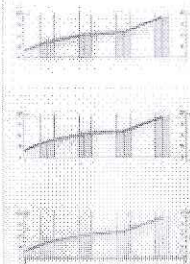
But among political philosophers there is no unanimity "whether autonomy [...] is or ought to be a value in the first place" (40). Is it not just another thing that is being exported from Western modernity? Does not the "talk of self-fashioning, self-direction, self-authorship" reflect "an arrogant insularity" (40)? Is there not "a tension between tolerance and autonomy" (41)? Appiah does not evade these questions. Although the concept of autonomy may stem from Western modernity, or so Appiah argues, the right to choose one's way of life freely is a value for itself, while diversity is of instrumental value only. He does not plead for a "preservationist ethic" (130). If individual autonomous choices will lead to the extinction of certain forms of life, of cultures or languages, then the individuals still have the right to choose their own way of life.

Individuals do not create their "theory of the good" isolated from society. Humans are raised by parents and educated in schools, which may be run or supervised by the state. Public education of the children matters for their individual choices when they are grown up. Now, if it is not possible not to influence children, which influences are to be chosen? Borrowing from Plato the conception of politics as "the art of caring for souls," Appiah calls this educational influencing "soul making" (155). He discusses at length the tensions between soul making and the purported neutrality of the state towards identities, and which kinds of identity may

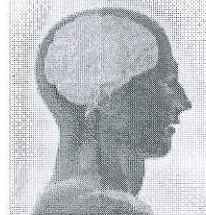
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be justly disfavoured by the state and which may not. According to Appiah, the state may justly disfavour identities like being a terrorist, because this identity threatens the state's very existence.

In his last chapter, Appiah argues for a position he calls "rooted cosmopolitanism" (213). The rooted cosmopolitanist does not deny his roots in his own culture, but he is open-minded with regard to other cultures. Appiah puts it in the slogan that we should seek "conversation, not mere conversion" (264). Within conversation, or so Appiah hopes, we could also convince members of other cultures of the value of human rights: not through conversion to universal principles, but through conversation starting from shared intuitions about particular cases.

The issues Appiah discusses are of philosophical interest and at the same time of political importance. His book is well written and bare of technicalities, but it requires concentrated attention when reading it. I wish, however, that this attention will be given to the book and its argument not only by philosophers but also by social workers, psychologists and politicians -- by all those who care for souls.

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Ludger Jansen, Ph.D. teaches Philosophy at the University of Stuttgart and is a research fellow at the Institute of Formal Ontology and Medical Information Sciences at the University of the Saarland in Saarbrücken.

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