

Ideas of Identity and their Normative Status¹

T. M. Scanlon

Introduction

The term ‘identity’ figures prominently in a wide range of contemporary discussions: in commonplace conversations, in abstract philosophical theories about practical reason, and in partisan political debates. Identity can be invoked simply as an explanatory concept. The way that certain individuals behave is held to be explained by certain facts about them, described as part of their identity.² A person may be said, for example, to behave in a certain way because he is an American male of a certain class and generation.

In some cases, what is held to explain a person’s behavior is not just some fact about that person’s background, described as an aspect of his or her identity, but rather a fact about what the person him or herself sees as part of his or her identity. As Anthony Appiah writes, “Identities give those who have them reasons for action, ... and so people will say to themselves sometimes, ‘Because I am an L, I should do X.’”³ A person’s

¹ A revised version of the Yeoh Tiong Lay Annual Lecture presented at Kings College London on March 27, 2018. I am grateful to Alison Hills, Ulrike Heuer, Joseph Raz, and John Skorupski, my commenters on that occasion, and also to participants in the UCLA Legal Theory Workshop, at the Department of Philosophy at the University of California, Berkeley, and especially to Tommie Shelby and Angela Smith, for comments that have led to significant improvements in the paper.

² For a scientific project carrying out this explanatory strategy, see Bernd Simon, “To be is to do is to be: Collective Identity and Action,” in Sabine Otten, Kai Sassenberg, and Thomas Kessler, eds., *Intergroup Relations: The Role of Motivation and Emotion (A Festschrift for Amelie Mummendey)* (London: Psychology Press, 2009), pp. 223-242.

³ Appiah, *The Ethics of Identity*, pp. 184-185.

conception of his or her identity “as an L” might be appealed to simply as an explanation of that person’s behavior. But I take it from the first part of what Appiah says that he means not just that people sometimes cite forms of identity as reasons for acting in certain ways, but also that when they do this they are sometimes quite correct. Sometimes, because of their identities, people have good reasons for acting that they would not have if their identities were different. I agree with Appiah that what are generally called identities sometimes give those who have them reasons for action. My aim in this lecture, like his, will be to investigate when and why this is the case. I will argue that the forms of identity that give rise to reasons are quite diverse, and I will investigate the normative conditions that are required in order for these reasons to arise. But I believe that this dry exercise in moral anatomy casts helpful light on some current political controversies in which ideas of identity are invoked, and I will explore some of these implications. My first task, however, is one of mapping the relevant moral and normative domain—trying to identify the diverse reasons we have. I may well have overlooked some things, and if so I will gain if you will point them out to me in the discussion.

Appealing to one’s identity as a justification for behaving in a certain way can be evasive. It would be evasive for a man to cite the fact that he is a white, male American of a certain generation as a justification for sexist attitudes that are held by many such people. This would be a version of what Sartre called bad faith.⁴ Appealing to such a fact about oneself as a justification would be bad faith in his sense insofar as it was an attempt

⁴ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, Hazel Barnes, transl., (New York: Washington Square Press, 1956), Chapter Two.

to evade responsibility for holding the attitudes in question. Sartre's example of bad faith was a waiter, who cited his role as a waiter as if it were a fact beyond his control, which provided him with reasons. Recently, a French waiter in Vancouver, British Columbia, who was fired for being rude, was reported to have appealed to the fact that he was a French waiter as a justification for his rudeness.⁵ I don't know whether he had read Sartre, or whether he was assuming that the reporters to whom he offered this justification (or their Canadian readers) would have read Sartre, and thus get the joke, if it was a joke.

When I hear it said of a person who is making some important decision, such as what career to choose, that she "needs to decide who she is," I worry that some evasion of this kind may be involved. This worry would not arise if the suggestion presupposed that the person had sufficient reason to choose either of the options she is considering, and that saying that she needs to decide who she is would then just be a way of saying that she needs to make up her mind what to do. It seems possibly evasive only if the suggestion is that some fact about her identity provides a reason for choosing one alternative rather than the other.

But this need not be evasive. Some facts about a person might play this reason-giving role. Perhaps what the person needs to do is to determine what he or she would enjoy, or what she would be good at. These facts could be good reasons for choosing one career over another (although calling them facts about her "identity" is not, I would say, the clearest way to explain their significance.) But a person making such a choice also needs to decide what is worth doing. The suggestion that what the person needs to

⁵<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/28/world/americas/french-waiter-rude.html>

“decide is who he or she is” would be what Sartre called “bad faith” only if as it was a way of evading the basic normative question of what the person has most reason to do.

My colleague Christine Korsgaard argues that the reasons a person has are determined by that person’s practical identities. The way she understands this avoids form of bad faith in one way. The practical identities she has in mind include such things as being “a human being, a woman or a man, an adherent of a certain religion, a member of an ethnic group, a member of a certain profession, someone’s lover or friend, and so on.”⁶ Appeals to identities of this kind avoid Sartrean bad faith on Korsgaard’s view because in her view facts about particular identities such as careers and professions are not facts about oneself that one simply discovers, but things that one has adopted, or chosen to continue. So a person who appeals to such practical identities as sources of reasons must accept responsibility for these choices.

This way of basing reasons on identities avoids the problem of bad faith as Sartre described it—namely refusing to accept responsibility for one’s identities. But it faces a different difficulty. Many forms of identity of the kind Korsgaard lists provide plausible instances of Appiah’s schema, “Because I am an L, I should do X.” Because I am his thesis adviser, I should read his paper carefully. Because I am her brother, I should go to Cincinnati to visit her while she is ill. Because I am a doctor, I should keep informed about the side effects of medications that I might need to prescribe. But not just any profession or commitment provides reasons in this way. “Because I am a terrorist, I should keep informed about new explosives and detonators” does not seem, by itself, a

⁶ Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 101.

good justification. Rather, it is such a justification only if I have sufficient reason to be a terrorist.⁷

So, as Appiah observes, neither the idea of identity as a fact about oneself that one simply discovers, nor the idea of identity as entirely a matter of choice, is adequate to explain how identities can give rise to reasons.⁸ Something more is required.⁹ In the following sections I will explore the question of what factors can play this role.

Varieties of Identity-Given Reasons

With respect to some identities of the kind just mentioned, such as careers and professions, this question is easy to answer in a very general way. Having a career or profession is a matter of having a large scale intention, or plan of life, which is something that a person can be said to choose, or at least to choose whether or not to continue. As we have seen, a person has reason to do what is required to succeed in her profession, for example, provided that this intention is one that she had sufficient reason to adopt in the first place and sufficient reason not to abandon. This same analysis applies to other forms of chosen identity, such as commitments to a cause.

Not all of the identities on Korsgaard's list are like this, however. The reasons I have to be especially concerned with my family members do not all derive simply from plans or intentions that I have adopted. Relationships of this kind, as I will understand them consist of certain biological relations and associated norms about how individuals

⁷ G. A. Cohen, made a similar point in his comments on Korsgaard's Tanner Lectures. See *The Sources of Normativity*, p. 183.

⁸ Appiah, *The Ethics of Identity*, p. 17.

⁹ Korsgaard argues that the larger Kantian framework of practical reasoning provides an account of these reasons. See *The Sources of Normativity* pp. 255-258, replying to Cohen's objection.

who are related in this way are to treat one another. So understood, these relationships, unlike careers and other commitments, are not something one can choose. A person does not choose to be someone's son, daughter, or cousin, for example.¹⁰ Despite this difference, the reasons one has in virtue of identities such as friendships and family roles, and those one has in virtue of identities such as professions, are alike in depending, albeit in different ways, on reasons supporting the identities in question. Relationships give rise to reasons to behave in the ways that they define only if these relationships are ones worth having, and remaining it. A person does not, for example, have reason to behave in ways required by demeaning relationships, for example, or relationships of domination. This dependence on prior reasons does not render appeals to relationships as sources of reasons illegitimate or pointless. What it does mean is that, as in the case of a profession, *simply* to refer to one's relationship as a reason, as if there were no need for further justification, would be a form of bad faith.

Experiential Reasons

Earlier, I said that a person who "looks inward" to decide who she is might be trying to discover what she would enjoy or find satisfying. Since pleasant experience is something that a person often has reason to seek, such facts about one's experiential reactions might seem to be free standing sources of reasons, without prior normative assumptions. The fact that I like peanut butter, or vegemite, is a reason for me to order a sandwich made with this substance, and for you to have some on hand when you invite

¹⁰ Some of these reasons can be explained in part, but only in part, by the fact that other parties to these relationships have expectations about what I (as someone related to them in this way) will do, expectations that I can have obligations not to disappoint. I discuss duties regarding expectations we create in *What We Owe to Each Other*, Chapter 7.

me over for lunch. Facts about what a person finds erotically arousing also provide reasons to seek interaction of certain kinds.¹¹ But we should not be *too* quick to generalize from such examples. Facts about what I find pleasant provide reasons to seek pleasure of this kind if, but only if, there is no objection to taking pleasure in those things. The fact that I would enjoy torturing someone, or humiliating him, would not be a reason to do this. Claiming that it was such a reason, because it was a fact about my “identity,” would again be a form of bad faith.

It would seem an exaggeration to call a taste for peanut butter a fact about a person’s identity. But it is much more plausible to say this about what a person finds erotically arousing. This is so, I think, for at least two kinds of reasons. The first is the special significance that being erotically aroused has in important personal relations with others.¹² Important forms of sexual relations involve assumptions about the erotic responses of those with whom one is having these relations.¹³ Insofar as this is so, and

¹¹ As Leslie Green says, about sexual responsiveness, “Sexual orientation is a matter of things like one’s sexual arousal cues and fantasies, one’s primary sources of sexual pleasure and, above all one’s capacity for erotic love. These form the unchosen background to one’s erotic life. They are objects neither of choice nor of justification.” Leslie Green, “Sexuality, Authenticity, and Modernity,” *Canadian Journal of Law & Jurisprudence* 8 (1995), pp. 67-82, p. 71. As Green says, reasons based on facts about what one finds pleasurable do not require justification. They are, however, subject to potential objection, as he also notes.

¹² As Green writes, “... the reason that is so is not that a tuna sandwich is no more meaningful than a hamburger, nor that this is the province of brute tastes. It is because the issue—what should I have for lunch—is trivial; it (normally) engages no important human concerns. In contrast, sexuality matters, not because our sexual orientations involve more than feelings, but because we are embodied creatures, sexual animals with a capacity and need for erotic love.” Leslie Green, “Sexuality, Authenticity, and Modernity,” p. 77.

¹³ Thomas Nagel, for example, argued that all non-perverted sexual relations involve taking pleasure in the similar responses of one’s partner or partners. See “Sexual Perversion,” in *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979) pp. 39-52.

one has reason to care about the responses of those with whom one is engaging in sexual relations, representing oneself as being aroused when one is not is deceptive, and hence puts one in an objectionable relation with those whom one is deceiving. It may also involve a failure to be “true to oneself” that one has reason to avoid.

Erotic responsiveness is a form of identity for a further reason when there is widespread disapproval of, and discrimination against, those who have erotic responses of a certain kind.¹⁴ I will discuss reasons that arise from being assigned such an ascriptive identity in a later section. First, I need to consider some other ways in which reasons can arise from being a member of a group.

Identities and Groups

Being a member of a family or a larger cultural group can give one the opportunity, by participating in its practices, to help promote the continuation of a practice or tradition, such as a religion, an artistic tradition, a language, or some other “way of life.” Whether this is a reason to participate in these practices, and how strong a reason it is, will depend on the value of the tradition in question—i.e., on the strength of the reasons for perpetuating that tradition. Whether these reasons are sufficient reason for continuing to participate in a tradition will also depend on how burdensome its practices are, and on what other things one might do.

More stringent reasons might arise from obligations to other members of the group, rather than from the value of the tradition itself. These obligations might arise

¹⁴ Reasons of the three kinds just mentioned—reasons to express one’s feelings, reasons to want openness and transparency in one’s relations with others, and reasons to stand up for oneself in the face of discrimination—might all be called reasons of “authenticity.” But they are distinct, and it is worth distinguishing them.

simply from the expectations one has led others to develop. Alternatively, it could be argued that, apart from any expectations one has created, loyalty to current and even past members of the group requires one to continue to participate in it, unless one has some very strong reason not to. The relationship between members of a family or cultural group might be understood in this way. When this is so, there is then the question whether, so understood, this is a relationship one has reason to be in, or whether its requirements are unreasonably demanding. (The answer to this question could turn out to depend, again, on the reasons for perpetuating the tradition in question.¹⁵)

Being a member of a group can also involve significant experiential values. There are distinct pleasures in associating with and feeling connected to others with whom one shares interests, and in commemorating events that have personal significance, even if these interests and events are not of independent value. Being a fan of a sports team, and celebrating its past victories is one obvious example. Pleasure of this kind can be a good reason to continue to be a member of a group, as long as there is no objection to taking pleasure in the activities and events in question. As experiential reasons, however, these reasons apply only to those who actually enjoy these things. Unlike reasons of value or obligation, they do not apply to individuals who find (“looking inward”) that they are left cold by the practices in question.

Different groups can also have different styles and norms of personal interaction, such as different conversational norms, and different expectations about how reserved or

¹⁵ The point is parallel to the one raised by Nozick’s example of the neighborhood public address system (*Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, pp. 90-95), the upshot of which seems to me to be that a defensible practice that does not serve a particularly compelling purpose must allow participants to opt out.

personally self-revealing individuals should be. Someone might feel particularly comfortable and “at home” when interacting with others in the way typical of one particular group (or of a particular role within a group). This need not be the group in which the person was raised. Who knows? I might discover that I was “really Korean” in this experiential sense (although not in other senses).¹⁶ Personal reactions of this kind can be reasons for preferring to be a member of a particular group, or preferring to have a certain role within that group. They can be *good* reasons as long as taking pleasure in the particular forms of interaction in question is not open to moral objection, for example because these interactions require some to defer to others in objectionable ways.

In calling these reasons “experiential” do not mean to suggest that they are not important. We have very strong reasons to care about the norms and expectations governing our personal interactions with others. Even saying that that value at stake in all these cases is a form of pleasure is too narrow. My point is only that the particular reasons I have in mind depend on the subjective responses of the individuals involved.

In this section, I have tried to show how, in many cases, the normative significance of membership in a group can be accounted for in terms of reasons of the kinds I have discussed earlier: reasons for promoting certain ends, experiential reasons, and reasons arising from obligations to individuals.¹⁷ It is often a matter of controversy

¹⁶ For a study of individuals who, partly for reasons of this kind, adopted identities in cultures different from that of their birth see Jerrold Seigel, *Between Cultures: Europe and Its Others in Five Exemplary Lives* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).

¹⁷ I believe that reasons of these kinds, together with reasons of the kind I will discuss in the following section for opposing unjust ascriptive attitudes, account for much of the force in arguments presented by Kymlicka and others in favor of providing opportunities for members of minority groups to promote and preserve their distinctive cultures. See,

whether, in a given case, these reasons are conclusive reasons for doing what membership in a group requires. I have not attempted to settle any particular questions of this kind. My aim has been just to bring out the diversity of reasons that group membership can give rise to, and to make clear what is required in order for them to be good reasons.

Ascriptive Identities

With these points as background, I turn now to reasons arising from ascriptive identities and memberships in groups that are defined by these identities. A person has an ascriptive identity in virtue of being seen by certain others as having characteristics that, in their view, provide reasons for treating them in certain ways, and perhaps also reasons for them to behave in certain ways.¹⁸ Race is an obvious example. Racists identify certain visible features of a person, or certain facts about a person's ancestry, as reasons for regarding that person as undesirable as a neighbor, friend, co-worker, or a person to sit next to on a bus, and even as reasons for denying the person basic rights such as the right to vote. Racism can also involve the view that particular norms of conduct apply to those of different races, requiring, for example, that blacks defer to whites in certain ways. Systems of gender can involve similar elements: not only the view that women are suitable only for certain roles, but also that they are subject to different norms of behavior

for example, Will Kymlicka, *Liberalism, Community, and Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

¹⁸ The term 'ascriptive identity' was first introduced by the anthropologist Ralph Linton in *The Study of Man* (1936) and later developed by sociologists Kingsley Davis and Talcott Parsons, among others.

governing how they should dress, how and when they should speak, and that they should defer to males in certain ways.¹⁹

I will be most interested in cases like these, in which the attitudes defining an ascriptive identity are widely held in a society and have negative effects on those to whom the identity is ascribed. But forms of ascriptive identity can also confer positive benefits on those to whom they apply. In some cases these benefits are illegitimate, such as the benefits accorded to males in a system of gender, or to whites in a racist society. But the positive effects of an ascriptive identity can also be legitimate. Being recognized as a person with full rights of citizenship, for example, is an ascriptive identity. Having this identity is a social fact about how one is viewed by most members of one's society. It is thus distinct from simply having such rights as a matter of law or morality. This ascriptive identity is something that individuals have strong reason to want, and an important thing that is denied to some people by some forms of discrimination.²⁰

A person's ascriptive identity is a fact about the attitudes of others toward that person. The group of individuals who share such an identity is thus determined entirely by those attitudes, and may or may not coincide exactly, or even approximately, with any group that individuals have independent reason to care about. Thus, Sartre writes, "It is the anti-Semite who creates the Jew,"²¹ and "The Jew cannot choose not to be a Jew."²²

¹⁹ Here I follow Sally Haslanger, "Gender and Race: (What) Are They? (What) Do We Want Them To Be?" in *Nous* 31 (2000), pp. 31-55. As she observes, a social practice defining ascriptive gender identities can take many forms. It need not define only two genders.

²⁰ Being recognized in this way is what Jeremy Waldron calls "dignity" in *The Harm in Hate Speech* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).

²¹ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew*, George J. Becker, transl. (New York: Schocken Books, 1965). P. 143.

²² *Op. cit.*, p. 89.

This is true, however, only of *one way* of being Jewish, namely being classified as Jewish by certain anti-Semitic attitudes. There are other senses of “being Jewish” that the anti-Semite does not create, such as subscribing to the Jewish religion, or having ancestry that makes one count as Jewish according to a certain branch of Judaism. The anti-Semite’s definition of being Jewish may or may not pick out the same group of people as those who are Jewish in these other senses.²³

Similarly, there are different ways in which an African American in the contemporary U.S. can “be black”: not only in being assigned that ascriptive identity by others but also, for example, in feeling strong obligations of solidarity to participate in opposing racism, in feeling more at home interacting with others according to the norms of the black community, in enjoying and taking pride in the celebration of African Americans’ history of struggle and survival, and in the enjoyment of the music, styles of dress, food and other social practices that are typical of the contemporary black

²³ Even though they are not defined by the anti-Semite, these other ways of being Jewish may also have ascriptive aspects. A person may have reason to attach importance not only to being of Jewish ancestry but also to being recognized as Jewish by a particular Jewish community or religious authority. What is distinctive about negative ascriptive identities such as those involved in racial discrimination is not just that they are ascriptive (that the reasons for being concerned with them are in part reasons for being concerned with the way one is categorized by other people) but that the effects of being so categorized is the basic reason for being concerned with these identities at all. A person may have reason to want to be recognized by certain others as a philosopher, or as being Jewish, but these reasons depend on his or her independent reasons for attaching significance to being a philosopher, or being Jewish. But widespread attitudes of discrimination can define identities that we have reason to care about only because of those discriminatory attitudes. On the positive role of socially defined identities, see Appiah, pp. 20-21, 68, 107.

community.²⁴ These are independent.²⁵ Someone might “be black” in the first of these senses but not in others, although the reverse is not true: someone would hardly be considered black if he or she did not have the relevant negative ascriptive identity. This just reflects the degree to which in this case it is the fact of discrimination that creates the relevant group.

My present concern is with the reasons a person has in virtue of being the subject of a certain (negative) ascriptive identity, whether or not the group of those who share this identity overlaps with an identity that one has other reasons to care about. Being Jewish in the other senses that I mentioned may give rise to reasons of the kinds I discussed in the preceding section: reasons that are dependent on the value of a tradition that one has an opportunity to participate in and help preserve, reasons arising from obligations to other members of a group, or reasons arising simply from fact that one enjoys participating with others in a community of shared attachments. The distinctive character of these reasons may also depend on the negative ascriptive identities. Participating in Jewish culture would not have the meaning it has today were it not for past anti-Semitism and the Holocaust, and the content and meaning of the distinctive African-American culture certainly depends in important ways on its being a response to

²⁴ Other ethnic identities that have been made the (approximate) objects of discriminatory attitudes will have a similar variety of senses, which are important for different reasons that go beyond the concern with discrimination.

²⁵ On the variety of meanings of race see Paul C. Taylor, *Race: A Philosophical Introduction* (Polity, 2004), and Sally Haslanger, “You Mixed? Racial Identity without Racial Biology,” in *Adoption Matters: Philosophical and Feminist Essays*, Sally Haslanger and Charlotte Witt, eds., (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), pp. 265-289. See also Appiah, *The Ethics of Identity*, p. 185.

oppression. But what I am interested in in discussing ascriptive identity is just the reasons that a person has in virtue of the social fact of being regarded in a certain way by others.

As Sartre observed, even if such an ascriptive identity is something one has no choice about, one does have a choice about how to respond to being categorized in this way. One might accept an identity and the negative assessments that it involves; one might, even without accepting these attitudes, try to “pass” as someone to whom these attitudes do not apply; one might simply ignore the fact that many people hold these negative attitudes toward one and try to rise above the whole thing; but one might, instead, openly contest these attitudes, rejecting the negative assessments that they involve; and one might join with others in collective efforts to contest these attitudes and the practices they support. It is worth considering the reasons bearing on each of these alternatives.

One good reason not to accept the negative assessments involved in some ascriptive identities is simply that these assessments are false. For example, racist attitudes hold that skin color and ancestral origin are reasons to deny certain individuals basic civil rights, and to regard them as undesirable to associate with. Since these views are false, there is good reason not to accept them. To do so would also show a lack of self-respect—a failure to properly value oneself.²⁶

²⁶ For discussion, see Bernard Boxill, “Self-Respect and Protest,” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 6 (1976), pp. 58-69, and Thomas Hill, “Symbolic Protest and Calculated Silence,” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 9 (1979), pp. 83-102. The debate between protesting racist attitudes and trying to ignore and rise above them goes back to W.E.B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington. See Du Bois, “Of Mr. Booker T. Washington and Others,” in W.E.B. Du Bois, *W.E.B. Du Bois: Writings* (The Library of America, 1987) pp. 392-404.

The reasons at stake in such cases bear a complex relationship to what Korsgaard has in mind when she writes that a practical identity is “a description under which you value yourself and find your life worth living and your actions to be worth undertaking.”²⁷ Three cases need to be distinguished.

First, people have reason to value themselves as persons with full moral and legal standing. Those who do value themselves in this way will therefore see themselves as having reasons of self-respect of the kind I have described to reject attitudes that deny them this status. But a person who (mistakenly) did not value herself under this description would also have this reason: she *should* see herself as having full moral and legal standing, and she is mistaken not to do so.

Second, there are other cases in which a person’s reasons not to accept a negative ascriptive identity can depend on other attitudes that that person holds. For example, a person who values himself as a Christian therefore has a special reason not to accept ascriptive attitudes that involve false negative assessments of Christians. Non-Christians do not share this particular reason, although they can have different reasons to reject religious discrimination.

In a third kind of case, a person who has a certain characteristic has reason not to accept an ascriptive identity that involves (false) negative assessments of those who have this characteristic even if it is not a characteristic under which she “values herself.” For example, even a person who does not attach particular value to having a certain skin color or having ancestors from a particular region has good reason not to accept ascriptive

²⁷ *Sources of Normativity*, p. 101, *Self-Constitution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 20.

identities that involve negative assessments of those who have these characteristics. In these cases, which I have been focusing on, the existence of attitudes that constitute an ascriptive identity creates a meaningful group—a set of people who have a significant reason in common—where there may not have been one before.

Faced with a negative ascriptive identity, one possible response is to try to “pass” as someone to whom it does not apply—to be seen, for example, as not a Jew, or not black. One reason against doing this is that, insofar as trying to “pass” involves accepting, or at least not rejecting, the legitimacy of the negative characterization involved in the ascriptive identity, this may be an objectionable failure to stand up for oneself against unjustified negative views, and hence incompatible with self-respect. A related but distinct reason is that trying to pass involves a lack of transparency in one’s relations with others, putting those relations always on a false footing.²⁸

An alternative response would be, without either denying that an ascriptive identity applied to one or accepting the negative assessment that many see as following from it, to try, insofar as one can, to ignore the fact that this negative attitude is widely held. This response might have a kind of nobility. But there can be reasons not to adopt it, and instead to speak out in some way. One reason is that silence may be interpreted as acceptance of the negative assessments in question. Beyond this, however, even if those who are subject to a negative ascriptive identity that is prevalent in their society live within a narrower community in which these negative views are not accepted, they are still affected by the views held in their society as a whole. They thus have reason to

²⁸ On “passing” see Adrian Piper, “Passing for White, Passing for Black,” *Transition* 58 (1992): 4-32; and Robert Gooding-Williams, “Race, Multiculturalism, and Democracy,” *Constellations* 5 (1998): 18-41.

contest these negative assessments. Assertions that “Black is Beautiful” and that “Gay is OK”—i.e. that black skin is not ugly and does not mark a person as undesirable in any way, and that there is nothing wrong with erotic attraction to people of the same sex—are examples of this kind of contestation.

Whether a person has reasons to contest such negative attitudes, rather than simply to ignore them, depends on the way in which that person is affected by the fact that these attitudes are held. A person would have reasons of the kind I mentioned earlier not to *accept* negative characterizations held by a few idiosyncratic people in his or her society, or by many people in some distant society with whom he or she has no interaction. But the person might have no reason to contest these attitudes, or protest against them. A person does have such reasons, however, if he or she is affected by the fact that others hold these attitudes, by, for example, being deprived of important opportunities, or prevented from having relationships with these others that there is reason to care about.

When they exist, such reasons to contest unjustified negative characterizations—what I called earlier reasons to stand up for oneself—are strong reasons not only in favor of individual action but also in favor of joining with others in collective efforts to combat negative attitudes. Where such efforts are underway, those who are subject to these attitudes have not only a reason to join in, but also an obligation not to free ride on the efforts of others.²⁹

²⁹ Tommie Shelby cites this as the main basis of black solidarity. See *We Who Are Dark* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), Chapter 6 and Conclusion. As I will say below, those who are the beneficiaries of such unjust practices have parallel, perhaps even stronger, reasons and obligations to combat this injustice. I am grateful to Ryan Kendall for pressing me to make this parallel explicit.

This is an instance of the general obligation not to free ride on the efforts of others to combat some shared public bad or promote some shared public good that affects one. It has the same moral basis as the obligation that a person living in a low-lying area might have to do his or her part in a fair scheme to keep flood waters at bay, or the obligation of a worker to support a union and take part in a strike for higher wages or better working conditions. In the case of floodwaters, it would sound odd to me to call the obligation that people have a matter of their identity, even though they have this obligation in virtue of a property that they have in common, namely being threatened by the rising river. I would say the same thing in the case of the labor union, although some may disagree. What makes cases of negative ascriptive identity different from these is just the distinctive character of the public bad involved, and the distinctive reason that individuals therefore have to stand up for themselves in response to this negative characterization.

In all of these cases however, to join in combatting the shared threat is to adopt a practical identity in the sense that Korsgaard emphasizes. Opposing discrimination, protecting homes from rising waters, and fighting for better wages and working conditions are all worthy projects, commitment to which might confer meaning on a person's life. (Although to take this as one's primary reason for engaging in them would be too self-regarding.)

Being regarded as white in a racial society, or as male in a gendered society, are also ascriptive identities. The reasons arising from these identities are in some ways parallel to, but also quite different from, the reasons that arise from being regarded as female or not white. Like black identity, white identity involves normative assessments that people have good reason not to accept, because they are false (in this case false

claims about the supposed superiority of white people and the entitlements that supposedly go with being white.) People do have reason to want some of the benefits that accrue to those who are white or male, such as access to good jobs. But they have no good reason to want to be able to gain these by means of unfairness to others. Having unfair advantages taints the accomplishments one achieves,³⁰ as well as putting one in a morally untenable relation to those who are disadvantaged.

Those who have benefitted from a system of discrimination thus have an obligation to do what they can to change this system in the ways required to make it just (and an even stronger obligation not to oppose such changes). To do this, it is not enough to stop discriminating. Justice also requires remedying the effects of past discrimination at least by putting those who suffer from these effects in as a good position as others to compete for desirable positions.³¹ Where there are collective movements to bring about these changes, the beneficiaries of past discrimination have an obligation to do their part, and not free ride on the efforts of others.

At the most basic level, these reasons and obligations are instances of general obligations of those who have received unjust benefits of some kind, even when they are not to blame for receiving these benefits. An idea of identity is relevant in this case only because the unjust benefits in question arise from systems of unjust ascriptive identities.

³⁰ As Ronald Dworkin says in *Sovereign Virtue: The Theory and Practice of Equality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), pp. 265-266. A similar claim is often made as an objection to affirmative action, alleging that it undermines the significance of the accomplishments of those who benefit from it. But the parallel point about the accomplishments of those who benefit from unjust discrimination is seldom mentioned.

³¹ See Jennifer Harvey, *Whiteness and Morality* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), esp. Ch. 4, and Linda Martin Alcoff, *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), Chapter 9.

The reasons I have been described whites as having in a racist society are thus “reasons of identity” in a broad sense of being reasons that a person has only because of some identity (in the present case, an ascriptive identity of being black or white.) They are not, however, reasons of identity in the narrower sense that I have been using in this section, namely reasons to stand up for oneself in opposition to unjust negative characterizations (although attempts are made to portray them as such by claiming, implausibly, that whites are themselves victims of discrimination.) So, in these terms, both whites and blacks have reasons of identity in the broad sense to oppose racist institutions, but only blacks also have reasons of identity in the narrower sense.³²

Identity and Solidarity

I have explained a number of ways in which | reasons can arise from membership in a group. But it may seem that group membership can give rise to reasons in a broader and more direct way. For example, Anthony Appiah writes, “Identities also create forms of solidarity: if I think of myself as an X, then, sometimes, the mere fact that somebody else is an X, too, may incline me to do something with or for them; where X might be ‘woman,’ black, or ‘American.’”³³ And in the passage I quoted at the beginning of my lecture, he says,

Identities give those who have them reasons for action, ... and so people will say to themselves sometimes, ‘Because I am an L, I should do X.’ Such an appeal is, in the terms I am proposing, standardly an appeal to a norm associated with that identity. Most social identities, especially of

³² Although whites also have a different kind of reason of self-respect, insofar as it is incompatible with self-respect to knowingly accept the advantages of an unjust regime.

³³ Appiah, *The Ethics of Identity*, pp. 24-25.

historically subordinated groups, have norms of solidarity: ‘Because I am an L, an L will say, I should do this thing for that other L.’³⁴

I have described one form of group solidarity of this kind. Members of a group, L, that is defined as those who are subject to some common problem or threat, have reason to join with others in collective efforts to combat this threat, and an obligation not to free ride on the efforts of others to do this. The norms one has this obligation to comply with might be seen as norms “associated with this identity” of the kind that Appiah refers to. Such norms are, as Appiah says, likely to exist in the case of historically subordinated groups. But as I have argued, the moral basis for these norms applies more widely, to groups subject to other kinds of threats.

This form of solidarity supports only certain ways of aiding other members of one’s group, namely aiding them in combatting a threat that they all face as members of that group. But Appiah’s statement that, “the mere fact that somebody else is an L, too, may incline me to do something with or for them” suggests that he has in mind reasons to aid fellow members of one’s group in a broader range of ways. There may be some groups, perhaps the Freemasons are an example, membership in which involves accepting a general norm of helping other members. But not all shared identities are like this. So the question is, how broad is the range of identities, L, in which “the mere fact that somebody else is an L, too” not only might *incline* me to help him or her but is a reason to do so? By a reason here, I mean not just a consideration that it would make sense for me to act on, but one that counts in favor of an action in a way that I would be mistaken simply to ignore, even if it does not settle the question of what I should do.

³⁴ Appiah, *The Ethics of Identity*, pp. 184-185.

Suppose that I am in an airport in a foreign country, and a problem has arisen because my flight has been cancelled. If I could help one other person who was on the same flight, say by offering to share a car with them, is there a reason to do this for someone because he or she is the one other passenger who is like me in some respect, L? If I were about to help the person who was sitting next to me on the plane, with whom I was having a pleasant conversation, but with whom I had nothing in common, rather than helping a person who is like me in some way L, should I reproach myself with the thought that he or she is an L, and take this as a reason to help that person instead?

Appiah mentions three forms of identity as examples: being a woman, being black, and being an American. The fact that the other person is black might well be a reason to help him if pervasive prejudice makes it unlikely that others would do so. This would also be a reason for anyone else to help the black person, rather than helping another white person, but a fellow black person might have a special reason of the kind I have discussed, given that the problem arises in part from the existence of discrimination. It is not clear that there would be such a reason in a case in which discrimination was not involved.

Shared identity might be a reason for a woman passenger to help another woman, if she might feel safer and more comfortable being helped in this way by another woman rather than by a man, but this seems to depend on factors other than mere shared identity. Finally, I don't see that the fact that I am an American would be any reason at all for me to help another American rather than some other person equally in need. If the other American is in special difficulty because he is the only one in the group who does not speak the local language, or know how to get around in this particular country, then this

would be a reason to help him. But, again, this would not be a reason based on our shared identity as Americans, and would also be a reason for any other person in the group to help that person.

One way in which I do have special reasons to do things for the benefit of other Americans depends on our shared membership in the American political institutions. A state is obligated to provide various benefits, such as education, police protection, and other environmental protections for those under its domain, although not for others. As an American citizen, I am obligated to contribute to the cost of providing these benefits for other Americans under some fair system of taxation. But this distinctively political obligation does not arise from some shared American identity independent of the state, as Appiah notes.³⁵

So, although there are cases in which the fact that someone is like me in some respect L would mean that I have reasons to help him or her in certain ways, it does not seem to me that in most of these cases it is shared identity that is doing the work, rather than some more general moral considerations. I do not, however, have an argument against the thesis that common identities in themselves can provide reasons for solidarity. All I can suggest is for readers to proceed in the way that I have been doing, to find cases in which there seem to be such reasons and then consider whether it is the shared identity, or some other factor, that is providing these reasons.

Identity and Insult

³⁵ See *The Ethics of Identity*, pp. 244-246. David Miller discusses the same distinction in *On Nationality*, p. 71 and elsewhere, although he takes a different view of the relation between state and nation.

Earlier, I discussed cases in which people have reasons to stand up for themselves in opposition to negative ascriptive identities. But similar reasons to stand up for oneself can arise in a broader range of cases. What Chris Korsgaard calls a “practical identity” is “a description under which a person values herself.” If a commitment to some project or cause is a person’s practical identity in this sense, in then that person will be vulnerable to, and possibly even insulted by, claims that that commitment is not worth having, and will see herself as having reason to stand up for herself by objecting to this claim. Like reasons to stand up for oneself in opposition to negative ascriptive identities, these are reasons to respond to the critical attitudes of others. But unlike reasons to respond to negative ascriptive identities, these reasons derive at base from the importance that this commitment has for the person him or herself. The term ‘identity’ seems appropriate in these cases for a different reason than in cases of ascriptive identity: namely because the person’s reasons to respond depend on the fact that he or she has “identified with,” i.e. adopted, the commitment in question. It is this identification that leaves the person vulnerable to claims that this commitment is mistaken, and thus provides a reason to resist such claims.

These reasons for responding to criticism can be particularly strong in the case of religious commitments, because of the importance that religion can have in a person’s life. Just because of this importance, however, one cannot reasonably demand that others refrain from criticizing one’s religious views. Questions of such importance about how to live one’s life have to be the subject of open discussion and debate. People must be permitted to argue about the merits of various religious views as well as to express their

adherence or opposition to these views in other ways, such as in the way they dress, and in what holidays and other religious practices they do or do not observe.

A society needs to have norms protecting these forms of activity and also setting limits to them. These include not only laws and constitutional protections, but also informal standards of politeness, which define respectful individual conduct. One plausible component of such norms is a distinction between criticism of a particular view, which must be allowed, and disparagement of individuals who hold that view, which can be ruled out by social norms, if not always by law.

Abstract moral argument cannot determine exactly what these legal and informal norms should be. Even in a particular society at a given time, there may be multiple versions of such norms to which no one could reasonably object. Individuals have valid complaints (as opposed to merely understandable distress at having their views criticized or satirized) only when what is done violates established norms that are defensible, or would violate any norms that would be defensible.

The problem is that norms of this kind are unstable.³⁶ Advocates of all kinds have reason to gain attention by pushing the boundaries of established norms. In particular, it is an inviting strategy for leaders of a group to build solidarity among their followers by claiming that they are being treated by others in ways that defensible norms would not allow, or are being unjustifiably prohibited from acting on and advocating their own views in certain ways. For example, Christian leaders in the U.S. claim, implausibly, that Christians are being denied their proper opportunities to express their beliefs in public

³⁶ I discuss the following point more fully in “The Difficulty of Tolerance,” in *The Difficulty of Tolerance: Essays in Political Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 187-201.

life. And both Christians and gun owners are told that they are not merely being criticized but are being “looked down on” by the “elites.” The claim is, in effect, that being Christian or a gun owner in the contemporary U.S. is a discriminatory ascriptive identity that they have reasons to stand up for themselves against and oppose. A supposed analogy with racial discrimination is even sometimes invoked. These claims seem to me to have no plausibility whatever. But this does not prevent them from being effective ways of building solidarity within these groups.

“Identity Politics”

This analysis provides a basis for understanding recent controversies in the U.S. about what is called “identity politics,” including claims by some writers that it is something that the Democratic Party should avoid.³⁷ What is identity politics, and how is it supposed to differ from the interest group politics that has been the stock in trade of the Democratic Party and other political parties for decades?

Interest group politics involves seeking the support of people in some group, such as farmers, labor unions, or those involved in some particular industry, by promising to promote the interests they share as members of that group. So understood, interest group politics can involve the idea that members of that group have been unjustly or unfairly treated, but it need not do so. Engaging in interest group politics can consist just in a commitment to vigorously support certain groups in what is seen as a legitimate political competition for benefits. African Americans, women, and LGBT individuals could be

³⁷ See, for example, Mark Lilla, *The Once and Future Liberal: After Identity Politics* (New York: HarperCollins, 2017). For critical discussion see Samuel Moyn, “Mark Lilla and the Crisis of Liberalism,” *Boston Review* Forum 5 (43.1) *Fifty Years Since MLK*, pp. 92-101, also at <http://bostonreview.net/class-inequality/samuel-moyn-mark-lilla-and-crisis-liberalism>.

seen just as interest groups in this sense. Appealing to these groups for political support is, however, frequently called “identity politics.” This is clearly an attempt to delegitimize their claims. But what makes it plausible to apply this label to these groups and not others?

The difference lies, I believe, in the fact that each of these groups has been subject to a negative ascriptive identity, under which they have suffered from unjustified negative attitudes, denied important opportunities, and even denied important political and legal rights. Members of these groups thus have distinctive reasons of the kinds I have discussed to engage in political action: reasons to stand up for themselves against negative characterization and unjust treatment, and reasons to join with others who are discriminated against to seek changes. The term ‘identity politics’ was first used positively, as the name of a political strategy in which members of groups that have been subject to discriminatory ascriptive identities, take up these identities as defining their particular movement in struggling against this injustice.³⁸

As I have said above, this is something that members of such groups have good reasons to do. Two kinds of such reasons should be distinguished. I will call these reasons of justice and reasons of identity, although both involve facts about injustice and facts about identity, albeit in different ways. Reasons of justice arise simply from the fact that the attitudes and practices in question are unjust. The injustice in question involves identity insofar as it arises from the existence of negative ascriptive identities that are

³⁸ See Combahee River Collective, “A Black Feminist Statement”, from 1982 in *All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies*, Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith (eds), (New York: Feminist Press.)

morally objectionable in themselves and lead to distinctive forms of injustice.³⁹ These forms of injustice are things that anyone in the society has reasons to object and to seek change. These are reasons not only for those who are treated unjustly but also, as I have argued, for individuals who benefit from these unjust practices (and for third parties as well, insofar as they are in a position to do anything about these practices.)

But those who are subject to unjust ascriptive identities have further reason to object to these attitudes and to the further unjust practices that they lead to—what I called earlier reasons to stand up for themselves. These are reasons of identity because they are reasons to resist particular negative characterizations and to demand recognition as citizens with full moral and legal standing. They are thus distinct from the reasons that others have to object to unjust practices and attitudes simply because they are unjust. But they depend on these reasons: they are *good* reasons to object to certain attitudes and practices *because* these attitudes and practices are in fact unjust.

This dependence on reasons of justice means that the claims of marginalized groups, and claims made on their behalf by a party that supports them, do not simply express interests that compete with other interests for scarce resources. Because these

³⁹ Claims of injustice, even considered apart from what I am calling here reasons of identity, thus need not be “color blind”: various forms of discrimination are distinct forms of injustice. On the importance of keeping in view the distinctive forms of injustice inflicted upon members of different groups—women, persons of color, persons of various ethnicities—rather than subsuming them all under a single idea, e.g. that “all lives matter,” see Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color,” *Stanford Law Review* 41 (1999), pp. 1241-1299), Angela Davis, *Women, Race, and Class* (New York: Vintage, 2012), and Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment* (Routledge, 1990).

claims involve charges of injustice, they challenge the legitimacy of the status and benefits that others enjoy.

It might be asked why the claims of workers are not seen in a similar light, as complaints against injustice and hence as threatening challenges to the legitimacy of existing institutions. Some claims made on behalf of workers do take this form, such as claims that the huge gains of the super-rich are unjustified. But these claims are not currently labeled as identity politics because that label is being used as part of a rhetorical strategy specifically designed to stir up resentment chiefly among working class, mainly male voters, and to divide them from non-white voters. Claims for justice on behalf of women or members of “minority” groups, are seen as threatening by this intended audience--as challenging to *their* status in a way that their own claims for justice, by definition, do not.

Charges of injustice made on behalf of women and minorities cause discomfort to members of this target audience because the members of this audience realize, at some level, that these charges have real plausibility. To ease their discomfort, and foster their resentment, it is necessary to reframe the claims of these groups in a way that masks their appeal to reasons of justice, and makes the claims appear instead to be unreasonable demands for special treatment on the basis of certain identities. This is what the current, negative use of the label ‘identity politics’ is designed to do: to describe the claims of blacks, for example, as demands for special treatment simply because they are black,

demands which, taken in isolation from the claims of injustice on which they depend, appear to be invalid.⁴⁰

This strategy is clear in the response to the Black Lives Matter movement. This movement was organized to call attention to policies and practices of police departments that give insufficient weight to the lives of black people. Why should anyone be opposed to such a movement? In some cases it could be simple racism—the view that black lives *don't* matter, at least not as much as white ones. But there is also the fact that those who oppose this movement understand it as making a charge of injustice, calling into question the legitimacy of police practices. They do not want to admit that their institutions are infected with racism to this degree, and are therefore seriously unjust. The police themselves, in particular, do not want to admit this, and others who see the police as “like them” share this reaction. The evidence for this charge of injustice is, however, extremely strong. So it is appealing to respond by reinterpreting the charge as a demand for special treatment, which can easily be dismissed.

This response was reflected in the counter-slogan, “All Lives Matter.” This counter-slogan expresses something that is undeniably true, and was not being denied by the protestors in insisting that Black Lives Matter. It was an important part (although only a part) of what was being *affirmed* in these protests. The presupposition of the “All Lives Matter” slogan, as used by these critics, however, was that the BLM protestors were denying this obvious truth by demanding special treatment for those with their identity, and that their demands were thus a form of (reverse) racism.

⁴⁰ For discussion of the historical development of negative views of identity politics, see Alcoff, *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self*, Chapters 1 and 2.

This response is itself a form of identity politics—*white* identity politics—an attempt to gain the support of a group by claiming to speak up for them against supposedly unjust treatment. Those who make this response may thus seem inconsistent: they are criticizing identity politics while engaging in a form of it themselves. But inconsistency is not the primary fault in their position. Those who object to claims made on behalf of blacks, such as by the Black Lives Matter movement, see these claims as *mere* identity politics because they do not want to acknowledge the legitimacy of the charges of injustice that these claims involve. They aim, by refusing to acknowledge these charges, to make it possible to see *themselves* as being subject to false criticism and unjust demands for sacrifice. They thus see their appeal to white solidarity as supported by the two kinds of reasons that I have mentioned—reasons to stand up for themselves and reasons to band together to resist unjust treatment—and therefore as not mere appeals to identity but rather as entirely justified. The two claims involved—that blacks are not being treated unjustly and that whites are being unfairly criticized and subjected to unjust demands—are manifestly false. The problem with their position is the falsity of these claims, not mere inconsistency.

In this section I have tried to use points made earlier in my lecture to understand current controversies about identity politics. My conclusions are these. First, that claims on behalf of blacks, women, members of the LBGT community, and other groups who have been discriminated against are supported by both reasons of justice and reasons of identity. It is important to understand the relations between these reasons. In particular, it is important to see how reasons of identity presuppose and depend on reasons of justice.

This is crucial to the difference between the substantial claims of black identity and groundless appeals to white identity.

Second, I have argued that the current pejorative use of the term, ‘identity politics’ is an attempt to undermine the claims on behalf of groups who have been victims of negative ascriptive identities by masking the reasons of justice that support these claims, thereby making them appear to be illegitimate demands based solely on identity. The best response is not to abandon identity politics by avoiding or downplaying claims on behalf of marginalized groups—this would be morally indefensible—but rather to re-emphasize the claims of justice on which these claims depend. This strategy is not without political risks, because it is these claims of justice that give rise to the discomfort that rhetorical appeals to “identity politics” attempt to exploit. But it has the advantage of making clear what the debate is really about. One slight ground for hope about this strategy is that people would not feel such discomfort in response to claims of injustice if they did not, at some level, recognize the validity of these claims.

National Identity

Let me turn now, briefly, to a question about national identity. A recent article in *The New York Times* discussed research about changing ideas of what is required in order to ‘be an American.’⁴¹ It reported, for example, the changing percentages of people who believe that being American requires being white or being Christian. Although nothing was said in the article about the implications of being or not being American in the sense in question, I assumed that something important was supposed to depend on this, such as

⁴¹ Lynn Vavreck, “The Great Political Divide Over American Identity,” *The New York Times*, August 2, 2017.

perhaps that those who are not American in this sense are not entitled to the full rights of citizenship, or that their views and interests should count for less in determining what laws and policies we should have.

I was disturbed by the suggestion that, according to many of my fellow Americans, our fellow citizens who are not white, or not Christians, are in some important sense not really, or not fully, American. But I was also puzzled about the question that was being asked: puzzled about what idea of “being American” people were being asked for their opinions about. Initially, I was inclined to say that there was no such idea. Being an American citizen, or being someone whose parents were citizens, is sufficient to make a person an American in the only senses that matter, and nothing further is required. It seemed to me pernicious even to ask, beyond that, who is American and who is not.

I was also inclined to say that it would be *un-American* to think that whether someone was an American in some important sense depended on that person’s race or religion. My tendency to say this, however, seems to indicate that I myself am committed to an idea of American identity of the very kind that I was denying, namely an idea of being American such that being American in this sense is incompatible with thinking that whether someone is or is not American in some important sense could depend on that person’s race or religion. So I need to consider what idea of American identity I might have had in mind, what it might require, and what implications having or not having this identity might have.

One important form of American identity, which I will mention just to set it aside, is just that of being an American citizen. Being American in this sense has implications

for the reasons that I have. As a citizen I am obligated to participate in American political institutions, insofar as they meet minimal standards of justice, and to fulfill the obligations it defines, such as paying taxes. This means that I have obligations to provide benefits for other Americans that I am not obligated to provide for foreigners. The American government, for example, must provide education, police and military protection and other benefits to its citizens and as a citizen I am obligated to do my part in paying the cost of these things. Recognizing this does not mean regarding the interests of my fellow Americans as morally more important than the interests of people elsewhere. It is just that I have a special relationship with them, as I do, in a different way, to those to whom I have made promises. Seeing myself as having these obligations is compatible with seeing the promisees as morally no more important than others as long as the promises in question were ones that I was morally free to make. (This meant only as analogy. I am not suggesting that political obligations are like the obligations created by promises in arising from consent.)

It is true simply as a matter of law that being American in this sense cannot depend on one's race or religion. So this sense of American identity would support my reaction to the survey I described. But this cannot have been the sense of being American that the respondents to that survey had in mind, so cannot explain my reaction to them, insofar as it was a reaction to what they were thinking.

Beyond this, however, there is a deeper sense of shared identity, which involves one of the forms of solidarity that I discussed earlier. As people living together in this territory, we have a shared need for institutions to provide us with benefits of the kind I have just mentioned, and therefore have reasons, indeed obligations, to join together with

others on fair terms to provide these benefits, and not free ride on what others do. These reasons and obligations of solidarity are clearest when, as in cases of war or emergency, we face some severe threat. In such cases they are the basis of patriotism, which is not just a matter of political obligation. But they apply as well in more normal situations (in which it would be healthy to see willingness to cooperate as a matter of patriotism, although it is, unfortunately, seldom seen in this way.)

The moral basis of such solidarity lies in shared needs, which arise simply from the fact of our living our lives together. It would be morally objectionable to exclude some people from either these obligations or from entitlement to benefit from them, on grounds of race or religion.⁴² But this general moral form of solidarity is not the idea I had in mind when I said that it was un-American to think that being American could depend on a person's race or religion.

That idea was, I think, closer to a different kind of identity that I have discussed, namely the kind of identity that involves a commitment to participating in some valuable cultural or political project. The sense of American identity that I had in mind involves such a commitment, in this case a commitment to certain political ideals, including the rule of law, democratic government, tolerance, equal individual rights, and the equal importance of the interests of all citizens. This commitment is more specific than the general moral obligation I mentioned earlier, to cooperate in providing certain needed benefits, such as a common defense. It is a commitment to build shared institutions of a particular kind, embodying the ideals I have listed. A commitment to this project is a

⁴² It would also be morally intolerable to exclude people from becoming residents on the basis of race or religion. But I leave aside the more general question of who has a claim to long term residency.

political commitment, but it is distinct from commitment to American political institutions as they currently exist. It is not a view about who has legal standing or Constitutional rights, but rather about how those rights should be understood, about who should have them, and about whose interests count in determining what our social and economic policies should be. This commitment gives me reasons for action not simply because I have it but because these ideals are ones that there is good reason to be committed to promoting.

These ideals are not uniquely American. They are ideals that members of any nation have reason to value.⁴³ The commitment I have in mind, however, involves not just accepting and valuing these ideals, which anyone anywhere could do, but also being committed to the particular project of promoting and realizing them in the contemporary United States.⁴⁴ This commitment was, I think, the idea of being American that I had in mind when I was inclined to say that it was “un-American” to think that being American could depend on a person’s race or religion. But I think it was a mistake for me to link this commitment with “being American.”

⁴³ Here I believe I am in agreement with what Joseph Raz says about the “only acceptable interpretation” of the “Jewish values” to which, according to its constitution, the state of Israel is devoted. See *Value, Respect, and Attachment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 37-38.

⁴⁴ I believe this is the sense of American identity that Appiah has in mind in discussing Ronald Dworkin’s *Americanness*, i.e. his commitment to participating in this distinctive American political project. *The Ethics of Identity*, p. 111. Appiah refers to this commitment as an aspect of Dworkin’s (American) identity. I suppose it might be said that my similar commitment is an aspect of my identity, although I would not have thought of putting it that way. Bringing in the idea of identity does not seem to add anything to the reasons I have for pursuing this commitment. But that is not a problem since nothing more is needed. My reasons flowing from the nature of the project itself are more than sufficient.

If someone were to ask me why I am committed to this project it would be somewhat evasive, or at least crucially incomplete, for me to say that I am committed to it “because I am an American.” The fact that I have lived in America for many years, and intend to continue living here, gives me reason to be particularly concerned with what happens here, and means that I have the opportunity to pursue the particular project of promoting these ideals here. But my most basic reasons for having this commitment are just reasons for believing that these ideals are very much worth promoting. I am not committed to them because I am an American. Similarly, if I were to try to persuade some other American to support these particular ideals it would be inappropriate for me to give, as a reason, “Because you are an American!” At most, this could be a reason for someone who was already committed to the ideals to get involved in promoting them, because he should care about what happens here, and because he is entitled to participate in determining what happens here. To claim in some further sense that someone should be committed to these ideals “because he is an American” would be an invitation to a form of bad faith. The most basic reasons for this commitment arise simply from the values involved, not from who you are.

There is nothing special here about the case of America. A person living in another country, such as Canada, Germany, or China would have parallel reasons to commit herself to the realization there of the ideals I have described. It might also be said that someone who was not a citizen of some country, say Poland, and had never lived there, but whose relatives several generations back were from Poland, should be committed to promoting these ideals in that country “because he or she is Polish.” In the framework I am defending, this would be relevant only as either the claim that, because

of this ancestry the person should be especially concerned with what happens in Poland, or that because of this ancestry the person was entitled to contribute to what happens there, in a way that outsiders are not.⁴⁵ I doubt that ancestry alone can support such claims, but this is a matter of controversy.

Not all Americans are committed to the project I have described. But sharing this commitment is not a condition for being American. The fact that many of my fellow citizens do not share this identity does not change their rights or my obligations to them as fellow citizens. These rights and obligations “go with the territory.” But the fact that many of my fellow Americans do not share this commitment does have serious implications. When other Americans support policies that are incompatible with the values I have listed, this means that I do not have the relationship with them that I have reason to want to have with my fellow citizens. They are not fellow participants in the valuable project of attempting to realize these ideals in America, as I would want them to be. My reaction to this impairment of our relationship as fellow citizens is a sense of estrangement, which amounts to what I have called elsewhere a form of blame.⁴⁶

If I were to say that all Americans should be committed to these values, the sense of identity I would be invoking would be aspirational: I would be expressing a hope or wish about the relationship that I would like to have with my fellow Americans, a shared commitment to a valuable project.⁴⁷ The sense of estrangement from fellow Americans

⁴⁵ This is my attempt to capture the force of a point raised by John Skorupski.

⁴⁶ In *Moral Dimensions: Permissibility, Meaning, Blame* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), Chapter 4, and “Interpreting Blame,” in D. Justin Coates and Neal A. Tognazzini, eds., *Blame: Its Nature and Norms* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 84-99.

⁴⁷ Perhaps this is part of what David Miller has in mind in saying that nations are “imagined communities” in *On Nationality*, p. 32.

who are not committed to this project, explains my temptation to say that they lack something that is part of being American. But I should resist this temptation. They *are* fellow Americans, and this is part of what makes the sense of estrangement so acute.

The views of those Americans who believe that being American requires being white, or Christian, can be interpreted, if not necessarily justified, in a similar way. We might understand them as seeing themselves as committed to a particular project that they believe is valuable— such as the creation, in America, of a distinctively white, or Christian culture—and they would like to believe that all true Americans are committed to this project as well. A distinctively white culture is not, however, something there is reason to value and promote. Indeed, insofar as such a culture includes unjustified privileges for those who are counted as white, promoting its continuation is the opposite of what, I have argued above, we have reason to do as members of American society who are counted as white. Promoting a distinctively Christian culture is a different matter. Granting that many features of such a culture could make it one among many cultural ideals that are worth promoting, it nonetheless remains a mistake to take a commitment to this cultural project to be essential to being American, the same mistake that I pointed out above in the case of my own quite different commitment.

There are many political ideals and cultural projects that are worth promoting. The fact that they are worth promoting makes a commitment to realizing them where I live a form of identity that shapes the reasons I have. It also gives me reason to wish that the others I live with share this commitment. But this does not justify labeling those who lack this commitment as unamerican.

Conclusion

Many different kinds of facts about a person, plausibly called facts about that person's identity, can make a difference to that person's reasons for action and to the reasons others have to treat that person in various ways, are. I have distinguished a number of ways in which reasons can arise from such facts, including reasons deriving from the characteristics of a culture or tradition that make it worth promoting, reasons arising from the pleasures of association and membership, reasons arising from obligations to individuals to whom one stands in relationships that one has reason to value, and reasons for objecting to negative ascriptive identities, and working with others to repair the forms of injustice that they involve.

I have tried to make clear why the term 'identity' seems appropriate in all of these cases. But I have also tried to make clear the different ways in which facts about identities affect the reasons that individuals have in these different cases. Taking account of this diversity—looking beyond the idea of identity to the particular reasons involved—is important for understanding what is at issue in each case, and for understanding the differences between them. This is important, for example, in understanding the difference between appeals to black identity and appeals to white identity.

There may be appeals to identity that involve other basic reasons that I have not examined. But I hope to have provided an example of the kind of analysis that is needed to uncover and understand them.