IDEAS OF IDENTITY AND THEIR NORMATIVE STATUS

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Light refreshments will be available at 4:45 pm and you are welcome to come a little early to mingle.

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Introduction

The term ‘identity’ figures prominently in a wide range of contemporary discussions, including commonplace conversations, abstract philosophical theories about practical reason, and partisan political debates. Here are a few examples:

In common conversation, it is sometimes said of a person who is deciding what to do in life, such as what career to choose, that he or she needs to decide “who he or she is.”

In philosophy, Christine Korsgaard has argued that many of the reasons that individuals have for acting one way rather than another derive from the identities they have adopted.¹

It is sometimes claimed that because a person has a certain ethnic or religious background, he or she has reason to act in ways that manifest that “identity” by, for example, following the tenets of that religion, or adopting the language, culture or ways of life typical of that group.

¹ See Korsgaard, The Sources of Normativity, Self-constitution
People sometimes object to certain speech, and even claims that it should be banned, because it shows a lack of respect for their identity, meaning, in most cases their religion or ethnic background.

In political debates, one frequently hears reference to what is called “identity politics,” which seems to mean an attempt to secure political support by promoting the interests of those with certain identities more than the interests of others, or perhaps by appealing to feelings of loyalty associated with certain identities.

Finally, there is the idea of “national identity.” The New York Times recently ran a story discussing recent social science research about changing ideas of “what does it take to ‘be an American’—including the degree to which most people believed that this required being “white” or Christian.”

The aim of this paper is to investigate these claims of identity, which I find puzzling. I am puzzled about what it is for something to be part of a person’s identity, but I will not try to offer a single answer to this question. I suspect that there is no single answer: a number of different ideas of identity are at work in the examples I have listed. My investigation of these ideas will be normative. I am interested in what would be required in order for various things that are called facts about a person’s identity to have the significance that is claimed for them, either as reasons for that person to behave in a certain way or for others to react to or treat that person in a certain way.

Skepticism about Identity

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In general, I am skeptical about such claims. In some cases—when the relevant normative preconditions are fulfilled—facts about a person’s identity can be normatively significant. A person can have important reasons that he or she would not have but for facts about what may be called his or her “identity.” But I want to question how much work an idea of identity is doing in providing or explaining these reasons. In many cases, I am skeptical.

My skepticism is easiest to explain in the first example I cited, that of a person who is said to be deciding what to do by trying to determine “who he or she really is.” What might this mean? Perhaps when it is said that a person choosing a career needs to decide, “who he or she is,” all that is meant is that the person needs to determine what he or she would enjoy. But a person making such a choice also needs to decide what is worth doing. What is troubling about the phrase “deciding who I am” is that it seems to evade this question, by suggesting that the question of what the person should do can be answered simply by, as it were, looking inward to discover a fact about him or herself. To think that the matter can be settled in this way would be an instance of what Sartre called “bad faith” because it evades the basic normative question.4

Practical Identities in Korsgaard’s Sense

Appeals to identity of the kind involved in Korsgaard’s view avoid this kind of bad faith. On her view, an identity is something that one constructs. Facts about particular identities such as careers and professions, for example, are not facts about oneself that one simply discovers but things that one has chosen, or chosen to remain in. So a person who appeals to such facts about her identity sources of reasons must accept responsibility

for these choices. This avoids Sartrean bad faith, by acknowledging the relevance of questions about why one has made these choices. The reasons a person has to do what is required to succeed in her profession depend not simply on the fact that it is her profession, but also on the features of that profession that make it worth adopting, and worth carrying out.⁵

Not all of the identities on Korsgaard’s list are exactly like this, however. The reasons I have to be especially concerned with my friends and family members do not derive simply from plans or intentions that I have adopted. Reasons arising from these relationships can be explained in part by the fact that other parties to the relationship have expectations about what you (as someone related to them in this way) will do, and these expectations can give rise to obligations.⁶ But, again, facts about expectations do not settle the matter. Such facts give rise to obligations only if the relationships defined by these expectations are ones that one has reason to remain a part of. The expectations involved in demeaning relationships, or relationships of domination, would not generate obligations, or reasons, in this same way.

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 thus alike in depending (in different ways) on reasons that are in one way or another reasons for having such identities. This dependence on prior reasons does not render appeals to such facts of identity illegitimate or pointless. But my main reason for skepticism about appeals to

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⁵ 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 an objection raised by G. A. Cohen.

⁶ I discuss duties regarding expectations we create in What We Owe to Each Other, Chapter 7.
identity is that they seem to conceal this dependence. *Simply* to refer to one’s relationship (or profession) as a reason, as if there were no need for further justification of this kind, can be a form of bad faith, just as in the case of a person who is said to be making an important decision by “looking inward” to determine “Who I am.”

*Experiential Reasons*

Earlier, I said that one thing that such a person might be doing by “looking inward” would be trying to discover what he or she will enjoy or find satisfying. It might seen that, since pleasant experience is something that one has reason to seek, such facts about one’s experiential reactions could 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 me over for lunch. But we should not be too quick to generalization from such examples. For The fact that I would enjoy torturing someone, or humiliating him, is not reason to do this. Facts about what I find pleasant provide reasons to seek pleasure of this kind only if there is no objection to taking pleasure in those things.

It may seem an exaggeration to call a taste for peanut butter a fact about a person’s identity, but much more plausible to say this about facts about what a person fids erotically arousing. This is so, I think, for at least two kinds of reasons. The first is the significance that being erotically aroused has in personal relations with others. The second is that forms of erotic responsiveness are important forms of ascriptive identity because they have been the basis of important forms of discrimination. Let me say something about each of these in turn.
Important forms of sexual relations involve assumptions about the erotic responses of those with whom one is having these relations. Thomas Nagel, for example, argued that all non-perverted sexual relations involve taking pleasure in the similar responses of one’s partner or partners.\(^7\) Insofar as this is so, and people have 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 want to avoid.

Honesty and dishonesty about these matters takes on a further kind of significance when there is widespread disapproval of and discrimination against those who have erotic responses of a certain kind. I will discuss in a later section reasons that arise from being assigned such an ascriptive identity. 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 larger cultural group can give one the opportunity, by participating in its practices, to help promote the continuation of the tradition it represents, such as a particular religion, an artistic tradition, a language or “way of life.” Whether this is a reason to participate in these practices, and how strong a reason it is, will depend on the strength of the reasons for perpetuating that particular culture. Whether this is a sufficient reason for participating will depend on how burdensome these practices are, and on what other things one might do. In most cases it seems to me unlikely to be a *conclusive* reason.

More stringent reasons might arise not from reasons for promoting the continuation of the tradition in question but from obligations to other members of the group. These obligations might arise, in the way I discussed earlier, from the expectations one has created. 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 on 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.\textsuperscript{8})

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. The fact that one takes pleasure in these things can be a good reason to continue as a member of a group, as long as there is no objection to having these interests or taking pleasure in commemorating these events. As experiential reasons, these reasons apply only to those who enjoy these things. Unlike reasons of value or obligation, they do not apply to people who find that they “just don’t care.”

\textsuperscript{8} The point is parallel to the one raised by Nozick’s example of the neighborhood public address system (\textit{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.
Different groups can also have different styles and norms of personal interaction, such as different conversational norms, and different expectations about how reserved or personally self-revealing individuals should be. Someone might feel more comfortable and “at home” when interacting with others in the way typical of one particular group (or a particular role within a group.) This need not be the group in which the person was raised. Who knows? In this sense of “identity,” I might discover that I was “really Korean.” The point is just that personal reactions of this kind can be reasons for preferring to be a member of a particular group, and 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 they require some to defer to others in objectionable ways.

In this section, I have tried to show how the normative significance of what might seem to be facts about a person’s identity as a member of a group can be accounted for in terms of reasons of the kinds I discussed earlier: reasons for promoting certain ends, reasons arising from obligations to individuals, and experiential reasons. It is often a matter of controversy whether, in a given case, these reasons are sufficient reasons for doing what membership in a group requires. I have not attempted to settle any particular

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9 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).

10 Gender norms within a particular society may illustrate both of these points. One reason for some people to wish the change gender may be just that they feel more comfortable and “at home” interacting with others in accord with the norms of one gender rather than the other. But some of these norms may also be open to serious objection of the kind I go on to mention.
questions of this kind. My aim has been just to bring out the diversity of reasons involved in such cases and to expose their normative presuppositions.

Ascriptive Identities

With these points as background, I turn now to the important phenomenon of ascriptive identity. A person has an ascriptive identity in virtue of being seen by others as having characteristics that, in their view, provide reasons for treating him or her in certain ways, and sometimes also as providing reasons for him or her to behave in certain ways. Race is an obvious example. Racists identify certain visible features of a person or 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 blacks are subject to particular norms of conduct, such as that they should defer to whites in certain ways. A system of gender involves 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 governing how they should dress, how and when they should speak, and that they should defer to males in certain situations.11

Cases like these, in which an ascriptive identity has negative effects on those to whom it is ascribed, will be the main focus of my discussion. But it is worth noting that some forms of ascriptive identity confer positive benefits on those to whom they apply. In some cases these are illegitimate benefits, such as those accorded to males in a system of gender, or whites in a racist society. But the positive effects of ascriptive identity can

11 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.
also be legitimate. Being recognized as a person with full rights of citizenship, for example, is an ascriptive identity. As a social fact about how one is viewed by most members of one’s society it is 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 by some forms of discrimination.

As a fact about how a person is generally viewed by others, an ascriptive identity is not normally under a person’s control. Sartre writes, “It is the anti-Semite who creates the Jew,” and “The Jew cannot choose not to be a Jew.” Insofar as this is true, however, it is true only of one way of being Jewish, namely having that ascriptive identity. There are other senses of “being Jewish” that the anti-Semite does not create, such as subscribing to the Jewish religion, having a certain ancestry, and so on.

Being Jewish in these latter senses may change the reasons one has in ways that I have described: ways that are dependent on the value of the traditions that one has an opportunity to participate in and help to preserve, or dependent on the enjoyment one gets from participating with others in a community of shared attachments. My concern at the moment, however, is with the reasons a person has simply in virtue of being the subject.

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14 Similarly, there are also 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 American’s history of struggle and survival, and in the enjoyment of the music, styles of dress and so on that are typical of the contemporary black community. These are independent. Someone might “be black” in some of these senses but not in others. But there are connections between them. See, for example, Tommie Shelby’s discussion of Hip Hop in *Dark Ghettos*, chapter nine.
of a (negative) ascriptive identity. As Sartre observed, although this is something one has no choice about, one does have a choice about how to respond to being categorized in this way. I want now to canvass the reasons that one has for responding to the fact of ascriptive identity in various ways.

One possibility is simply to accept the identity that is assigned to one, not only in its descriptive aspects but also as having the normative significance that others assign to these characteristics. There can be significant prudential reasons to do this. But there are also strong reasons not to, and I want to consider the variety of these reasons.

First, there are what I called earlier “reasons to stand up for oneself,” that is to say, reasons to contest unjustified negative characterizations and resist the imposition of unjustified norms of behavior. To fail to stand up in this way, it might be said, would involve a lack of self-respect. But this is so only when one is in fact subject to unjustified negative characterizations.

Faced with such a characterization, another possible response is to try to “pass” as someone to whom this negative characterization does not apply—to be seen, for example, as not a Jew, or not black. Several reasons against doing this are worth distinguishing. The first is that, insofar as trying to “pass” involves accepting, or at least not rejecting, the legitimacy of the negative characterization, it may be incompatible with self-respect—an objectionable failure to “stand up for oneself” against unjustified negative views. 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.

A third important reason (which applies against any of the options so far mentioned) is that one has an obligation to others who are subject to discrimination to
stand with them in opposing it—to “stand up for them” and to join in their efforts. This is like an obligation not to “free ride” on the efforts of others to combat some shared “public bad,” such as the obligation a person has to do his or her part in a fair scheme to keep flood waters at bay. What makes cases of discrimination different is distinctive character of the public bad, and hence the presence of the distinctive reason to “stand up for” oneself in response to it.

Identity and Insult

In the cases I have been discussing, the reason that people have “to stand up for themselves” is a reason to oppose discrimination that denies them important rights and opportunities. As I mentioned at the beginning of my lecture, however, the fact that something is an element of a person’s identity is often taken to mean that that person has reason to “stand up for herself” by objecting to any criticism that calls the value of this identity into question, even if it does not involve discrimination or the denial of rights. In this section I will examine this connection between having an identity and being insulted by what are seen as challenges to it. This will also raise a question about the relation between ascriptive identities and identity in other senses.

Korsgaard 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.” “Valuing yourself” and “finding your life worth living” may seem a bit exaggerated in some cases. But the basic idea seems right, and indeed follows from some of the points

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15 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.
16 The kind of obligation accounted for by what Rawls called the principle of fairness. See A Theory of Justice, section 52.
17 Sources of Normativity, p. 101, Self-constitution, p. 20.
about identity discussed earlier. If a person is committed to some project, then he or she
is subject to feelings of failure if this project does not succeed, and is vulnerable to
criticism claiming that this project is not in fact worthwhile. The term ‘identity’ seems
appropriate here because these reactions depend on the fact that the person has “identified
with,” i.e. adopted, the project in question.

These reactions are reactions to the actions or attitudes of others. But the sense of
identity involved differs in an important way from (at least many cases of) ascriptive
identity. A person can have an ascriptive identity simply in virtue of the significance that
others attach to certain characteristics. Their attitudes define the identity, and its
significance for the person whose identity it is can due solely to the fact that others have
these attitudes. Absent a practice of racial prejudice, being black in the sense defined by
that practice is unlikely to be a “a description under which a person values him or herself
and find his or her life worth living.” (And the same is true of “being white” in the sense
defined by such a practice, when considered independently of that practice.) Someone
might take pleasure and pride in having what he or she regarded as an attractive skin
color, but this is quite a different thing from valuing oneself as being black, or white, in
the sense defined by a particular form of racism, such as the “one drop of blood rule.” It
is the social practice of discrimination that makes such definitions significant.

Practical identities in Korsgaard’s sense can, however, come into play in cases of
ascriptive identity in two ways that I have mentioned. First, racial discrimination can
involve the denial that blacks have full rights of citizenship, or even full moral status.
Being a citizen and being a person whose fate matters morally are descriptions under
which a person thinks of him or herself as valuable. To deny them is therefore to attack a
person’s identity in Korsgaard’s sense. Second, those subject to discrimination have strong reasons to oppose discrimination of this kind, and to join with others in doing so. These worthwhile projects confer meaning on a person’s life, and commitments to them are therefore important forms of practical identity. But these practical identities are not the same as the ascriptive identities created by the practice of discrimination itself (even though they depend on the existence of that practice.)

Thus, while religion and race can both be forms of ascriptive identity, they are importantly different. As I said earlier, Sartre’s statement “The anti-Semite creates the Jew” is true at most of one sense of “being Jewish,” what might be called the “purely ascriptive” sense, and what it takes to be Jewish in this sense, being defined by a social practice of anti-Semitism, may be quite different from what it takes to be Jewish in other senses.

For a religious person, being a Jew, or a Christian, or a Muslim will be a practical identity in Korsgaard’s sense, a description under which the person values him or herself and considers his or her life to be worth living, quite independent of any practice of discrimination. And as a form of practical identity, religion is raises in a particularly sharp way the questions about the relations between identity, respect, and insult that I am presently concerned with. A person who is committed to a project or role is subject to feelings of failure and regret if he or she does not fulfill these commitments, and to distress when others argue that these commitments are misguided or even foolish. These reactions are particularly strong in the case of religion, given the importance it can have in someone’s life.
Just because of this importance, however, the remedy cannot be to prohibit criticism of others’ religious views. Questions of importance about how to live one’s life have to be the subject of open discussion and debate. People must be permitted not only to argue about the merits of various religious views but also 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 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 attacks on or disparagement of individuals for holding 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 the context of 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. Advocates of all kinds have reason to seek greater attention by pushing the boundaries of established norms. It is an inviting strategy for leaders of a group to build solidarity among their followers by

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18 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.
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 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 of the kinds mentioned above to “stand up for themselves” and oppose. A supposed analogy with racial discrimination is even sometimes invoked. These claims seem to me to have no plausibility. But this does not prevent them from being effective ways of building solidarity within these groups.

“Identity Politics”

This analysis of ascriptive identities and the reasons they can give rise to provides a basis for understanding recent controversies in the U.S. about “identity politics,” including claims by some writers that this is something that the Democratic Party should avoid.19 What is identity politics, and how does it differ from the interest group politics that has been the stock in trade of the Democratic Party (and of other political parties) for decades?

A party engages in interest group politics by seeking the support of people in some group, such as farmers, labor unions, or people profit from some particular

industry, by promising to promote the interests they share as members of that group. So understood, interest group politics need not be based on any idea that members of that group have been unjustly or unfairly treated. It might involve such a claim (such as that workers are being exploited) but it need not. Engaging in interest group politics can consist just in a commitment to vigorously support certain groups in the competition for benefits, through “log-rolling” and other political devices.

African Americans, women, and LGBT individuals could be 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?

Each of these groups is defined by an ascriptive identity, a characterization under which they have been subject unjustified negative attitudes, denied important opportunities, and even denied important rights. Members of these groups thus have 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 change. As I have said earlier, reasons of this kind are good reasons only if the norms and attitudes that they are protesting against are in fact unjust, as they are in this case. It follows that the claims of these 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 they raise claims of justice, 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; especially claims that the huge gains of the super rich are unjustified. But these claims are not labeled as “identity politics” because that label is part of a rhetorical strategy specifically designed to stir up resentment chiefly among working class male 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 particular discomfort to members of this target audience because they 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 justice and makes the claims appear instead to be unreasonable demands for special treatment. This is what the rhetorical 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 their moral presuppositions, appear to be invalid.

This strategy is clear in the response to the Black Lives Matter movement. This movement was organized to call attention to police departments’ policies and practices that give insufficient weight to the lives of black people. A prominent line of response was the counter-slogan “All Lives Matter.” This counter-slogan expresses something that is undeniably true, and was not being denied, but rather affirmed, by the protestors in
insisting that Black Lives Matter. The presupposition of the “All Lives Matter” slogan, however, was that the BLM protesters 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.

Why should anyone be opposed to the Black Lives Matter 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 more than this seems to me to be involved. 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 is itself a form of identity politics—white identity politics. So those who offer it may seem inconsistent: they are criticizing identity politics while engaging in a form of it themselves. Inconsistency is not the primary fault in their position, however. 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. By refusing to acknowledge these charges, they 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 entirely justified. The claims involved—that whites are being unfairly criticized and subjected to unjust demands—are manifestly false. But the problem with their position is the falsity of these claims, not mere inconsistency.

What follows from this analysis? Am I agreeing with those who say that progressives should avoid “identity politics”? In a way, “yes,” but in a more important way “no.” The important part is that I am not suggesting that progressives should set aside or downplay issues such as racial injustice, unequal pay and unequal opportunities for women, and the denial of equal rights for gays and lesbians. To do this would be morally indefensible. What I am suggesting is that positions on these issues should be put as claims of justice, not in terms of identity. This is, in one way, simply an application of the general point I have been making throughout this lecture: that claims made using ideas of identity are better understood not in terms of identity but rather in terms of the underlying reasons that are at work in each case. In the case of “identity politics” in particular, this lack of clarity enables a deceptive, but politically potent, rhetorical response.

National Identity

At the beginning of this lecture I mentioned a New York Times article concerning the views of Americans about what is required in order for someone to be an American—whether, for example, this required being white, or being a 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 depended on this, such
as 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 therefore disturbed by the suggestion that there was a sense of “being American” that included more that merely being a citizen, and that might have this kind of significance. And I was particularly disturbed by the suggestion that whether someone was an American in any significant sense might depend on his or her race or religion.

One question that I want to investigate in this section is how we might understand an idea of American identity that is independent of simply being a citizen, and to consider what might follow from being, or not being, American in this sense. I will focus on the question of being American, because that is the form in which the problem presents itself to me, but I hope that what I will say will have more general relevance. The question of national identity is a large topic, about which an enormous amount has been written. What I will try to do briefly in this section, drawing on the analysis offered in previous sections, is to provide a normative analysis of some possible understandings of national identity, what would be required to have such an identity and what implications having or lacking this identity might have.

Three ways of accounting for the significance of identity that I have discussed above are potentially relevant here. The first is experiential: the significance for a person and for others of the fact that he or she finds certain activities or forms of interaction enjoyable. The second is the significance of a person’s plans, intentions, and other commitments. The third is a matter of the obligations that a person has to others to whom he or she stands in certain relations.
The moral status of citizenship is best explained in this third way. If political institutions are established in a given territory and are reasonably just, then individuals to whom these institutions apply are obligated to comply with its requirements, and entitled to demand the protections and services that it specifies. What I am concerned with at present, however, is a form of identity that is independent of citizenship, and I want to explore the possibility of accounting for the significance of such an idea of identity in one or the other of the first two ways just mentioned.20

Consider first an experiential account. A central aspect of thinking of oneself as an American might involve taking pleasure in remembering and celebrating events in American history, such as the American revolution and the signing of the Declaration of Independence. So one idea of national identity would be, that being an American involves, at least in part, taking pleasure in celebrating these things and seeing oneself, and other Americans, as having reason to do so.

As I said earlier in discussing experiential reactions as forms of identity, the fact that one enjoys celebrating certain things is a perfectly good reason to do this as long as

20 One thing that will not follow from either of these accounts is that one has special obligations toward others simply in virtue of sharing a national identity, or that one has reason to give their interests greater weight than the comparable interests of others. David Miller, for example, writes that individuals have “unconditional obligations to other members of a [national] community that arise simply by virtue of the fact of having been born and raised in that particular community.” On Nationality (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995) p. 42. Membership in a state does involve obligations of this kind. One has, for example, special obligations to pay taxes to support schools and other public services for poorer communities within one’s country and reasons to vote for policies that would provide such services. But this is a matter of co-citizenship, or perhaps co-residency, rather than shared nationality in any thicker sense. If a crisis arises when I am in an airport in some foreign country mere nationality gives me no greater reason to aid another American than a Canadian or Ghanaian or Korean in similar need that I am equally able to help.
these are things that there is no objection to celebrating, or taking pleasure in. So, while there may be good reason to celebrate the progressive aspects of American history, there would be an objection to doing so in a way that involved a refusal to recognize the serious injustices that are also a part of this history, such as slavery and the forced removal of Native Americans. There is no objection to observing black history month, but there would be an objection to celebrating “white history month” insofar as this involved claims of racial superiority or involved denying or glossing over regrettable facts about America.

What, then, is the normative significance of being, or not being, an American, when this identity is understood in this experiential way? Not being an American in this sense does not entail any lack of standing as a citizen. Insofar as this identity merely consists in what a person takes pleasure in doing, it might seem to have no relevance other than to decisions about whom to invite to a Fourth of July Party.

But this is not the whole of the matter. For those who have this identity, the significance of the fact that others do not have it, will depend on the reasons why they do not. If someone fails to take pleasure in the celebration of certain events in American history simply because history leaves them cold, this would not matter very much. But if a person’s reason for not taking pleasure in these events were that he thought that the ideals of liberty and equality being celebrated were fundamentally mistaken, this would mark a serious breach. Similarly, for someone who believed that the founding of the American republic on the basis of a compromise with slavery made it something not to be celebrated, that fact that others were willing to celebrate it, or even to do so uncritically, would, again, be a serious matter.
But insofar as some aspects of American history are worthy of being celebrated, anyone, anywhere, would have an experiential reason for celebrating them if he or she enjoyed doing so. So in order for taking pleasure in these events, and in marking them with celebrations, to be a mark of American identity, it must involve taking pleasure in these events because one takes oneself to be connected with them in some way. If this identity is to apply to most Americans, the connection in question must hold for individuals who were born, or came to this country, decades or even centuries after the events being celebrated.

I cannot assess all of the ways that such a connection might be understood. I will discuss only one, drawing on an account of identity of the second kind I listed. On this account, to see oneself as having a certain identity is to see oneself as a participating in, and intending to continue to participate in, some practice. The examples I discussed earlier were such things as professions and family roles. More relevant examples for present purposes are cultural and political projects.

Whether someone has good reason to have and to act on an identity of this kind will depend on the reasons for promoting the project in question. Promoting a distinctively white American culture is, I would argue, not something worth doing. But there are many shared projects that would be worthwhile, and just institutions must allow scope for pursuing them. Promoting a distinctively Christian way of living might be one of these. The problem, however, comes with saying that American identity requires a commitment to any particular religious project. One might say, in fact, that “being American” is incompatible with viewing as American only those with some particular religious commitment, or only those of a certain race. Indeed, I am tempted to say this
myself. In saying this, I would be indicating that I myself attach importance to an idea of American identity, going beyond mere citizenship, of the kind that I expressed some skepticism about earlier in this lecture. I still think that this temptation should be resisted. But I want to look more carefully at why such an idea might be appealing, by considering the content it might have and asking what it might mean to attach the label ‘American’ to this idea.

The identity I have in mind is 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. A commitment to these ideals is a political commitment, but it is distinct from commitment to current American political institutions. It is not a view about who has legal standing or Constitutional rights, but rather about who should have those rights, and about whose interests count in determining what our social and economic policies should be.

To call a commitment to these ideals a form of American identity would not be to claim that these ideals are uniquely American. They are ideals that members of any nation have reason to value. But they are acknowledged sufficiently clearly in founding documents and famous events in American history that it makes sense to say that pursuing them is an American political project. Nonetheless, not all Americans are committed to it. Or at the very least, many Americans have serious disagreements about what these ideals require.

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21 Here I believe I am in agreement with what Joseph Raz says about the “only acceptable interpretation” of the “Jewish values” to which the state of Israel is devoted. See Value, Respect, and Attachment (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 37-38.
The fact that many of my fellow citizens do not share this identity does not change their rights or my obligations to them. These rights and obligations “go with the territory.” But when other Americans vote, or support policies, in ways that are incompatible with these ideals, this indicates that I do not have the relationship them that I have reason to want to have with my fellow citizens, and that I have reason to hope to have with my fellow Americans, given our shared history. Their lack of commitment to these ideals impairs my relationship with them. My reaction to this—a sense of estrangement, and a need to reconsider what our continuing relationship is or can be—amounts to what I have called elsewhere a form of blame.22

If I were to say that “being American” requires being committed to these ideals, the sense of identity I would be invoking is aspirational: I would be expressing a hope or wish about the kind of a relationship one would like to have with my fellow citizens. The sense of estrangement I have described, from fellow Americans who are not committed to these ideals, explains the temptation to say that they lack something that is part of being American. But this temptation should be resisted. They are fellow Americans, which is part of what makes the sense of estrangement so acute. The account I have offered, of shared commitment to a political ideal, provides a better explanation of these cases than does the idea of American identity.

My discussion of national identity has been limited in two ways. I have focused on ideas of American identity, and on one particular form of shared commitment, commitment to certain important political ideals. But the point I have been making can be

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generalized along both of these dimensions: to apply to other nationalities, and to other forms of (aspirationally) shared commitment. There are many forms of shared commitment other than the one I have discussed, including commitment to a particular language or culture, a religion, or way of life. Insofar as one has historical reasons to believe that these commitments are widely shared among one’s compatriots, it may be tempting to say that having such a commitment is a matter of national identity, but this temptation should be resisted.

Such appeals to ‘identity’ would be aspirational in the way I have described, since it is unlikely that everyone in a society will share these commitments. The feeling of estrangement from one’s fellow citizens who do not share such a commitment will vary from case to case depending on the importance of the commitments in question. This estrangement is particularly acute in the case of the political ideals I have been discussing because political institutions and decisions affect all aspects of our lives in important ways. This means that there is also more reason to want this commitment to be unanimous than there is in the case of other projects and ideals. One advantage of viewing these phenomena in terms of shared commitment rather than in terms of identity is that it allows for this kind of variation in content and in importance.

For a person to cite nationality—“because I am American” (or French, or British, as the case may be)—as the reason for having some commitment would be a form of bad faith, of the kind I discussed at the beginning of this lecture. To tell one’s compatriots that they must have this commitment because of their nationality, and thus are not really American (or French or British) if they do not would be a form of bullying, based on an unjustified proprietary claim to the name in question. The forms of cultural or political
estrangement expressed by such claims may be quite legitimate. But “identity” is not the best way to express them.

Conclusion

Many different kinds of facts about a person can be called facts about his or her identity. I have considered a number of these, including facts about experiential responses, facts about abilities, facts about professions and other commitments, facts about personal relationships, facts about how others view a person, and facts about a person’s nationality. In many cases such facts do make a difference both to the reasons that a person has to behave in various ways and to the reasons others have to treat that person in various ways. But I have argued that the idea of identity is not a helpful way of explaining these things.

It is unhelpful, first, because it suggests a misleading uniformity among cases that are actually quite different. Having a certain profession is different from being a member of a family, or having a certain religion, or finding certain activities or forms of social interaction agreeable, and all of these are different from being stigmatized by others as having characteristics that they see as making you undesirable.

Second, identity is not a helpful way to think about what is at stake in any one of these cases, insofar as it invites us, mistakenly, to take certain facts about a person, because they are aspects of his or her “identity,” as in themselves reasons for the person to act in certain ways. Putting things in terms of identity also fuels conflict, because it makes it easy to misrepresent disagreement about values, which is inevitable, as disparagement of the individuals whose identity involves a commitment to those values.
Taking identity as a basic notion also blocks understanding of the reasons that individuals have, or take themselves to have. Instead of taking a person to have certain reasons because of his or her identity, we should ask what exactly these reasons are, and consider what further considerations are required in order for them to be reasons. This is what I have tried to do in this lecture: to understand diverse appeals to identity by describing the various reasons they appeal to and examining their normative presuppositions.

I have argued that it is important to distinguish between reasons deriving from 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 those to whom one stands in relationships that one has reason to value, and reasons for objecting to discrimination and working together with other victims of discrimination to eliminate it. I have not tried to assess the relative strengths of these diverse reasons in particular cases. My aim has been merely to distinguish them, and thus to provide a clearer understanding of what is at stake. Other appeals to identity may involve 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 them.