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Book Review The Lies That Bind: Rethinking Identity

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The Lies That Bind: Rethinking Identity
Kwame Anthony Appiah, New York: W. W. Norton, 2018, 256 pp., \$27.95
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Identity is something many people take for granted. At the end of a course I teach titled “Self and Identity,” students often write that prior to taking the class they had considered identity to be a given. They *thought* they knew exactly what it was; they were moderately certain that identity would be an easy concept to discuss—until we discussed it for a whole semester, twisting and turning concepts and evaporating their certainty. Similarly, Kwame Anthony Appiah’s book *The Lies That Bind: Rethinking Identity* is a dismantling of identity as a demographic and social construct. This book is a keen examination of many of the elements ordinary people consider to be essential parts of their identity—particularly religion, gender, and race. Artfully, alliteratively arranged in chapters titled “Classification,” “Creed,” “Color,” “Country,” “Class,” and “Culture,” Appiah’s book deftly dismantles the central ideas of these constructs until we are left with a pile of rubble. He writes in the introduction, “Much of what is dangerous about [these ideas] has to do with the way identities—religion, nation, race, class and culture—divide us and set us against one another. They can be the enemies of human solidarity, the sources of war, horsemen of a score of apocalypses from apartheid to genocide” (xvi). This is a central theme of the book: we often cobble together these categories, accepting them as valid and real, and in using them to contribute to problems of the world—racism, Islamophobia, nationalism, and disregard for the poor, to provide a few examples.

The book is highly readable, meant for a wider audience than academia. So although Appiah discusses narrative and other concepts that are routinely included in philosophical literature about identity, this is not a book that references that body of literature or its jargon. That quality in itself can be considered an asset, but it would also likely be the main criticism of the book by someone looking for a more academic approach steeped in recent literature. However, Appiah impressively weaves together personal stories and anecdotes with examples from literature and history. He explains that identities are labels that matter to people because they impact claims we make about appropriate vs. inappropriate behaviors (e.g., “I should do *x* because I am a *y*”). These ideas lay out what Appiah calls “norms of identification” (10); they are bedrock beliefs we have, foundational and often essentialist. And they lead to stereotypes we expect to mirror reality. Early in the book, Appiah offers up examples from his own youth, “when . . . the idea that you could be properly English and not white seemed fairly uncommon” (7), showing that notions of both “color” and “country” are blurrier and more confusing than one may initially realize.

Thus, the hardwired essentialist assumptions human beings use to group things and people into categories is a helpful theme throughout this book. The stereotypes adults assume about their world can be traced to childhood. As Appiah explains, “What essentialism means is that children assume that these superficial differences—the ones that

lead to applying the label—reflect deeper, inward differences that explain a great deal of how people behave” (26). Recognizing the tendency we as humans have to perpetuate essentialism—incomplete and erroneous as its demographic categories may be—is crucial to fighting the forces of racism, sexism, anti-Semitism, and other forms of oppression. Similarly, I would say one of the main strengths of this book is its underlying presentation of how we have approached many of the categories of identity as binaries—male vs. female, black vs. white, citizen vs. immigrant, etc. These binaries are often too simplistic; they do not track with reality. Take, for example, the gender binary of “masculine” and “feminine.” There is growing awareness of a segment of the American population that find themselves outside this binary, in a third or fourth category. This is also true elsewhere in the world. Appiah offers the example of two categories in India: *kothis* (men who identify more with being feminine) and *hijras* (men who reject this binary and consider themselves something other than the binary choice between man or woman). Neither of these groups can be completely superimposed on our American notions of “transgender” or “gender neutral” (17), a fact that illustrates the tangled and labyrinthine nature of identity. And taken together, these two human tendencies (essentialism and binary thinking) show us how oversimplified our ideas of identity really are.

Additionally, Appiah indicates that many of the identity categories we use are overstated in different ways. Or, as he puts it, “we have a tendency to exaggerate the continuities of [identities like creed and country] over time” (141). For instance, we currently recognize national identities, like German, Italian, or Pakistani, but such identities are newer, younger constructs. Germany was not unified until the late nineteenth century, so while Germans may now feel part of a common German identity, this would not have been true in the eighteenth century, prior to unification. The desire to homogenize a country’s citizens seems part and parcel of the thrust of Appiah’s argument. He fittingly points out that “many of the genocides of the twentieth century—against Turkey’s Armenians, Europe’s Jews, and Rwanda’s Tutsis—were perpetrated in the name of one people against another with the aim of securing a homogenous nation” (80). It is unsurprising, then, that Appiah asks “what *does* hold countries together?” (99), because in many cases countries are more of an invention than we have often considered them to be. His examination of the phenomenon of race is similar here. Modern notions of race are often traced back to the nineteenth century, where there is no lack of evidence that various white intellectuals wanted both to categorize people by phenotypes they believed were caused by genotypes and also to prove the superiority of the white race. Like country (and religion), their categorizations relied on a kind of continuity that does not really exist. As Appiah rightly points out, “Another thing became clear through the course of twentieth-century genetics. The vast bulk of our genetic material is shared with all normal human beings, whatever their race” (119). It is now transparent that even assumptions about human

biology are entangled with questions and notions that mirror our ideas of nations. We are left with stereotypes that do not match reality and instead are riddled with illusions. Similarly, Appiah's diagnosis of religion is on point. He demonstrates that the world's major religions are subject to complexities that disunify what we often think of as a unified whole. He writes, "If by a religion you meant a single coherent set of doctrines, precepts, and practices, then none of the familiar global religions—nor world—would be one religion" (41). Religion is often subject to a kind of thinking he describes as "who's out" vs. "who's in" (40); this stems directly from how religions have been prone to schism since the beginning of religion itself. Additionally, *who* is part of the "in-group" is subjective and also subject to change. Whether or not members of the Bahá'í religion are actually a sect of Islam is not an agreed-upon truth. Similar questions arise over whether Mormons are Christians (42). To claim that Hinduism is "a single coherent whole" is also problematic, Appiah claims, due to all of the different texts, gods, festivals, traditions, and temples that exist across the subcontinent of India (44). He also importantly points out that the word "Hinduism" was introduced in the nineteenth century, and that some would claim this moment signaled the birth of the religion itself (43). This claim goes against the grain of how most people think about religions, especially those like Hinduism that have well-known ancient texts. Thus, one might wonder precisely what holds a *religion* together. Appiah is quick to note that traditions, practices, and scriptural interpretations are all subject to change and that we are perhaps in a better position if we think of our religious affiliations and traditions as being more fluid and mutable.

Perhaps the grossest mistake scholars have made in this way of thinking is the bewildering conception of "Western culture" or the "West." This, too, is a nineteenth-century invention, emerging from imperialism. The very concept of "Western culture" is supposed to trace back to an area technically outside its own boundaries (namely Mesopotamia, technically in the Middle East). If this term is supposed to signify "Christendom," it is still a misapplication, since Christianity is practiced on every continent in the world now and also did not emerge from Europe or any part of "the West." This discussion is one of the crowning achievements of Appiah's book. He makes clear the "identity lie" that binds us, the other motivating factors of classifying people into binary groups (us vs. them; Christian vs. non-Christian), and how forces like imperialism and colonialism have wreaked havoc on our very understanding of the world.

The chapter on class serves as an outlier in the book in the sense that class *does* have continuity, Appiah explains, and often more so than we assume (141). The chapter is rife with examples of how social classes, based on monetary wealth and family background, exist cross-culturally and historically, contributing to strong associations with norms of behavior and proper treatment toward members of classes and acknowledging class

distinctions themselves. This chapter is crucial because it serves as an important foil to the hodge-podge concepts of nationality and race. Because the stringent boundaries between classes in some places *have* existed since before the nineteenth century, they have had long-lasting effects on how we assume people will behave in many contexts.

In conclusion, I recommend this engaging, approachable book for anyone who wants to explore social ontology in a broader way. Delving into the imprecisions, errors, and oppressive forces that have forged the boundaries of many of these categories may be hard work, but it is nonetheless important work to do if we are to face reality and overcome the lies we have inherited. Since philosophers are in the business of making distinctions between appearances and reality, what is real and what is less so, this is work we should be doing for our own betterment as well.