

Review Essay

Appiah's Reconstruction of Philosophical Liberalism

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Kwame Anthony Appiah, *The Ethics of Identity*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004, 384p. ISBN 0-691-12036-6, \$29.95

Kwame Anthony Appiah is an unapologetic liberal individualist, and in this new book aims to lay the groundwork for a new version of liberal theory adequate to the challenges of our time. Liberalism, Appiah states, is an evolving tradition of concerns for certain values (e.g., limited government and basic rights, equality, autonomy, dignity, tolerance and individuality) as well as concerns for arguments about their meanings, justifications, and proper applications. Succeeding generations of liberals have made important contributions—Locke on limited government, Kant on autonomy, the French revolutionists on equality, Mill on individuality. Combining, but also critiquing, the elements that constitute their common heritage, liberals reconstruct liberal theory to protect and advance their values in the unique conditions of their own times. Appiah's attempt to reconstruct liberalism calls to mind John Dewey's project a century earlier.

The word "identity" in his title gives a broad hint about how Appiah sees current challenges. Liberal ethics and politics have tended to make use of a particular abstraction: the rational, autonomous, individual self. They have inquired about the rights and obligations this thinly conceived self possesses, and the challenges it faces in realizing its individual potential. Liberals have not denied that actually existing people are more than the "thin" individuals of liberal theory, that they are "encumbered" with various ethnic, religious, professional, and community identities that are replete with special obligations and value commitments. But until recently liberals have not attended to how recognition of such identities might qualify the received wisdom of liberal theory.

Issues of identity have, however, forced themselves upon the public attention in recent years, due to the civil rights movement, the influx of immigrants, and the re-emergence of religion in civic life. Claims regarding identity have, as a result, have generated a large body of scholarly literature, much of which has been devoted to showing how attention to identity undermines not only received

liberal notions of rationality, autonomy, and individuality, but liberalism itself. Appiah sets out to assess this challenge, by scrutinizing the concept of "identity" and the various notions associated with it such as "culture" and "diversity."

As identity claims have come to the fore, Appiah notes, philosophers have become increasingly aware that narrowly moral obligations make up only a small part of our normative concerns; special obligations associated with the group attachments we form in the course of shaping our lives also play an important role. While there is today no settled way of marking out the normative sphere focused on the kinds of lives that are good or bad for a person to lead, this issue was central to what the ancient philosophers marked as "ethics," and he chooses to adopt their language. Thus, an "ethics of identity" is a normative theory about how identities enter, for good or for ill, into the kinds of lives we lead.

Appiah writes not as a social prognosticator or guide, but as a professional philosopher situated squarely within contemporary philosophical discourse. Acting as adjudicator, he groups philosophical concepts and arguments together for assessment under broad topics like autonomy, identity, and culture. As an interesting stylistic gesture, Appiah invites John Stuart Mill, a prophet of liberal individualism, to accompany him as he moves through this terrain. Mill's familiar texts provide Appiah with concrete ideas both to consider and to test against current philosophical ideas. This is a nice touch, because Mill's focus on the challenges of attaining individuality in the face of pressures to conform to social conventions plays nicely against the potential constraints imposed by socially given identities. Does it help, or hurt, people to attain a full measure of individuality, Appiah asks, when their given identities (as Jews or African American, or for that matter, as professional philosophers) already encumber them with prescribed life scripts, values, and obligations?

Alan Ryan has suggested that Dewey might have been a more suitable companion for Appiah, as Dewey took up many of the issues that Appiah considers along the way. Given Appiah's individualist starting point, I think that Mill is the wiser choice, because, like William James but, arguably, unlike Dewey, Mill had a very special place in his heart for all manner of distinct, even eccentric, individuals. Though he was no romantic individualist who imagined an authentic self to be stamped upon each person at conception, he recognized that given the great diversity of genetic endowments and early life circumstances, an equally wide diversity of kinds of lives were required for individuals to flourish.

The Ethics of Identity is divided into six chapters, backed up by endnotes constituting almost one fifth of the text. Although the theory of "rooted cosmopolitanism" presented in the final chapter recapitulates many of Appiah's themes, the book is not in fact structured as a unified argument for a comprehensive new theory, but rather as a series of detailed assessments of concepts and arguments. In what follows I selectively present some of the main ideas of the book, and then offer a brief overall assessment.

Chapter 1, “The Ethics of Individuality,” asks how the notion of identity enters into the liberal conception of individuality. The attainment of individuality is a central concern of liberal ethics. It is not a given, as postulated by romantic conceptions of authenticity (being true to your authentic self) but develops in coordination with a plan of life (a notion central to the ethical theories of Mill, Royce and Rawls). Life plans are not like engineering plans that lay out determinate, concrete steps for realizing fully imagined designs. Rather, they are basic life projects and commitments, mutable sets of articulating aims that are expressions of each person’s evolving individuality and that provide something like a rudder as that person steers through the contingencies of life.

For a liberal, this plan is “up to” each person; each is responsible for giving life a definite shape. But the plan is not, therefore, arbitrary; it is not a good plan merely because a person has made it, but rather because it is chosen in light of realistic consideration of his or her dispositions, circumstances, and life options. Because this life plan makes essential reference to existing circumstances and available life options, however, it is inevitably social; it is mapped out through concepts and practices available in the surrounding society. On such a view, the individual whose self-creation is valued is not the narrowly *self-regarding* individualist, a point Dewey frequently insisted upon.

Society for its part already provides a repertoire of kinds of lives, and various narrative scripts for them, associated with loose norms and models determining what living these kinds of lives entails. These are social identities. Such identities assist each of us in making choices among valuable things that, without our identities, we would have no basis in choosing. They provide patterns which help us focus on particular issues, form solidarity with others sharing our identity, and see where we stand in the social whole. A person who identified as a Jew, for example, would have, by virtue of that identity, a basis for choosing among foods, for taking a special interest in the historical plight of the Jewish people, for a feeling of solidarity with other Jews, and for situating himself as something of an outsider in a social world that is dominantly Christian. In this way social identities can be thought of as pre-existing basic life plans, scripts that their bearers live out over the course of their lives. Individuality consists in accepting (or resisting) those identities that are thrust upon one (e.g. racial, religious and gender identities), choosing others (e.g., professional or residential identities), and then modifying them to suit one’s particular dispositions and circumstances. Here Appiah may be asked whether identities play a *necessary* mediating role in the development of individuality. A young man attracted to wilderness and offended by the encroachments of developers might today embrace an “environmentalist” identity that has Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, and Aldo Leopold baked in as models. But did these models have comparable social identities available for them, or were they in some important sense “true originals”?

Chapter 2, “Autonomy and Its Critics,” is concerned with the meaning of

liberal autonomy and its place in ethical and political life, focusing on the tension between liberal concern for rational self-direction and recognition of the social matrix of identities that not only constrains, but also constitutes individual selves.

Some philosophers conceive autonomy as an ethical virtue that demands cultivation. For them, autonomy consists in the full and free rational deliberation regarding actions and choices. On that view of autonomy few individuals actually *are* autonomous, as few are sufficiently rational and deliberative. Appiah rejects this strong account of autonomy, arguing that it requires a level of critical self-consciousness not entailed by the concept. One can be an autonomous person, he quips, without becoming a moral philosopher. Other philosophers, most notably the communitarians, claim that the very idea of an autonomous individual is strictly incoherent; individuals are constituted within a social context: selves are functions in a social field and their choices are bound up with the life scripts of subject positions.

Each of these two groups, according to Appiah, adopts one of two distinct perspectives on the individual in society: a subject-centered perspective that focuses on agency vs. a social-centered perspective that focuses on existing social structure. The mistake lies in placing these perspectives in opposition. The two perspectives are conceptual tools that serve different interests; they bring different factors into focus and provide different vocabularies for talking about what we see. Different situations call for the use of different perspectives and their vocabularies. The importance of the agency perspective with its discourse of autonomy is that it enables us to conceive of a political sphere in which persons are regarded as ends, as possessing dignity and inherent worth, that is, a social and political order conducive to the development of individuality.

In chapter 3, "The Demands of Identity," Appiah more precisely defines the notion of a social identity, and then asks whether social identities are preconditions for autonomy or threats to it, and whether the liberal state should take the social identities of its citizens into account in legislation and judicial decisions. He stipulates the following conditions for L's being a social identity:

- i. There are terms available in public discourse for picking out Ls; that is, there is some public consensus on who is and who is not an L (e.g., a Jew, an African-American, a professional philosopher);
- ii. There is some internalization of the L identity by at least some Ls, so that e.g., they act as Ls, take an interest in the sorts of things Ls take an interest in, express solidarity with other Ls; and
- iii. There is at least some general social response pattern to Ls, such that non-Ls can be said to react to the L-ness of others in a socially predictable way; some of these social responses may be

discriminatory, in which case the L identity itself may be oppositional and involve narratives of resistance.

Historically, liberalism has been associated with the struggle for treating citizens *without* regard for their social identities, e.g., to treat Jews, or African Americans, or women, as equals, without regard to their ethnic, racial, or gender identities. But recently, multiculturalists have turned this around, arguing that because individuality requires a background of social identity, and because individual Ls cannot flourish if Ls as a group are socially devalued, the state must not ignore, but rather must explicitly recognize and respect the identities of citizens.

In considering these claims, Appiah divides multiculturalists into two camps, which he labels “hard” and “soft” pluralists. Hard pluralists such as Horace Kallen want to conceive multi-cultural nation states as federations of identity groups, and wish the liberal state to promote and protect not only individual but also group flourishing. Indeed, the two are interconnected because, as hard pluralists insist, individual Ls can flourish only if the L group flourishes (think, for example, of the burden placed on each African-American by the social devaluation of African-Americans as a group.)

Appiah notes that on the surface, hard pluralism conflicts with liberal individualism. When positive recognition of an identity is demanded, the identity tends to freeze; the very apparatus of recognition leads to the ossification of the identity. There will, however, be individual Ls who will dissent from, or reject, the L scripts prescribed by the group representatives who interact with the state in efforts to promote and preserve the group. Others will simply wish to exit from the group, for example Jews who choose to convert. Either of these choices would weaken the group, and the liberal state, even in the name of group recognition, cannot be placed in the position of working against them.

There is a deeper problem, in that there is no obvious way to determine the appropriate boundaries of the various groups in the national federation of identity groups. How about the group of *dissenting* Catholics who practice birth control and favor priesthood for women? Clearly there are many of these, and they have their own organizations and communication vehicles, and membership in this group also provides a basis for meaning and solidarity. Should the state promote and protect their identities too? To do so would obviously undermine the state’s promotion and protection of Catholic identity, and negate the entire hard pluralist program.

Further, some identity groups are themselves internally illiberal, in that they practice discrimination against a sub-group of members, for example against women. The restrictions on women with regard to professional choices in certain forms of Islam, for example, make it impossible for them to make life plans that suit their individual temperaments and talents. Liberal individualism cannot recognize and value such restrictions.

Such considerations have weighed in favor of one or another version of

“soft” pluralism. Will Kymlicka, for example, has argued that the state should both recognize and protect certain identity groups, but also demand that such groups abandon illiberal practices. Critics of soft pluralism, however, have responded that this is not sufficiently pluralistic because requiring groups to abandon some of their core practices is not to recognize, but rather to annihilate them. After assessing these concerns, Appiah counters that the multiculturalists' concern for the protection and survival of identity groups is misplaced; they should instead concern themselves with equal citizenship for group members. This requires only equal respect from the state for individual citizens regardless of their identity groups, not group recognition.

In chapter 4, “The Problem with Culture,” Appiah notes that much of the discussion of social identity has been centered about the notion of *culture*. Individuals are seen as deriving their identity from their cultures, and cultures are the kind of group that struggles for recognition. The term “culture,” however has expanded beyond the root notion of an encompassing network of practices supporting and sustaining the way of life of a territorial group. It has become ubiquitous, applying to just about any network of group practices, so that we now speak of youth culture, deaf culture, and gay culture. Appiah complains that the term has been “atomized within an inch of its life,” making the discourse of culture a “singularly boggy terrain.” Has the notion of culture expanded to such an extent that has lost its all of its “conceptual purchase,” so that questions of identity should now be taken up in other terms? Appiah provides several arguments for concluding that it has.

He first argues that if cultures are regarded as intrinsically valuable, as good in themselves, this would suggest that they be preserved, or frozen in ways that would constrain the life choices of their members in ways that, as we saw above, would violate the demands of liberal individualism. Here Appiah echoes Dewey's observations that individual group members cannot borrow a culture, but have to make one (MW 10:297). The present is “life leaving the past behind” (MW 9:79–81); the vital task of culture is not to reproduce the past but to produce in the present the conditions for future vitality.

Appiah then argues that programs of cultural destruction (e.g., requiring native American children to be taken from their parents and educated in residential schools) can readily be condemned on liberal grounds without reliance on a notion of culture, as abuses of state power and imposition of unequal status for members of certain groups.

Similarly, cultures are sometimes defended as the necessary contexts for certain values. For example, some may feel that chastity has not been valued adequately since the passing of the Victorian culture, and they may wish to restore a “culture” of chastity. The problem here is that there has been a slippage from “culture writ large” to “culture writ small.” Certainly the advocates of chastity do not wish to restore Victorian culture in its entirety, nor could they, nor are they likely to think that only that specific culture in all its detail could value

chastity. Thus, all the talk about culture is entirely superfluous; what they value is not culture but chastity.

A deeper concern is that projects of preserving and protecting cultures never arise in a political or economic vacuum. Projects defended in terms of cultural preservation often require change rather than preservation. The project of “preserving Quebec culture” by eliminating street signs or school instruction in English, for example, has been more about constructing a new Quebec identity than preserving anything that existed in the past. Here, appeals to “culture” are simply misleading cover-ups for forward looking political projects.

Ironically, some ways of granting recognition to cultures erodes or destroys rather than protects and preserves them. Consider groups who have suffered discrimination and whose identities have been sustained through cultural narratives of opposition. To turn around and positively value their cultures is to give the *received* cultures the kiss of death. African Americans become more like Whites, not less, when their “culture” is positively recognized and valued, because in that event the oppositional narratives and behavioral patterns that have evolved as central to their culture are undermined. Instead of worrying about their culture, we might be better off simply treating African Americans with equal respect, and letting their culture evolve however it might.

Finally Appiah considers whether we retain the language of culture not because we value culture, but because we value cultural *diversity*. He notes that Mill placed great value on the diversity of ways of life that could flourish within society, but he did so because different ways of life provided contexts in which individuals with different temperaments might flourish. Individuality, not cultural diversity, was the primary value. He wouldn’t have valued despotic ways of life, or those based on slavery, as adding to diversity. Instead, he would have set limits to diversity based on principles of individual self development and respect for basic human rights. “Moral modernity” has rested on the expansion of these principles, for example, their extension to women and minorities. As a result, Appiah argues, no argument for cultural diversity that cuts against these principles is likely to be convincing. So in this case, the talk of cultural diversity adds nothing of value that is not already included in liberal individualism.

In chapter 5, “Soulmaking,” Appiah asks what the role of the liberal state might be in attempting not merely to make citizens’ lives go better, but to make them go better by making the citizens *better people* (hence the term “soulmaking”). Issues of identity enter into this project when we ask in particular about whether, and how, the liberal state should intervene in the process of identity formation with the intent of increasing the chances of citizens with the resulting identities living ethically successful lives. Such lives, Appiah stipulates, are those in which a person both achieves what he or she sets out to achieve in accordance with a plan of life, and experiences and creates things of significant value. For example, a person who set out to become, actually became, a lawyer, and along the

way had many rich experiences and won significant cases, could be said to have lived an "ethically successful life."

Appiah is not out to defend or reject soulmaking, but merely to understand the ways in which it might enter into the projects of the liberal state. He explores three ways in which the liberal state might get involved in soulmaking: making citizens more rational, fighting discrimination, and educating the young. His broad conclusion regarding all three cases is that state efforts to make citizens better people, including efforts that affect the identity formation processes, are unavoidable, but must always be balanced against the need to respect the autonomy of citizens as they currently exist.

With respect to the project of making people *more rational*, Appiah's initial point is that there are ways for the state to assist us in improving our lives without even trying to make us better people. The government may, for example, simply establish a computerized shopping system to flag and remove items at the cash register that we have, in our current moral condition, signed up to do without. Alcoholics could in this way be assisted in staying on the wagon, even without treatment that would make them better.

It might be argued that the state's provision of information, through subsidies for libraries, might also improve our lives, merely by making us more efficient in satisfying our already existing desires, or merely qualifying them in light of new information, rather than by making us better people. The problem with this idea is that past a certain point, the "informed desires" no longer need to bear much relation to the previous unqualified desires. As Appiah puts it, the "informed desire" model moves in the direction of a third-person perspective, in which people are no longer assisted in satisfying their own desires but those selected by a "God that loves them." For example, you want to relax with a cigarette, but after the government anti-smoking and nutritional information campaigns have had their way with you, you drink green tea instead. Are these campaigns merely helping you to satisfy *your own* "informed desire" or are they intended to *change* your desires for the better?

Even those liberal theorists who reject all forms of soul making might not complain about anti-smoking campaigns or nutritional labeling laws. But the state can clearly go too far in its attempts to make us more rational. Appiah invites us to consider life in "Cartesia," where the state campaigns not only against smoking, but against all forms of irrationality including astrology and even supernatural religion. He argues that such a state could not sustain itself as a liberal democracy. It would violate citizen autonomy, undermine identities central to citizens' understandings of themselves, constrain free association and freedom of speech, and simply irritate too many citizens.

With respect to *anti-discrimination* policies, Appiah argues that the liberal state does, and should, intervene to reduce the social stereotypes that generate demeaning identities. It rightly passes laws prohibiting discrimination in public accommodations and employment. These laws result in modifications, over

time, in the identities of both disadvantaged minority group members and those previously engaged in discrimination. This constitutes soulmaking as defined, because the state improves the lives of its citizens in part by fostering better identities. These policies, however, must be balanced against protections of freedom of speech and free association in the private sphere

With regard to the *education* of the young, the state is involved in the formation of those who do not yet have stable identities, and it cannot help but affect their identities. All liberal democratic approaches to education share at least two concerns, the preparation of the young for autonomy, and the preservation of the state as a self-perpetuating democracy. Appiah's initial point is that the process of formation does not strictly entail that the state must get involved in *intentionally* shaping identities in particular ways. Nonetheless, philosophers of many ideological persuasions conceive of education as a "widening of horizons" beyond those of parochial homes, a project intended to support the formation of autonomy by broadening the range of elements from which a life plan can be constructed. This liberal project, however, conflicts with the commitments of those parents adopting certain (e.g., "fundamentalist") identities that explicitly *eschew* wider horizons. While we could try to resolve these conflicts by democratic means, for example, by electing school board members granting them authority to determine the curriculum, Appiah notes that other options may be both possible and more effective.

One possible compromise would be to leave it to parents to teach their children what is *true*, while restricting the state to teaching what various groups in the community *think* to be true. The problem is that illiberal parents have frequently rejected this sort of compromise, insisting that views in conflict with their own can only be taught, if at all, as dangerous error. Appiah doesn't add, but might, that professional educators are no more likely than fundamentalist parents to accept this relativist limitation, as it would effectively undermine their professional identities as teachers. He does note, however, that school officials are usually reticent about acceding to identity claims at odds with the official curriculum. One example is the Mozart case, in which parents found stories in the district's reading textbook offensive, and demanded that their children be excused from the English course. They offered to teach English at home and have their children take the district's mandated reading test, but the district rejected the offer. Appiah thinks they may have been too hasty, as accepting the parents' proposal could be defended on grounds of respecting their autonomy. On the other hand, he acknowledges that many claims grounded in intolerant identities must be rejected, and the schools, given their liberal democratic aims, must seek to modify identities some children acquire at home.

In chapter 6, "Rooted Compopolitanism," Appiah sets out to salvage a cosmopolitan ethic—an identification with all of humanity—in the face of recent attacks. Some critics have argued that cosmopolitanism is incoherent, as the world, unlike the family or local community, is not a concrete site of positional

attachments; one simply cannot identify with "people" in the way one identifies with a brother or a home town. Others have argued that cosmopolitanism is tied to the enlightenment project of perfecting people, and can only be taken up from a position of privilege, i.e., of those *doing* the perfecting, a position that underwrites colonialism as civilizing the heathens.

Some forms of cosmopolitanism have, indeed, been hostile to less universal attachments. Virginia Woolf speaks of "freedom from unreal loyalties," Tolstoy regards patriotism as fake and stupid, Martha Nussbaum considers our families of origin and places of birth "accidental." Appiah quips that just about everything that gives our lives meaning is to a large extent "accidental" in the same sense, so he wishes to develop a version of cosmopolitanism that is friendly to various attachments and loyalties including national ones, a cosmopolitanism that values people *as* encumbered by identities.

A first obstacle to this project lies in squaring associative obligations with the demand for moral impartiality. How, concretely, can a moral agent donate a kidney to his or her brother when there are so many other people who need it just as much if not more? Appiah creatively maintains that this question arises from a Rylean category mistake. Individuals are not, like states, bound by moral equality. The demand for impartiality is "position-dependent"; a store owner can with impunity arrange for his son to take over his position, but a public official can not. The special obligations stemming from our attachments, as a result, do not in general conflict with moral obligations. *Ethical* obligations (donating a kidney for my brother) are born by "thick" selves in light of the lives they have made for themselves by way of associations and attachments. *Moral* obligations (refraining from violence), on the other hand, apply to all moral agents as a result of their "thin" relations. Moral obligations *require* compliance, while ethical obligations merely *call* for it. I can *choose* to be a good brother or *not*, in a way that I cannot choose whether or not to conform to moral rules. The former choice, but not the latter, is "up to me."

This argument secures the merely negative point that special obligations stemming from local attachments do not conflict with commitment to universal moral norms. This leaves open the question of whether *particular* attachments rejected by previous versions of cosmopolitanism, for example, loyalty to nation states, make sense. Appiah divides the task, noting that *states* have a *moral* claim upon us, not because we *choose* to care about them but because their coercive mechanisms open the space for our individual freedoms. *Nations*, on the other hand, *matter* to us *ethically* in much the same way as families and communities; they exist in our chosen projects through our shared exposure to their thick narratives. Being a good patriot is somewhat like being a good brother or neighbor; the choice is "up to us" and is an element in our overall plan of life.

Given our "thin" attachment to particular states, would it make sense to retain our loyalty to our nations while opting for a global state to protect basic moral rights? Appiah answers that we have no reason to think that a global state

would do a better job of protecting individual rights than existing national political institutions. The cosmopolitan project Appiah identifies with does not aim at establishing not a transnational polity but a rich transnational conversation, in which even if we cannot find any rational *basis* for agreement, we may nonetheless reach practical agreement. Such a conversation lies at the heart of Dewey's vision of expanding democracy, and is now taking place at many levels. Dewey's cosmopolitan vision, however, also favored creation of a transnational polity with legislative and executive functions, to prevent war and to protect human rights (MW 5:422, 430). Given the dismal record of the current American administration, making war in defiance of the Security Council and world opinion, violating the Geneva Convention, and undermining basic rights of its citizens through such measures as the eerily named "Patriot Act," I would not be as quick as Appiah to dismiss the need for strong transnational political institutions.



The Ethics of Identity is beautifully written. Appiah's sentences are frequently epigrammatic. His conceptual analyses and arguments are generally clear and persuasive, and at times make use of fascinating thought experiments. His use of a broad range of literary examples to illustrate his points is remarkable for a contemporary philosopher.

Some treatments of the large organizing topics are more successful than others. I found the discussions of identity and individuality (chapter 1), culture (chapter 4) and cosmopolitanism (chapter 6) consistently illuminating. The treatment of autonomy (chapter 2), however, was not entirely convincing. Even if anti-autonomists grant that retaining the vocabulary of rational and autonomous individuals might be *useful* in conceiving the polity as a space for individuality, why would they not counter that employing the language of encumbered selves and social structure can be *even more useful* in identifying issues essential for sustaining individuality, while at the same time providing a more realistic picture of social life. The notion of balancing respect for the autonomy of actually existing (even illiberal) citizens against the state's interest in tolerance and excellence of character (chapter five) struck me as insufficiently theorized, leaving readers without clear principles for considering actual conflicts.

I have two additional grumbles. First, Appiah's selection of texts for discussion has an oddly *presentist* bias. He leaves no contemporary social philosopher behind. All the usual suspects—Richard Rorty, Tom Scanlon, Alasdair MacIntyre, Tom Nagel, Joseph Raz, Will Kymlicka, Michael Sandel, Charles Taylor, Bhiku Parekh and others—receive detailed treatment. But there is no mention of earlier philosophers such as A. I. Melden, who placed issues of personal attachment special obligations on the table, and quite shockingly, no mention of John Dewey, who so influentially addressed Appiah's main topics.

Second, while I greatly admired Appiah's detailed treatment of so many conceptual analyses and arguments, I sometimes found myself lost in the thicket, and would have appreciated a more clearly marked pathway to his main conclusions.

In spite of these reservations, I find Appiah's overall conception of liberalism very congenial. Like many older philosophers who staked their claims before the "era of identity," I have been somewhat skeptical about many popular and scholarly claims made in the name of culture and diversity, some of which have appeared to be thoughtlessly relativistic, others self indulgently outlandish if not blatantly hostile. If Appiah succeeds in attenuating the force of such claims by undermining the theoretical conceptualizations and arguments supporting them, and integrating the valid claims of identity into liberal theory, he will have contributed very significantly to the reconstruction of liberalism.

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