

# Identity, Culture, and Value

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The personal and political significance of social identity is well studied; this paper contributes to those studies a discussion of the metaphysics of identity. Three features of an adequate theory of identity are specified, two existing theories are considered, and concerns about them are leveraged in order to craft a new theory. An identity group is a group whose members value and commit to valuing enough of the activities and products of cultures associated with the group. Theories of culture and commitment are provided. Some hard cases are discussed.

Work on identity pervades the humanities and social sciences, Google Ngram reports an eightfold uptick in identity talk over the past fifty years, and identity politics entangles public debates. Philosophers have had a piece of the action, writing insightfully about identity's personal and political significance. However, in the course of weighing a phenomenon's significance, it often pays to know precisely what it is that is significant, and work on the metaphysics of identity is surprisingly neglected. Anthony Appiah (2005) has articulated a behavioural theory of identity (see also Gutman 2003 and Jenkins 2018), and Akeel Bilgrami (2015) has offered an evaluative alternative. Yet neither engages the other, and nobody has sought to negotiate their differences. This paper raises concerns about both theories, not to take them off the table but in order to introduce a new, cultural theory of identity.

## 1. What Are Theories of Identity?

People can be male or female; black, brown, or white; Indigenous; disabled in any of myriad ways; queer or straight; Ukrainian or

Tanzanian; Muslim, Buddhist, or Unitarian. That is one non-exhaustive list. Here is another: people might be born on a Tuesday, have blood type B, play billiards, attend university, or win election to the Royal Society. The two lists differ in an obvious respect. There are people with black, queer, and Muslim identities, but not blood-type, billiards-playing, student, or FRS identities. At any rate, Bernard Williams was surely correct to remark that ‘one is in a bad way if being a member of the Royal Society is one’s identity’ (1995: 9). Only some groups—and only some social groups—are identity groups. Given that not all groups—and not all social groups—are identity groups, the question is, what is it for a group to be an identity group? Let an answer to this question be a theory of identity.

Theories of identity should fit the following schema:

$K^*$  is an identity group in  $C$  = the members of  $K^*$  (1) are (typically) members of  $K$  and (2) identify as  $K$ ,

where  $K$  is a relevant non-identity group and  $C$  is a context such as the contemporary United States or colonial South Asia. For example, what makes a group of black people in São Paulo an identity group is that they are black and, in addition to that, they identify as black. An identity group,  $K^*$ , is typically made up of members of some other group,  $K$ , that is not an identity group. Yet belonging to an identity group involves more than belonging to a relevant non-identity group. What makes  $K^*$  an identity group is that its members identify as  $K$ .

Existing theories of identity do in fact fit the schema, as we shall see below. Moreover, there are good reason to adopt it.

First, the schema models certain complexities. It signals that members of some  $K$ s might not belong to  $K^*$ . Some East Asians do not identify as East Asian, some homosexual people do not identify as gay, and some Jews do not identify as Jewish. What about the converse? Might some members of some  $K^*$ s not belong to the relevant  $K$ s? Perhaps it is possible to have a black identity and pass as black. If so, belonging to a black identity group does not entail

being black. The ‘typically’ in (1) accommodates this possibility. At the same time, its placement in parenthesis indicates that passing as a K might be possible only for some types of  $K^*$ . Perhaps it is not possible to identify as an Evangelical Christian, satisfying condition (2), yet merely pass as an Evangelical Christian, failing to satisfy (1). Perhaps, also, for some Ks, one cannot be a ‘genuine,’ ‘authentic,’ or ‘real’ K unless one satisfies condition (2). For example, we should not reject a priori the claim that one cannot be, as some say, a ‘real American’ without identifying as an American. The schema foregrounds these complexities.

Second, the schema highlights a choice between placing the explanatory burden on either (1) or (2). The smart money puts the burden on (2) to provide an informative account of what it is to identify as a K. Most work on the metaphysics of race, gender, and disability does not aim to unpack (2). Rather, it addresses (1), seeking to state what it is to belong to a race, a gender, or a group of disabled people.<sup>1</sup> By marking the distinction between theories of K and theories of  $K^*$  and placing the weight on (2) rather than (1), we secure neutrality on what it is to be a K. We sidestep ongoing disagreements about the metaphysics of race, gender, and disability.

Placing the weight on (2) is also wise from a substantive perspective. The schema sets out how to answer the question, what is it for a group to be an identity group? Since it is unlikely that the relevant types of Ks are metaphysically uniform, an answer to our question should not rule out theories of some types of Ks. For example, Quayshawn Spencer’s (2019) case for a biological theory of race carries little weight when it comes to religion, and race anti-realism is compatible with realist social constructivism about

<sup>1</sup> The literatures on the metaphysics of race, gender, and disability are vast and rich—e.g., Mills 1998; Haslanger 2000; Sundstrom 2002; Mallon 2006; McKittrick 2015; Barnes 2016; Hardimon 2017; Hochman 2017; and Glasgow et al. 2019. Clause (1) should be read as accommodating nominalist anti-realism about K (e.g., Appiah 2005).

ethnicity. We accommodate diverse theories of different types of Ks by placing the burden on (2) and the question of what it is to identify as a K. Placing the burden on (2) allows for specific theories of specific identity groups that do take into account the nature of the relevant K.

Third, when conjoined with neutrality on the nature of Ks, the schema is flexible enough to accommodate some recent views according to which, for some types of Ks, to be a K reduces to identifying as a K. For example, Talia Mae Bettcher (2017) argues that to have a gender is to self-identify as having the gender, where self-identifying is being prepared to sincerely assert that one has the gender. Fitting this view to the schema, we get the result that what makes men, say, an identity group in C is that (1) they are members of the group of those who self-identify as men and (2) they are prepared to sincerely assert that they are men. In this case, it turns out that (1) and (2) are equivalent. Again, that is no reason to dispense with (1) or (2) as elements of a schema for theories of identity unless identity groups generally have the same constitutive conditions as Bettcher's genders. Those who agree with Bettcher about gender might doubt that being black, Indigenous, queer, Ukrainian, Buddhist, or disabled comes down to self-identification (e.g., Barnes 2016).

Moving beyond philosophy, the schema heeds a call on behalf of some social theorists, notably Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper (2000), to replace appeals to identity with appeals to processes of identifying. Without going so far as to eliminate talk of identity, the schema makes it plain that identifying does heavy lifting in sociological explanations of facts about identity groups.

In sum, a general theory of identity—one that applies to identity groups across the board and not only to some identity groups—should be neutral on the nature of Ks; it should accommodate the possibility that races, genders, ethnicities, and religions are metaphysically heterogeneous by placing the burden on (2). Call this the 'neutrality constraint'.

## 2. Assessing Theories of Identity

Placing the burden on (2) means seeking an informative account of identifying—one that best explains whatever needs explaining. Most agree that identity groups have a distinctive personal and political significance.

Start with personal significance. Membership in an identity group can be a source of pride and self-esteem, and it can foster a sense of belonging and community (e.g. Taylor 1994: 24; Gutmann 2003: 2–3; Killmister 2012). Appiah argues that it contributes to the ethical project of self-fashioning: ‘we use identities to construct our human lives’ (2006: 19; see also Appiah 2005). Building on an idea of Williams’s, Miranda Fricker makes a case that identity plays a profound role in the formation of a stable sense of self. She defines identity prejudice as an association of an identity group with attributes inversely related to competence or sincerity (2002: 32). Identity prejudice imposes a credibility deficit on members of the targeted group, which degrades their capacity to participate fully in exchanges of testimony. Williams proposed that such exchanges are a mechanism for ‘steading the mind’. He explains that, ‘Drawn to bind myself to the others’ shared values, to make my own beliefs and feelings steadier... I become what with increasing steadiness I can sincerely profess; I become what I have sincerely declared to them’ (2002: 204). Fricker concludes that testimonial injustice is so injurious because it deprives a person of a key resource for a kind of psychological stability and consistency that is essential to their value as a human being (2007: 54). The resource is the very kind of identification that is undercut by identity prejudice.

Notwithstanding occasional doubts about identity’s political significance (e.g., Rockefeller 1994; Waldron 2008), many give identity a central role in democratic politics (e.g., Gutmann 2003; Bilgrami 2006; Bilgrami 2015; Bellolio 2023). Identification with a group can amplify an individual’s voice in the political arena, provide for mutual support and solidarity, and both organise and motivate action against injustice. The assumption is that identity is

to be given weight in making political arrangements if it is a factor in political participation.

Charles Taylor (1994) reasons in the opposite direction: identity is politically significant because identities are formed in political conditions. He assumes that identity should be given weight in making political arrangements if politics is a key factor in identity formation. According to Taylor, identity is always formed in dialogue with others and how they see us (1994: 33). When they mirror back a ‘demeaning and contemptible picture’, the result is ‘crippling self-hatred’ (Taylor 1994: 25–6). What Taylor calls ‘recognition’ is a political act in which people are attributed their authentic identities. Given that the alternative induces the ‘crippling self-hatred’, the political act of recognition is ‘not just a courtesy we owe people’; it is ‘a vital human need’ (1994: 26; cf. Wolff 1994).

In sum, an adequate theory of identity will explain why grouping people by gender, race, indigeneity, disability, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and religion is personally and politically significant, when nothing like the same significance accrues to grouping people by blood type, leisure pursuits, school attendance, or election to honour societies.

Identity’s personal and political significance plausibly entrains a further fact to explain. That identity is significant suggests (but does not entail) that it can be rational to identify with a group. Sometimes we have adequate normative reasons to forge our identities. A theory of identity should explain identity’s significance and also why it can be rational to identify with a group.

Two notes. One is that identity’s significance should not be overstated. Williams claims that an identity must be ‘rich enough to permeate and affect many of the most important aspects of life—at the limit, to form the structure of a whole way of life’ (2002: 202). This is too strong. The lives of many of those who identify as Catholic do not differ a great deal from the lives of their neighbours who identify as Presbyterian or Buddhist. Someone’s identifying as Italian American or gay might impact only a relatively well-

contained part of their life. Not all identities involve identification with far-reaching impacts on a life.

Second, theories of specific types of identity might be crafted with additional desiderata in mind. For example, Katharine Jenkins (2018) mandates that a theory of gender identity should apply to binary and non-binary genders, that it should reconcile having a gender identity with critiquing gender norms, and that it should be compatible with an ethical norm of first-person authority and with the need of some trans people for transition-related healthcare. Obviously, Jenkins's desiderata are tailored to gender; they are not appropriate in thinking about every kind of identity group. What we look for in a theory of identity across the board might be less than what we look for in a theory of a specific type of identity.

With the neutrality constraint and some explananda on the table, the question to which a theory of identity is an answer can be refined. What is identification as a K, characterised without taking a stand to the nature of Ks, such that identity groups are personally and politically significant and such that we can have reasons to forge identities?

### 3. A Behavioural Theory

According to a standard model in the humanities and social sciences, kinds of people occupy social positions. Appiah proposes that to identify with a group is not merely to occupy a social position (2005: 69–70). To identify is to internalise elements of the social position.

A social position is a loose, dynamic, and contextually variant agglomeration of norms for how to treat members of a group, given expectations about how members of the group think and behave.

Appiah characterises the norms and expectations as scripts.<sup>2</sup> Scripts prescribe sequences of acts to be performed when certain circumstances are cued. However, scripts' contents need not be very determinate, and they need not be explicitly articulated or endorsed. Inasmuch as scripts function as they do because people acquire certain perceptual and affective dispositions, we also expect Ks to have those dispositions (McKittrick 2015). Moreover, scripts vary by context. The scripts that encode norms and expectations for a desi in Southall are not the same as those for a desi in Toronto. Finally, scripts can and do change, sometimes as a result of deliberate efforts at ameliorating discrimination.

Appiah's theory of identity is now ready to state. The idea is to replace the reference, in (2), to identifying as a K with a more informative appeal to internalising scripts for Ks in C. Thus,

behavioural theory:  $K^*$  is an identity group in C = the members of  $K^*$  (1) are (typically) members of K and (2) internalise scripts for Ks in C.

For a member of K to internalise scripts for Ks in C is for them to recognise, perhaps implicitly, the scripts as ones for them to follow qua K. Someone who has internalised the relevant scripts might actually follow them, but this is not required by the behavioural theory. Someone might not follow an internalised script simply because they have stronger reason to do otherwise. Some employment-related scripts for women were trumped in the 1940s by dint of wartime necessity, but the scripts' normative authority persisted. Moreover, it is possible for someone to resist following internalised scripts and indeed to act to undermine them in perfect recognition that the scripts are ones for them to follow qua K.

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<sup>2</sup> Jenkins's version of the behavioural theory deploys a cartographic metaphor (2018: 729–30; see also Dembroff and Saint-Croix 2019: 574–5). Social positions are maps of prescribed paths in behavioural space. Others prefer a metaphor of images (e.g., Collins 2000).



Recognising that the scripts are deemed to have normative authority is compatible with skepticism about that authority.

The behavioural theory handily complies with the neutrality constraint. Some identify races and genders with social positions (e.g., Haslanger 2000). The behavioural theory is compatible with but does not imply social constructivism with respect to race or gender—or any other K, for that matter. The theory implies only that, whatever it is to be East Asian or a man, East Asians and men are subject to social positioning. Spencer's (2019) view that to be East Asian is to belong to a genetic population group is compatible with members of the group being socially positioned. In other words, the behavioural theory makes social positioning constitutive of K\*s; it does not make social positioning constitutive of Ks.

How well does the behavioural theory explain the personal and political significance of identity groups, by contrast with groups that are not identity groups?

The narrative format of scripts is key to an identity's personal significance. Having internalised scripts, people can use them in 'shaping their life-plans and in telling their life stories', and 'it matters to people that their lives have a certain narrative unity.... The story—my story—should cohere in the way appropriate by the standards made available in my culture to a person of my identity' (Appiah 1996: 127).

Turning to political significance, Appiah directly addresses Taylor's call for recognition. Recognition, as it were, changes the script, so that people learn to see their

identities not as sources of limitation and insult but as a valuable part of what they centrally are.... Because there was no good reason to treat people of these sorts badly, and because the culture continues to provide degrading images of them nevertheless, they demand that we do cultural work to resist the stereotypes, to challenge the insults, to lift the restrictions (Appiah 1996: 128).

In obtaining recognition, a group acquires resources for its members to shape their lives as individuals, building pride and self-esteem; recognition amplifies individual voices and can organise them against injustice.

Finally, these considerations provide good reasons for people to foster identities, even if there are countervailing reasons, such as the threat that policing identity can inhibit individual choice and obscure what people from different walks of life share in common (Appiah 1996: 130–4). The behavioural theory represents identity as sometimes rational.

Although the theory is promising, here is a concern. Billiards players, university students, and fellows of the Royal Society internalise scripts. Billiards players should not disguise their skill, students should balance study with exploring campus life, and fellows of the Royal Society should publish diligently. It would be surprising (if possible) to discover a socially salient kind of person with no behavioural strings attached. So, the behavioural theory seems to count the groups made up of billiards players, university students, or fellows of the Royal Society as identity groups. Yet these groups do not have the personal and political significance that accrues to identity groups and that a theory of identity groups should explain.

The concern is not a decisive reason against the behavioural theory. Those attracted to the theory are free to regard the concern as a challenge to which they might respond. One response would specify an additional, distinctive feature of the scripts that members of identity groups internalise. The additional feature should help explain the personal and political importance of identity. At the same time, pending such a response, the concern motivates a search for alternatives to the behavioural theory.

#### 4. An Evaluative Theory

If the behavioural theory over-generalises, implying that too many groups are identity groups, then the fix is a more restrictive theory. Bilgrami argues that identifying is valuing plus evaluative commitment (2015; see also 2006). That is,

evaluative theory:  $K^*$  is an identity group in  $C$  = the members of  $K^*$  (1) are (typically) members of  $K$ , (2) value their being  $K$ s, and (3) commit to valuing their being  $K$ s.

Both (2) and (3) unpack the phenomenon of identification, but the action centres on (3). Obviously, (1) and (2) do not suffice for identification: people value their being members of many groups that are not identity groups.

Bilgrami proposes that commitment to valuing has two elements. The first is second-order valuing. Identifying with being a  $K$  is, in part, valuing being a  $K$  plus valuing one's valuing being a  $K$ . The first-order and second-order values cohere. Yet there must be more to commitment than valuing. After all, someone might coherently value and value their valuing being a billiards player or an FRS, but billiards players and fellows of the Royal Society are not identity groups.

The second element of commitment to valuing is this. Sometimes, a person's first-order valuing makes their second-order valuing relatively unrevisable. After all, first-order valuing has practical upshots when it motivates acts, and some of those acts put in place psychological or social structures that make it hard to shed the way of life in which people value their valuing being who they are. Habits of mind, modes of interacting with others, including a sensitivity to their reactive attitudes, and Appiah's scripts: all of these can entrench second-order evaluations.

So, the proposal is that identifying is valuing being  $K$  plus committing to value being a  $K$ , where commitment to valuing is relatively unrevisable second-order valuing. As Bilgrami explains, what one commits to valuing is,

part of one's deepest self-conception, because one would so utterly disapprove of oneself if we did not have the value at some future point, that we now try and make sure that one's self, at that future point, will live according to the value. 'Identity-imparting,' 'self-constituting,' and so forth, seem apt descriptions for values held and endorsed with such deep commitment (2015: 523).

The claim is not that commitment makes evaluations immutable. Evaluations that are relatively unrevisable can be revised. In worlds that exert strong pressure on existing identities, they are revised.

Does the evaluative theory satisfy the neutrality constraint and explain the personal and political significance of identity groups, such that it is sometimes rational to forge an identity? The answer is a bit complicated. Notice that the theory has two independent strands. One is a claim about the structure of the attitudes that comprise identification: they include valuing and relatively unrevisable second-order valuing. The second is a claim about the content of those attitudes: what one values and commits to valuing is one's being a K. Given the content claim, the theory must choose between satisfying the neutrality constraint and explaining the rationality of identity.

Start with rationality. Bilgrami assumes a thin conception of rationality according to which first-order and second-order evaluations are rational if coherent. A conception of rationality as coherence is too thin, though. It is not rational for some people to identify with some groups, even if they go to the trouble of ensuring that their evaluations cohere. On a thicker conception, rationality also requires sensitivity to normative reasons. Identifying with a group is rational, in the thicker sense, only when people have adequate normative reasons to so identify.

Now consider the content claim, namely that a person identifies with K by valuing and committing to valuing being a K. Given a thick conception of rationality, their valuing and committing to value being a K is rational only if their being a K is worthy of valuing and committing to value—only if it is good for them to be a K.

Identification is rational, with respect to its constitutive evaluations, only if it is good for the identifier to be a K.

Suppose that an identification is in fact rational. It follows that it is good for the identifier to be a K, but this result violates the neutrality constraint. Philosophers working on race, gender, and disability dispute whether it is good, bad, or neutral to be female, black, or disabled. For example, Spencer (2019) argues that the races are genetic population groups. Since the DNA that differentiates the groups codes for no proteins and has no phenotypic effects, race is value neutral. Anita Silvers (2003) and Elizabeth Barnes (2016) push back against theories on which being disabled is a misfortune. In Barnes's striking statement, being disabled is,

a way of being a minority with respect to one's body, just as being gay is a way of being a minority with respect to sexuality. It is something that makes you different from the majority, but that difference isn't by itself a bad thing (2016: 6).

The reasoning is, briefly, that being disabled can negatively impact someone along some dimensions of well being, and it can positively impact them along other dimensions, but nothing general can be said about the all things considered goodness or badness of being disabled for arbitrarily any person. Finally, Sally Haslanger's (2000) theory of gender implies that women are subordinate to men along some dimensions. This is bad; it should be ameliorated. Identifying turns out to be rational only if all of these views are false. Rationality comes at the price of neutrality.

Alternatively, suppose we take the neutrality constraint as bedrock. Now it follows that it might be irrational, with respect to evaluations constitutive of identification, to identify as a woman, as disabled, or as black, because it might be bad or value neutral to belong to any of these groups. Neutrality comes at the price of rationality.

Once again, the concern is not conclusive reason against the evaluative theory. One response is to deny that anything more is needed than a thin conception of rationality as coherence. Another option is to concede that the evaluations constitutive of identification are not rational as often as it seems. A third response is to relinquish the neutrality constraint and dispute many theories of race, gender, and disability. Option four is to return to the drawing board, keeping in mind that the concern targets the content claim. Why not retain the structure of identification in the evaluative theory and replace the content claim?

### 5. A Cultural Theory

Retaining Bilgrami's structural claim that identification is valuing plus commitment to valuing, the cultural theory replaces the content claim with something loosely akin to Appiah's scripts. Instead of valuing and committing to value being K, identification involves valuing and committing to value some cultures associated with being K. That is,

cultural theory:  $K^*$  is an identity group in  $C =$  the members of  $K^*$  (1) are (typically) members of K, (2) value, and (3) commit to valuing enough of the activities and products of the cultural associates of K in C.

Commitment is relatively unrevisable second-order valuing. What remains to unpack is the 'cultural associates of K in C'. This section offers a suitable conception of culture and then lays out what it is for some cultures to associate with K in C. The next section gives an argument for the theory.

A relative of the cultural theory is to be found in political theory, where some communitarians and liberal culturalists have equated national identity groups with cultures (e.g. Taylor 1994; Kymlicka 1995). For example, Will Kymlicka argues that special political consideration should be given to any group that 'provides its

members with meaningful ways of life across the full range of human activities, including social, educational, religious, recreational, and economic life, encompassing both private and public spheres' (1995: 76). On the organic conception of culture, a group's culture comprises a bundle made up of epistemic, legal, religious, linguistic, ethical, aesthetic, artistic, and other components, each contributing ineliminably to the whole (e.g., Tylor 1871: 1; more recently, Margalit and Raz 1990; Margalit and Halbertal 1994).

Might one model all identity on national identity and organic culture? As noted above, Williams took a person's identity to be comprehensive, touching on most aspects of their life. Organic cultures fit the bill, for they are whole ways of life that would explain a great deal about the lives of those who live them. However, the problem—also noted above—is that not all identities involve identification with such far-reaching impacts on a life. Someone's identity as Italian American, gay, goth, or Unitarian might impact only a relatively well-contained part of their life. The prospects are poor for any version of the cultural theory that implies an organic conception of culture.

The cultural theory jettisons the organic conception in favour of a minimal conception of culture. Minimally conceived, a culture is a regularity in group behaviour that is due to members of a group sharing formative conditions distinct from the formative conditions shared by members of other groups (Richerson and Boyd 2005: 5; Patton 2014: 51; Lopes 2024: ch. 2). That is, a minimal culture is any learned regularity of behaviour, be it epistemic, legal, religious, linguistic, ethical, athletic, or aesthetic. Each is a culture in its own right; the culture is not a bundle of which each is a part.

A minimal conception of culture captures how cultures associate with identity groups. Members of an identity group need not share a single organic culture. Indeed, they need not share even a type of culture. For example, people who identify as desi in England cover the spectrum of political cultures; they share no political culture.

More importantly, the cultural associates of an identity group very often comprise a disjunctive list, and association might come to nothing more than a tendency for group members to share the listed cultures. Thus the musical preferences of people who identify as Latinx in the United States lean towards salsa or reggaeton and away from polka and metal. Given the minimal theory of culture, we can represent members of an identity group as having an overlapping arrangement of cultures, not as culturally homogenous.

Two claims have so far been made about culture and cultural association. First, the cultures in question are often minimal cultures. Second, cultural association often involves nothing more than a tendency among members of an identity group to share some cultures on a disjunctive list of cultures of some types (but not other types). It only requires statistically discernible distributions of members of identity groups across cultural groups. For any identity group, above chance predictions can be made about some of its members' cultures. Together these claims distinguish the cultural theory of identity from theories of national identity that appeal to organic cultures.

A third claim is that the cultures associated with an identity group vary by social context. According to the cultural theory, members of an identity group,  $K^*$ , value and commit to valuing the the cultural associates of  $K$  in  $C$ . Recall that  $K$  is a non-identity group paired with  $K^*$ . For example, one black identity group is (typically) made up of black people who value and commit to valuing the cultures associated with black people in São Paulo. Another black identity group is (typically) made up of black people who value and commit to valuing the cultures associated with black people in Nairobi. Obviously, there is no single black identity group. Likewise, the cultures associated with desis vary from Southall to Toronto, and the cultures associated with trans women vary from Mumbai to Melbourne. In general, identity groups vary because the cultures associated with the relevant  $K$ s vary by social context.



Variation is no surprise given the conception of a minimal culture as a behavioural regularity due to shared formative conditions. So long as they are seen as and treated as different, black people in São Paulo are liable to share formative conditions that are distinct from the formative conditions shared by others in the same context. As a result, they are apt to acquire a set of cultures that is not the same as those with which their fellow citizens in São Paulo or their black friends in Nairobi associate. In general, people tend to share formative conditions when they are members of recognised groups: they will tend to have behavioural regularities that are associated, in the context, with being male, female, black, brown, or white, Indigenous, disabled, queer, straight, Ukrainian, Tanzanian, Muslim, Buddhist, or Unitarian.

We can now see that the cultural theory earns the ‘typically’ in clause (1). Members of  $K^*$  are typically members of  $K$  in  $C$  because  $K$ s in  $C$  share the formative conditions that generate a shared culture.

The cultural associates of  $K$  in  $C$  provide the content of the attitudes constitutive of identifying. Clauses (2) and (3) of the cultural theory specify that identifying is valuing and committing to value enough of the activities and products of the cultural associates of  $K$ . Identifying as a  $K$  does not require identifying with all of  $K$ 's cultural associates. A desi in Toronto is likely to commit to valuing chaat, perhaps not a desi in Mumbai. Moreover, chaat is a product of a desi culinary culture, but one might also commit to valuing a cultural activity. For example, someone might identify as Muslim by valuing the activity of Muslim prayer in a way that makes their valuing what they value relatively unrevisable.

Finally, the theory builds in a useful ambiguity. Is committing to value the cultural associates of an identity group *de dicto* or *de re*? Suppose that I identify as black Brazilian by valuing and committing to value some music that goes with being black Brazilian. Do I commit to valuing whatever music that is? Or do I commit to valuing this very music, the music that is now associated with black

Brazilians? The theory permits either possibility. The *de re* reading fits relatively conservative identity groups. Conservative Muslims might commit to valuing this very prayer practice, adopting measures to inhibit their coming to value some new prayer practice that might displace it. The *de dicto* reading fits less conservative identity groups. Black Brazilians might commit to valuing whatever style of music other group members might cook up.

## 6. The Case for the Cultural Theory

Does the cultural theory satisfy the neutrality constraint? Does it explain the personal and political significance of identity groups such that it is thickly rational for their members to identify with them?

To begin with, the theory satisfies the neutrality constraint. It does not reduce Ks to cultures; it holds only that Ks are contingently associated with cultures, because members of K share a formative background in C that generates regularities of behaviour. No theory of race, gender, disability, sexual orientation, religion, or ethnicity denies that. Needless to say, if the cultural theory is neutral on what it is to be a K, it is also neutral on whether Ks are good.

Chike Jeffers defends a theory of race according to which races are both hierarchical social positions and also groups of people who participate in distinctive cultures (2019; see also 2013). Jeffers's cultural theory of race is compatible with the cultural theory of racial identity, but neither implies the other. On the one hand, to belong to a race might be to participate in the regularities of behaviour that he takes to be constitutive of the race, even if identifying is not valuing or committing to valuing the goods of the culture. On the other hand, identifying might be valuing or committing to value the goods of the culture associated with a race in a context, even though a race is, say, a genotype group. Of course, independence does not imply incompatibility, and there might be

good reasons for Jeffers to twin his cultural theory of race with a cultural theory of racial identity.

Turn to the personal and political significance of identity groups. Here it is crucial that the minimal theory of culture reduces cultures to learned behavioural regularities. Since cultures deserve special political consideration, one way to withhold that consideration is to refuse to acknowledge a culture for what it is. Some conceptions of culture, such as the organicist one, set the bar very high for a group's activities to count as a culture. They make it easier to deprive group members of the personal and political benefits of identification. The minimal conception of culture actively undercuts this dynamic by setting the bar low for what activities count as a culture.

On the personal level, there is Williams's idea that identity serves to steady the self. The cultural associates of an identity group are steadying because they are not within individual discretion; typically, they stem from countless micro interactions, and few, if any, parties to the interactions have the least idea of what regularity of group behaviour will emerge. Cultural reality shares with non-social reality a recalcitrance to individual subjectivity. Perhaps less profoundly, but no less importantly, identity serves as a source of self-esteem and pride. Here the cultural theory arguably has an edge on the evaluative theory. When someone is asked, 'what is it about being gay that warrants your pride?', a shrug is not the expected answer. The expected answer is something like, 'we're ironically yet joyfully rebellious, we're the backbone of the creative industries, we make great families...'

On the political level, Taylor argues that identities, being products of political conditions, deserve political recognition. Clearly, recognition is more than bare acceptance that there are Ks; what is recognized is the authentic identity of a group, by contrast with any 'demeaning and contemptible picture' that induces 'crippling self-hatred' (Taylor 1994: 25–6). According to the cultural theory, the positive picture represents the cultural goods that are associated with the identity group. Indeed, demands for recognition

are very often demands that cultural goods be seen as good, and they very often manifest as vivid and celebratory displays of the goods. That is one function of pride marches, ethnic festivals, black history months, and the Paralympics.

An alternative approach to political significance assumes that identity is to be given weight in making political arrangements not because those arrangements are factors in identity formation but instead because identity is a key factor in political participation. Identity groups amplify individual voices, secure mutual support and solidarity, and motivate action against injustice. These functions can be served by identity groups on the hypothesis that the mechanism of identification is valuing and committing to value some cultural goods. Committing to value, together, the goods of the cultures we together share is an effective way to motivate collective action, mutual support, and a common voice.

As we saw above, one might object that Appiah's behavioural theory fails to explain the personal and political significance of identity groups because many groups internalise scripts and yet lack the same significance. Is the cultural theory vulnerable to the same objection? There are cultures associated with being a billiards player, a university student, and an FRS, but these are not identity groups. Does the theory over-generalise?

The theory does not claim merely that identity groups have cultural associates. It claims that identity group members value and commit to valuing the goods of some cultural associates. Granted, members of all kinds of groups value the activities and products of their associated cultures. What sets identity groups apart is commitment to valuing. To commit to valuing the goods of a culture is to value the goods in a way that makes it hard to stop valuing one's valuing the goods. Billiards players, university students, and fellows of the Royal Society might value very highly the goods of their groups' cultural associates, but they do not value them in ways that come close to ensuring that they will always spend too much on cues, discuss existentialism into the wee hours, or wear their

honours with pride. By contrast, black Brazilians are an identity group because they commit to valuing (*de dicto*) the goods of whatever music they together value, and conservative Muslims are an identity group because they commit to valuing (*de re*) the goods of their current prayer practices.

In explaining the personal and political significance of identity groups, the cultural theory places considerable weight on evaluative commitment. Identity groups steady the self, source pride, deserve political recognition, and foster political participation largely because their members value and commit to valuing the goods of the cultural associates of their groups. Non-identity groups lack the same significance because their members lack the same commitments.

That leaves rationality. Thickly conceived, rationality requires a sensitivity to normative reasons. The cultural theory represents people as rational, in identifying with a group, to the extent that they have normative reason to value and to commit to valuing the activities or products of the cultures associated with K. Moreover, they have normative reason to value and commit to valuing those activities or products that are good—good for them, at least. Anyone should concede that some the relevant activities and products are often enough good. Muslim prayer is good for Muslims, and *cacio e pepe* is good *simpliciter*.

## 7. Mixed, Emerging, Critical, and Agential Identity

The cultural theory explains the personal and political significance of identity groups, and it improves on the evaluative theory by satisfying the neutrality constraint while at the same time explaining how it can be rational for people to forge identities. Addressing four

concerns further articulates the theory's content, and perhaps its appeal, too.<sup>3</sup>

First, some identities are mixed. Some people are mixed race, for example, and some people identify as mixed race. But then what are the cultural associates with which they identify? No particular race is implicated in being mixed race, so they cannot be expected to identify with the cultural associates of one particular race in a context. If they did that, they would not have a mixed race identity.<sup>4</sup>

The reply is that there are many mixed race identity groups. Each mixed race person belongs to two or more races, and each race has many cultural associates. For each of their races, they value and commit to valuing enough of its cultural associates. (The cultural theory does not construe identifying as a K with valuing and committing to value every culture associated with K.) In social contexts where a particular race mixture is common, a distinct culture can crystallise. Métis cultures would be good examples. In social contexts where mixed race people are uncommon—1950s Reykjavík, for example—the cultural mixing is adventitious and more individualistic.

On this reply, there is no single mixed race identity group; there are many.<sup>5</sup> Mixed race people identify as mixed race only by identifying as Anglo-Indian or black East Asian. If there is a general mixed race identity group, then it is a determinable whose determinates are identities such as Anglo-Indian and black East Asian. To try to identify as mixed-race without identifying with a

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<sup>3</sup> I thank three referees for pressing these concerns, and I take the liberty of borrowing some of their language.

<sup>4</sup> A parallel point might be that one can have a non-binary gender identity but being non-binary has no particular cultural associates.

<sup>5</sup> The same style of reply might work for non-binary identity: there is no general non-binary identity; there are many, including being genderqueer, genderfluid, and agender (Jenkins 2018: 723).

specific mixture of races is like trying to colour a surface without making it red, blue, or some other determinate colour.

Perhaps the objection is precisely that there are people with a general mixed race identity and no more specific mixed-race identity. So far, the reply has been to undercut the objection by explaining away any appearance that this is the case. What appears to be a general mixed race identity is a determinable that is never instanced except determinately. To continue to press the objection, some reason is needed to believe that determinate mixed race identities leave something to be explained and that a general mixed race identity can close the explanatory gap.

Second, what about new identity groups? Sometimes identity groups emerge well before they develop significant cultural associates. Even if there are now various cultures associated with being non-binary, that was not always the case. The cultural theory implies to the contrary that where there is an identity group there is some culture.

The reply leans on the distinction between being a K and identifying as a K. On one hand, new Ks can emerge, or people can come to recognise that they are Ks. On the other hand, people can come for the first time to identify as Ks. Only the latter requires that Ks already have cultural associates. Not all groups are identity groups, and some groups become identity groups.

The question for the cultural theory is not how new Ks emerge or come to be recognised. Nor is the question how Ks acquire cultural associates. A culture is just a pattern of behaviour due to shared formative conditions, and since members of all kinds of social groups share formative conditions, it is to be expected that many will share some culture. The problem of how people come to identify as Ks is the problem of how they come to value and commit to valuing some culture associated with their group. For philosophy, the deep question is what makes only some Ks and their cultural associates eligible for identification—that is, for committing to value. Why sexual orientations and religions, not blood groups and

leisure pursuits? One hypothesis is that the former are the Ks implicated in social injustice, and valuing and commitment to valuing are reactions to and mechanisms of solidarity in the face of social injustice (e.g. Shelby 2005).

Third, the cultural theory should accommodate what Robin Dembroff and Catharine Saint-Croix (2019) call ‘agential identity’. Ks are either social positions or they are associated with social positions, which are agglomerations of norms for how to treat members of a group, given expectations about how members of the group think and behave. Dembroff and Saint-Croix argue that although social positions are partly determined by the attitudes and behaviours of others, there is room for group members to exercise agency with respect to their being members of a socially positioned group and also with respect to the contents of the social position. For this reason, one way to oppress a group is to limit its members’ agency with respect to their identity. With this in mind, Dembroff and Saint-Croix offer a three-part theory of agential identity (2019: 576–7). Someone has a K agential identity just in case they (i) identify as a K, (ii) use some expressive resources to make (i) externally available to others, and (iii) accept that others take them to occupy the social position associated with Ks.

So conceived, agential identity is a special case of identity. The behavioural, evaluative, and cultural theories are theories of (i). They take identity groups to comprise those who identify as members of the groups, and they offer competing theories of what it is to identify. Each can be conjoined with (ii) and (iii) as understood by Dembroff and Saint-Croix. When conjoined with (ii) and (iii), the cultural theory yields a theory of agential identity.

With that said, Dembroff and Saint-Croix adopt, without argument, Jenkins’s version of the behavioural theory of identity: for someone to identify as a K is for them to experience the behavioural norms associated with Ks as relevant to them (2019: 577–8 after Jenkins 2018). Why not consider plugging the cultural theory into (i) to see if it yields an improved understanding of agential identity



—and of (ii) and (iii) in particular? The expressive resources that are in fact used to make identification externally available to others include exhibits and embodiments of culture—think again of pride marches, ethnic festivals, black history months, and the Paralympics. What these expressions make externally available is not merely the costume of K. They make available what some Ks value and commit to valuing, and that is what it takes to display pride and take one's destiny in one's own hands.

Agential identity is arguably a special case of identity as understood on the cultural theory, but a fourth and final concern suggests the need for a thin conception of identity that does not require identifying. The concern is about what might be called 'critical identity'. Someone has a critical identity when they identify as a K and yet reject the cultural associates of K as oppressive.

In practice, those with critical identities need not reject each culture that is or could be associated with K. In *We Who Are Dark* and *Black Is Beautiful*, Tommie Shelby (2005) and Paul Taylor (2016) trace in detail how black people in the United States found and fostered positive cultural resources with which to replace the negative cultures imposed upon them. Jeffers uses the language of 'pride', which 'involves valuing black bodies and their activities in the face of their historical devaluation' (2019: 62). Here, the distinction between more and less conservative identity groups does some work. In more conservative groups, people commit to valuing their cultures *de re*; in less conservative groups, they commit to valuing their cultures *de dicto*. Critical identities thrive in less conservative groups, where people can value and commit to valuing whatever culture their ameliorative efforts will bring about. The cultural theory accommodates ameliorative critical identities.

Not all critical identities are ameliorative in this way. Take someone who is lesbian but does not commit to valuing any of the actual or prospective cultural associates of being lesbian. She wishes to regard being lesbian much as she regards being a billiard-playing fellow of the Royal Society. Nonetheless, she recognises that her

being lesbian has a significance that does not accrue to her being an FRS. Knowing that she is just as likely to be harmed by homophobia as those who fully identify as lesbian, she works to combat it in solidarity with other lesbians. For this reason, she says she ‘identifies as lesbian’. The personal and political significance of her stance is not the same as that for which the cultural, behavioural, and evaluative theories are crafted. However, the cultural theory does not imply that there are no phenomena in the neighbourhood that we might describe as social identities. A good theory yields a sufficiently clear picture of one phenomenon that we can begin to discern related phenomena and the facts that theories of them should explain.

Care should be taken not to treat identity as a potent force whose effects on us, good or ill, we seek to understand, while leaving it mysterious what it is in the first place. If we ‘construct our human lives’, in Appiah’s phrase, through identification, then do we not risk what matters in failing to figure out what we are up to? Regardless of whether or not the cultural theory ultimately works out, making the case for it clarifies the space of theoretical possibilities and brings out some of what is at stake in the choices between those possibilities.

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