Book Review: The Ethics of Identity by Kwame Anthony Appiah

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These qualifications notwithstanding, this work provides a quite useful analysis of the role of ideology in driving southern party activists and change within the perspectives of activists in both parties. All of the authors agree that the ideological perspectives of the activists of both parties were found nearer the ends of the political spectrum in 2001 than had been the case in 1991. After reading *Southern Political Party Activists* one might ask where are the centrists who can forge governing coalitions?

Prysby and Clark’s concluding chapter examines southern parties from the perspectives of the responsible party thesis and the party renewal thesis. Another perspective, derived from the work of Anthony Downs and the spatial theorists, might also come into question. The increasing polarization of party activists could be explored as it affects candidate selection and the future of the parties in the South and nation. Since the authors agree that activists in both parties are moving farther from the median voter, the relationship of the ideology of voters and activists and what it presages for the future of southern politics could well be a fruitful topic for further exploration.

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Using John Stuart Mill as his touchstone, Appiah looks at the ways in which identity impacts the success of our lives, and defends liberalism against communitarian and multicultural critics. Appiah argues that identity precedes culture and that individuality is ethically prior to identity. "My aim is to begin with the interests of individuals and to show how identities give individuals
complex interests that ethics—and, therefore, a satisfactory politics—must bear in mind” (105). Appealing to a large body of theoretical work on identity (Taylor, Galston), autonomy (Raz, Scheffler), liberalism (Rawls, R. Dworkin), culture (Parekh, Kymlicka) and cosmopolitanism (Rorty, Ignatieff), Appiah seeks to rejuvenate Mill as a theorist of individualism with a clear eye towards issues of identity, diversity, difference and community.

Appiah begins with a passage from *On Liberty* about choosing one’s life plan and the need to avoid “ape-like imitation.” He couples this necessity for a robust individuality with a recognition of the “deeply rooted conception which every individual even now has of himself as a social being” (21, again from *On Liberty*). Appiah is working within these two aspects of humanity: our individual selves, not self-chosen, but at least self-understood and embraced; and our social selves, contingent upon economic, geographic and political circumstance, but also furthered by choices we have made. Appiah argues that we need to be both self-flourishing individuals and members of multiple communities embedded in a global context. He refuses to see the debate between liberalism and communitarianism as turning on a merely factual issue of whether we are first individual or embedded selves. Rather he sees us as embedded selves who must act as individuals. Liberalism, with its emphasis on autonomy, dignity and rights is the best (but not the only) mechanism for providing balance between community and self.

This account of the self implies an Aristotelian view of the flourishing life:

Living a life means filling the time between birth (or at any rate adulthood) and death with a pattern of attempts and achievements that may be assessed ethically, in retrospect, as successful or unsuccessful, in whole or in part.... A life has gone well if a person has mostly done for others what she owed them (and is thus morally successful) and has succeeded in creating things of significance and in fulfilling her ambitions (and is thus ethically successful) (162).
The argument supporting this view is embedded within an often overly drawn out analysis of other authors' work. His primary focus, once gleaned from his discussion of others, is the successful life. He defends his focus on the successful individual (a focus that might call to mind a western, rationalist, individualist approach) in part by criticizing those who rely too heavily on a possible incommensurability of values between East and West. First, he rejects the East/West distinction, arguing that it is difficult to draw clear geographic lines between views (this emerges through his frequent references to Ghana and his own experiences with his Asante background). Second, he points out ways in which we may learn (and thus enhance our success) from traditionally non-Western views (for example, he admires the principle of Confucian reverence for elders in contrast to the deaths of so many Parisian elderly in the heat wave of 2003).

The central chapters (3-5) take up some of the most interesting work concerning identity, culture and soul-making. Here Appiah is at his best, working through historical, personal, literary and hypothetical examples. The chapter on soul-making is particularly compelling, highlighting the ways in which liberals, who are loathe to involve the state in any way in choosing goods for citizens, are nonetheless committed to certain ethical judgments about how they ought to live. Responding to critics who claim that liberal neutrality is neither neutral nor admirable, Appiah tries to show how the state can help facilitate an "ethical identity."

How can the state assist in making us successful individuals? Mandatory education, for example, can be both good for individuals (it teaches you skills and informs you about a variety of life choices) and for states (it creates citizens with useful technical knowledge and helps foster a national identity). I think Appiah sides too strongly with champions of parental rights, claiming that "we believe that children should be raised primar-
ily in families and that those families should be able to try and induct their children into the mores, identities, and traditions that the adult members of the family take as their own" (201). Do we believe this? Should we? Did Wisconsin v. Yoder, which Appiah discusses in relation to issues of freedom of religion, really enhance the capacity of Amish children to be successful individuals? Still, Appiah raises important questions about the tension between the state and parents concerning the good of children. He suggests that we would not require the state to intervene when parents refused to provide a child with the means to pursue a talent (e.g. music). But he does not consider how we view states (like the former USSR) that tested the talents of children and provided training (in sports, for example) that in many respects furthered the ambitions (perhaps not self-chosen) of those children. A balance must be struck, and the issue is not simply one for individuals to decide for themselves and for their children. Should the state ensure funding for arts education? If we criticize a parent who squanders her child’s talent, can we similarly criticize the state that does nothing to help a child with talent? On Appiah’s “ethics of identity,” this does seem to follow. (Despite Appiah’s prefatory claim that this is “not a work of political theory” (xvii), he has produced a text that suggests how not just individuals but also groups and states should think about the demands of identity.)

He concludes with an appeal to cosmopolitanism, understood as “…a form of universalism that is sensitive to the ways in which historical context may shape the significance of a practice. At the same time, I want to elaborate on the notion that we often don’t need robust theoretical agreement in order to secure shared practices” (256). Ultimately Appiah is aiming towards (and this is no criticism) a Berlinian stance that communication within, between and among groups is the only way to achieve the “rooted cosmopolitanism” that Appiah believes is the hallmark
of an "ethical identity." Like Berlin, Appiah appeals to communication as a fact about humans across time, space and culture. Communication in real time and space, and through history and literature, allows us to find points of contact. Like Berlin (who appeals to pluralism, not cosmopolitanism) Appiah argues against both the "ruthlessly utopian" and the relativist. Neither can properly converse because neither sees the identity of others as both something worthwhile in its own right and understandable from the perspective of one's own identity. "We can learn from each other's stories only if we share both human capacities and a single world: relativism about either is a reason not to converse but to fall silent" (257).

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We are reminded with the new edition of *Politics and Vision* of the considerable influence Wolin's first edition had for those determined to pursue political theory and philosophy in the face of the burgeoning dominance of the social sciences and the resulting cleavage between facts and values which drew sustenance from logical positivism and analytic philosophy. Wolin's grand tour through the tradition of political thought brought to the forefront its continuity as the necessary framework for comprehending change within the social and political realms.

The sweep of Wolin's expanded edition repeats Part One, beginning with Plato, and continues through postmodernism, with particular emphasis in Part Two on Marx, Nietzsche, Popper,