

HUMA S-125: The Ethics of Identity

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Personal identity is, to say the least, a slippery concept. Yet insofar it constitutes who and what we are—whether it is explicitly acknowledged or not—identity has deep ethical and political implications, and “identity politics” is one of the most significant contemporary dimensions in political and social thought. This class, which is structured around Anthony Appiah’s 2005 book *The Ethics of Identity*, delves into the ethical, social, and political questions around identity. Each section of the book will be complemented by readings that put the issue in a larger context. These texts include a few of the foundational philosophical works for contemporary debates around identity, contemporary philosophical analyses of the underlying issues, and critiques of the discussion of identity as understood by philosophers like Appiah. The purpose of the course is not to try to answer the questions, but to have a rich and open discussion of the issues, and help shape a richer and more nuanced private and public deliberation on identity and ethics beyond the classroom.

Week One: Introduction

June 24 Prologue

Anthony Appiah, *The Ethics of Identity*, Preface (pp. ix-xviii)

“Case of Lautsi and Others vs. Italy” (PDF)

Adolph Reed Jr., “[From Jenner to Dolezal: One Trans Good, the Other Not So Much](#)”

June 26: Chapter 1, Part 1: The Value of Individuality

Appiah, *Ethics*, Chapter 1, Part 1 (pp. 1-17)

John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, Chapters 1 and 3

Adriana Cavarero, *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*, introduction and chapter 13 (pp. 1-4; 139-144); also in Italian, *Tu che mi guardi, tu che mi racconti: Filosofia della narrazione*, (pp. 7-11; 179-187); (both PDF)

Week Two: Individuality and Autonomy

July 1: Chapter 1, Part 2: The Terms of Individuality

Appiah, *Ethics*, Chapter 1, Part 2 (pp. 17-35)

Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* Chapter 15: The Virtues, the Unity of a Human Life, and the Concept of a Tradition (204-225, PDF)

Shirley Jackson, "The Lottery" (PDF)

July 3: Chapter 2: Difficult Autonomy

Appiah, *Ethics*, Chapter 2 (pp. 36-61)

Charles Taylor, "To Follow a Rule," in *Philosophical Arguments* (pp. 165-180)

Week Three: Identity

July 8: Chapter 3, Part 1: Identities, Multiculturalism, and the Problem of Neutrality

Appiah, *Ethics*, Chapter 3, Part 1 (pp. 62-99)

Ian Hacking, "Making up People" (PDF)

Ursula K. Le Guin, "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas: A Story" (PDF)

July 10: Chapter 3, Part 2: Recognition, Limits, Parameters

Appiah, *Ethics*, Chapter 3, Part 2 (pp. 99-113)

Wendy Brown: "Wounded Attachments" (PDF)

Audre Lorde: "Age, Race, Class, and Sex"

Week Four: Culture

July 15: Culture and Value

Appiah, *Ethics*, Chapter 4, Part 1: 114-130

Richard Shweder, "Equality Now in Genital Reshaping: Brian Earp's Search for Moral Consistency" (PDF)

July 17: Diversity and Monism

Appiah, *Ethics*, Chapter 4, Part 2: 141-154

Isaiah Berlin: "The Pursuit of the Ideal," in *The Crooked Timber of Humanity* (PDF)

Week Five: Persons and States

July 22: Rational States

Appiah, *Ethics*, Chapter 5, Part 1: 155-192

John Rawls, *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*, Part I (PDF)

Stephen Vincent Benét, “By the Waters of Babylon” (PDF)

July 24: Identity and Education

Appiah, *Ethics*, Chapter 5, Part 2: 192-212

Danielle Allen, *Talking to Strangers*, Part Three, Chapters 8-10 (PDF)

Week 6: Cosmopolitanism

July 29: The Ethics of Identity Beyond the State

Appiah, *Ethics*, Chapter 6

July 31: Conclusions

Mark Lilla, “[The End of Identity Liberalism](#),” New York Times, November 18, 2016

Colleen Flaherty, “[Questioning ‘Identity Liberalism’](#),” Inside Higher Ed, December 5, 2016

Requirements:

The goal of this class is to cultivate dialogue around these complex issues. As such, it is fundamental that all texts are suitably prepared in advance. This means not simply having read the texts, but being able to summarize them and identify their key issues and be ready to discuss them. Many of these texts are dense, difficult, or both, and there is no reason to be concerned if a text seems opaque.

Beyond the readings you will be writing a short essay (7-8 pp.) a draft of which will be due at the end of week 3, and a final version at the end of week 4. The topic of the paper can be on any subject covered up to that point, in consultation with Nancy and/or with me.

There will also be a final oral exam of between 10-20 minutes to be conducted individually with the instructors at the end of the semester. While this exam is intended as a test of your knowledge and understanding of the material it is also intended to be an opportunity to discuss the material in a manner more responsive to your perspective on the material.

The paper will count for 40% of the final grade, the oral exam 30%, while 30% will come from class and section performance. To get a perfect section grade, you need to respond to the issues of the class—in person or in writing before class—for at least 75% of class and section meetings. Some people are naturally more comfortable speaking and others writing. If you are prefer writing rather

than speaking in class, you are welcome to type up your thoughts on a reading or a question developing out of it and send it to both Professor Harris and Nancy *before class*. This will count toward your section performance.

In addition to classroom meetings, there will be section every week with Nancy, your Teaching Fellow. Section is an opportunity to discuss the issues in class further, touch on other issues, and consider them in a different light. Not all the texts that are discussed in the classroom will be discussed in section, and, equally, not all texts discussed in section will be discussed in the classroom. At any point in the term you are welcome to set up a meeting with Professor Harris or Nancy, to discuss any of the issues we are dealing with in this course, or beyond.

Attendance at all classes is required.

Note on collaboration and academic honesty

You are encouraged to discuss your paper topics with your peers, in and out of class. If you are working on the same topic as someone else, collaboration can be a useful part of the writing process, but your final paper should present your own ideas, writing and bibliographic work. If you are using some of the same books as someone else in the course, please work cooperatively to share library resources. If you are uncertain about what is and is not permitted, please speak to me or to Nancy.

Plagiarism and other forms of academic dishonesty are serious offenses that undermine the trust on which the scholarly endeavor rests. Please make sure that all your work conforms to the College's policies on academic integrity. You may access these policies [here](#).

Laptops and Tablets: You are permitted to use electronic devices in class; indeed, as many of our readings are only available in electronic versions you are encouraged to do so. But these devices are for accessing documents and taking notes only. I know that many of you think you are skilled multi-taskers who can switch from class-related activities to other activities without missing a beat, but recent research (summarized [here](#)) makes clear that no one is good at such multi-tasking. Stay focused on what is happening in the classroom. I will feel free to call on students who are obviously focused elsewhere.