

BRITISH ACADEMY LECTURE

Other People

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GOETHE TOLD J. P. ECKERMANN, ‘I do not know myself, and God forbid that I should.’ Ignorance of oneself is not particularly uncommon, though it is seldom perceived and acknowledged with such clarity. There is, however, a prior issue: how does such a failure of self-knowledge arise? This is an issue of much complexity, and I shall confine my remarks to only one specific aspect of it. I shall be concerned, in particular, with the difficulties in acquiring self-knowledge that arise from the intricacies of our relation with other people. Our knowledge of ourselves must include how our concerns and priorities are influenced by the presence of others. We are, in fact, strongly influenced by others, even though the tacitness of the connections may, often enough, make the bearing less than transparent.

Oscar Wilde made the enigmatic claim, ‘Most people are other people.’ This may sound like one of Wilde’s preposterous exaggerations, but he defended that view with some cogency: ‘Their thoughts are someone else’s opinions, their lives a mimicry, their passions a quotation.’¹ We are influenced to an amazing extent by the company we keep and the people we identify with, and our lack of clarity about many of our beliefs and their underlying reasoning may, at least partly, arise from the fact that they reflect the views and judgements of others who have—perceptibly or imperceptibly—influenced us. For example, when partially articulated hatreds, whether in Kosovo or Bosnia or Rwanda or Timor or Palestine,

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¹ Oscar Wilde, *De Profundis* (1905; republished, 1908, 1969), p. 97.

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spread like wild fire, the nature and exact foundations of the abhorrence may be far less clear than the resolute call for fierce and violent deeds. Lack of self-knowledge and of self-criticism derives, often enough, from our attachment to one group of people, while spelling brutal disaster for another group.

Our identification with others in one group or another can have a strong influence on our thoughts and feelings, and through them, on our deeds as well. This, broadly speaking, is the subject of ‘social identity’, which elicits much interest and championing in the contemporary intellectual world, particularly in the so-called ‘communitarian’ literature. Indeed, in recent social, political, and moral investigations, social identity has become a frequently invoked concept. This lecture is concerned with a critical examination of the notion of social identity and its implications—real or imagined.

The importance of the idea of identity can scarcely be doubted. Our relation with other people is greatly influenced by the way we identify with some and not with others. I will, however, argue that the nature and reach of identity-based reasoning are often oversimplified, and that an inadequately scrutinised intellectual framework in which the notion of identity is situated can contribute greatly to confounding our relations with other people. The subject is, I would submit, not only of some analytical interest, it is also of central relevance in understanding a diverse basket of practical problems, as varied as violence in former Yugoslavia or Rwanda, the growing appeal of fundamentalism in Asia and Africa, racial discrimination in America or anti-immigrant violence in West Europe, and even the current controversies surrounding the idea of being British in a multi-ethnic Britain.

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The title of this talk, ‘Other People’, can be interpreted in different ways, invoking different contrasts. It can refer to:

- not *me*, but ‘other people’;
- not *my* people, but ‘other people’;
- not *this* group of people, but ‘other people’.

All three interpretations have a bearing on identity-based thinking.

The first contrast (not me, but other people) can be seen to be something like an ‘identity base line’, by distinguishing an individual, as seen

by herself, from all others. As far as interpersonal connections go, it invites reflection on how we relate to other people in general, without distinction. Indeed, a good deal of contemporary moral and political philosophy concentrates precisely on the way we may think about—and even identify with—all others. For example, Immanuel Kant's famous dictum, 'So act as to treat humanity, whether in thine own person or in that of any other, in every case as an end withal, never as means only',² makes a strong demand on our concern for all others—without exception. In so far as this is interpreted within a concept of identity (we are not obliged to do this—more on this later), this is, at least in one sense, the broadest identity we can have—with all human beings.

I use the qualifying phrase 'in one sense' because even broader characterisations can be invoked if we want our concern or our identity to stretch to other animals as well. 'Others' could include 'other sentient beings', and not just 'other people'. For example, quite a few of the moral issues encountered in the *Jatakas*, which are so central to Buddhist ethics, involve one's relation with other members of the animal kingdom. While I do not pursue this question further in this paper, I must put on record the belief that in understanding the demands of social ethics, we cannot dismiss the claims of other living beings as if they did not exist.

In the human-centred framework, universal coverage includes all other human beings. This universalist position can be contrasted with more limited structures of ethical or political thinking which are confined, in one way or another, to particular groups of people with the members of which the person identifies. The difficult questions to be faced arise only after the basic relevance of group identities has been acknowledged. The further questions include, I would argue, at least three elementary ones.

First, must our social identity be linked exactly to one group? Why not several groups with which one identifies in one way or another. Let me call this the issue of 'plural identity'. Second, do we choose our identities, or simply discover them? This is the issue of 'identity choice'. Third, how should we consider the claims of other people—not just the ones with whom we identify—in determining what would be acceptable or reasonable behaviour? This issue of transcendence I shall call 'beyond identity'.

² Immanuel Kant, *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Ethics* (1785), English translation by T. K. Abbott (8th edn, 1920), p. 56.

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Let me begin with the notion of ‘plural identity’. This is not, of course, a new subject, and many writers have discussed with much clarity the limitation of the presumption—often made implicitly—in identity politics and in identity-based philosophy that a person belongs only to one community or group. Surely any claim of exclusivity of this kind cannot but be manifestly absurd. We invoke group identities of various kinds in very many disparate contexts, and the language of our communications reflects this diversity in the different ways in which phrases like ‘my people’ are used. A person can be a Nigerian, an Ibo, a British citizen, a US resident, a woman, a philosopher, a vegetarian, a Christian, a painter, and a great believer in aliens who ride on UFOs—each of these groups giving the person a particular identity which may be invoked in particular contexts.

Sometimes an identity group—the idea of ‘my people’—may even have a very fleeting and highly contingent existence. Mort Sahl, the American comedian, is supposed to have responded to the intense tedium of a four-hour-long film, directed by Otto Preminger, called ‘Exodus’ (dealing with Jewish migration), by demanding on behalf of his fellow sufferers: ‘Otto, let my people go!’ That group of tormented film-goers did have reason for fellow feeling, but one can see the contrast between such an ephemeral group and the well-defined and really tyrannised community led by Moses—the original subject of that famous entreaty.

There are many groups to which a person belongs, and the assumption of a unique identity helps to generate what Anthony Appiah has called an ‘imperialism of identity’.³ In pursuing this critique further, it is useful to distinguish between ‘competing’ and ‘non-competing’ identities. The different groups may belong to the same category, dealing with the same kind of membership (such as citizenship), or to different categories (such as citizenship, class, gender, or profession). In the former case, there is some ‘competition’ between different groups within the same category, and thus between the different identities with which they are associated. In contrast, when we deal with groups classified on different bases (such as profession and citizenship), there may be no real competition between them as far as ‘belonging’ is concerned.

³ K. Anthony Appiah, ‘Race, Culture, Identity: Misunderstood Connections’, in K. Anthony Appiah and Amy Gutman, *Color Consciousness: The Political Morality of Race* (Princeton, 1996).

However, even though these non-competing identities are not involved in any territorial dispute as far as belonging is concerned, they can compete with each other for our attention and priorities. When one has to do one thing or another, the loyalties can conflict between giving priority to, say, race, or religion, or political commitments, or professional obligations, or friendship. And in that context, to be guided by only one particular identity (say, race), oblivious of others, can be disastrously limiting. As Anthony Appiah illustrates the point, 'racial identity can be the basis of resistance to racism', but 'let us not let our racial identities subject us to new tyrannies'. The neglect of our plural identities in favour of one 'principal' identity can greatly impoverish our lives and practical reason.

In fact, we can have plural identities even with competing categories. One citizenship does, in an elementary sense, compete with another, in a person's identity. But as this example itself indicates, even competing identities need not demand that one and one only of the unique specifications can survive, vanquishing all the other alternatives. A person can be a dual citizen of, say, both the United Kingdom and the United States. Citizenship can, of course, be made exclusive, as is the case with, say, China or Japan or India or Germany (this was, in fact, the case even with the United States until quite recently). But even when exclusivity is insisted on, the conflict of dual loyalty need not disappear. For example, if an Indian citizen resident in Britain is unable to take British citizenship because she does not want to lose her Indian citizenship, she may still have quite a substantial loyalty to her British attachments and to other features of her British identity which no Indian court can outlaw. Similarly, an erstwhile Indian citizen who has given up that citizenship to become a UK citizen may still retain considerable loyalties to her Indian identity.

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The plurality of competing as well as non-competing identities is not only not contradictory, it can be part and parcel of the self-conceptions of migrants and their families. For example, the tendency of British citizens of West Indian or South Asian origin to cheer their 'home' teams in test cricket has sometimes been seen as proof of disloyalty to Britain. This phenomenon has led to Lord Tebbit's famous 'cricket test' (to wit, you cannot be accepted as English unless you support England in test matches). This view involves a remarkable denial of consistent pluralities

that may be easily involved in a person's self-perception as well as social behaviour. Which cricket team to cheer is a completely different issue from the demands of British—or any other—citizenship, and different also from a socially cohesive life in England. In fact, in so far as Tebbit's 'cricket test' induces an exclusionary agenda, and imposes an unnecessary and irrelevant demand on immigrants, it makes social integration that much more difficult.

The compatibility of plural identities with the demands of citizenship and of social cohesion is important to recognise both for a fuller understanding of the nature of identity as well as for more effective public policy and social practice. A 'Pakistani Brit' could, for example, feel deeply proud of—indeed even 'patriotic' about—cricket back at 'home' in Pakistan, and this need not conflict with demands of British citizenship, not even with a sense of 'Britishness' or 'Englishness' in other respects, for example being integrated in English social life, defending the Parliamentary system and the English Common Law, and even perceiving some supernatural loyalty to the British pound against the offending Euro.

Similarly, on the other side, criticism is sometimes made of people who take pride in traditional, and classically old, British or English culture, and it has even been suggested that such belief must be seen as proof of their non-acceptance of a multi-ethnic Britain. Why so? Surely there is no conflict whatsoever in both fully accepting that the contemporary British population is a multi-ethnic mixture, which is supportive of the liberties and civil rights of different groups, and also maintaining at the same time that English traditional culture is far superior to anything that the immigrants have—or could have—brought. There is, in fact, overwhelming evidence that the vast majority of the British people—of all different colours—do not believe in any cultural comparison as simple as that. But there is no reason whatever to assume that such a belief, were it to be entertained, would disqualify the person from being a good citizen of a multiethnic Britain. The multi-ethnicity of Britain cannot be an all-engulfing super-identity that must knock out all other identifications—and beliefs—in deference to this one cause.

A related issue has been the subject of a somewhat diverting discussion in the recent Report of the Commission on the Future of Multi-ethnic Britain, sponsored by the Runnymede Trust.⁴ The Report, to give credit where it is due, discusses many important issues that genuinely need

⁴ *The Future of Multi-ethnic Britain, The Parekh Report* (2000).

consideration and attention. It is, thus, somewhat unfortunate that the Report gets distracted into the dead-end of a non-issue as to whether 'Englishness' or 'Britishness' has racial connotations. Britain has not, of course, been racially homogeneous in any strict sense for a long time, with waves of invasion and immigration over two millennia or more. But until recently the composition of the population was predominantly 'white' (a term that has come to be used for a mixed hue with varieties of ruddiness thrown in). This, of course, is a historical fact, as is the cultural fact that this is a country the past history of which has been distinctive, and continues to be influential in the lives of the inhabitants. Even the tradition of political and social tolerance in this country has strong historical roots.

A historian of language may find it interesting enough to see how the use of the word 'British' or even 'English' is changing. And changing it certainly is, in all kinds of different ways. Indeed, it is worth noting, in fairness to Norman Tebbit, that his absurd 'cricket test', misguided as it is, does not demand a skin inspection, only a close scrutiny of the cheers that emanate from immigrants, which is very different from mooring Britishness or Englishness on racial origin alone. To lament the fact that the terms 'British' or 'English' were not historically pre-fashioned *ex ante* to take note of the future arrival of multi-ethnic immigrants would surely be an exercise in futility.

Similarly, on the other side, when J. B. S. Haldane, the great biologist and geneticist, chose to become an Indian citizen and remained so to his death in Calcutta in 1964, he did not demand that the term 'Indian' be dissociated from its historical associations—only that he too be counted in as an Indian, which of course he was. Since I visited the Haldanes a number of times at their home in Baranagar in Calcutta, I can also affirm that their style of living not only had the mark of their impeccable originality (even eccentricity), but also well-established elements drawn from British as well as Indian culture (even though I am not able to tell you which cricket team the Haldanes tended to support). Their acquiring of Indian citizenship was not coupled with rejecting their British linkages (only of particular features of contemporary British politics), nor, on the other side, with any qualms about the historical associations of the term 'Indian'. There is, in fact, no serious reason for caging oneself in a prison of limited identities, or volunteering to be caught in an imagined contradiction between the richness of the past and the freedom of the present.

I shall come back again to some further issues connected with multiculturalism in Britain, but before that I turn to the second general topic, that of *identity choice*. Given the alternative identifications from which we can choose, the actual identities to which we can give recognition and priority are, to a considerable extent, ours to determine. This is not to deny that choices—of identity or anything else—are always constrained by feasibility restrictions. But there can be important options within those restrictions.

The constraints may, of course, vary in strength depending on circumstances. There may be especially strong limits to the extent to which we can persuade *others*, in particular, to take us to be different from what they take us to be. A Jewish person in Nazi Germany may not have been able to take on a radically different identity to escape persecution, and the same must have been true of an African American facing a lynch mob. The freedom that we actually have to choose our identity, especially in the way others see us, can often be extremely circumscribed.

Indeed, some times we may not even be fully aware how others identify us, which may differ from self-perception. There is an interesting lesson in an old Italian story—from the 1920s I believe—concerning a political recruiter from the Fascist Party trying to persuade a rural socialist that he should join the Fascist Party instead. ‘How can I’, said the rural socialist, ‘join the Fascist party? My father was a socialist. My grandfather was a socialist. I cannot really join the Fascist Party.’ ‘What kind of an argument is this?’ said the exasperated Fascist recruiter. ‘What would you have done’, he asked, ‘if your father had been a murderer and your grandfather had also been a murderer? What would you have done then?’ ‘Ah, then’, said the rural socialist, ‘then, of course, I would have joined the Fascist Party.’

It may often enough be very hard to change the way others see a person. In general, whether we are considering our identities as we ourselves see them, or as others see us, we choose within particular constraints. The choices may be less confined in the case of self-perception, but they can still be quite limited. However, this is not really a remarkable fact—rather the most elementary aspect of any choice. Anyone seriously involved in choice theory cannot but be aware that the first exercise to undertake is to identify the constraints within which one chooses. For example, in the economic theory of consumer’s choice, the existence of a budget, which of course is a constraint, does not imply that there is no choice to be

made, but that the choice has to be made within one's budget. The point at issue is not whether *any* identity whatever can be chosen (that would be an absurd claim), but whether we do have choices over alternative identities or combinations of identities, and perhaps more importantly, substantial freedom on what *priority* to give to the various identities that we may simultaneously have.

6

Identity choice is important in assessing the increasing trend towards cultural separatism that has emerged in recent years along with the rise of communitarian reasoning. One of the claims that many communitarians have made is that our identity is a matter of self-realisation, and thus not really a matter of choice. As Michael Sandel has explained this claim (among other alternative claims), 'community describes not just what they *have* as fellow citizens but also what they *are*, not a relationship they choose (as in a voluntary association) but an attachment they discover, not merely an attribute but a constituent of their identity'.⁵ In this view, identity comes *before* reasoning and choice.

I have scrutinized this claim elsewhere, in my Romanes Lecture at Oxford University, two years ago, which was entitled 'Reason before Identity'.⁶ I have argued that the claim has to be rejected. There is, of course, truth in the realisation that the culture in which one is born and bred can leave a lasting impact on one's perceptions and predispositions. But this does not imply that a person is not able to modify or even reject antecedent associations. It is not only that we can reconsider the groups with which we would like to identify, but that we can also examine and scrutinise the priorities that we attach to different identities. This does not, in any way, contradict the presence of elements of discovery in one's identity. For example, a person may well discover—a fact that she did not know—that she is, say, Jewish, or a Parsee, or part-American-Indian by descent, but what importance to attach to this fact is something on which she will have to take her own decisions. People of Jewish origin, for example, can have immensely divergent attitudes to politics, society, religious practice, or conception of themselves, and the discovery by a

⁵ See Michael Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (Cambridge, 1998), pp. 150–2.

⁶ *Reason before Identity* (Oxford, 1999). See also Leon Wieseltier, *Against Identity* (New York, 1996).

person that she has Jewish ancestry will not settle any of these issues. To deny choice where choice exists is not only an epistemic mistake, it can also entail a moral and political failure through abdication of one's responsibility to face the fundamental, Socratic question: 'How should I live?'

Choice is inescapably associated with responsibility, and a chosen identity has to be defended in a way that a discovered identity need not be. But this lack of responsibility can be the cause of a great many transgressions—even horrors. Jonathan Glover discusses in his new book, *Humanity: A Moral History of the Twentieth Century*, why many atrocities in the world occur as a result of people feeling compelled to act in particular ways—in line with their perceived identities, including chastising others who belong to a group which has a hostile relation with the group with which the person himself identifies.⁷ Indeed, many of us from the Indian subcontinent—old enough to have lived through the bloody 1940s—can vividly remember how readily the pre-partition riots drew on the newly devised identity contrasts, which transformed old friends into new enemies and made murderers into putative compatriots. The carnage that followed had much to do with the alleged 'discovery' of one's 'true' identity, unhampered by reasoned humanity. Similar—in some cases even more extreme—butchery has been occurring more recently across the world in Rwanda, Congo, Bosnia, Kosovo, and elsewhere, under the spell of newly rediscovered and magnified identities.

7

Identity choice is a crucial aspect also of many other issues of social ethics. For example, it has a strong bearing on global justice. Recognising the possibility of identity choice has the immediate implication that global justice must be distinguished from international justice, with which it is often confounded. To see global justice as international justice is to assume that the national identity of a person is the only—or at least the dominant—identity. But people in different parts of the world interact with each other in many different ways—through commerce, through literature, through political agitations, through global NGOs, through the news media, through the internet, and so on. Their relations are not all mediated through governments or representatives of nations.

⁷ See Jonathan Glover, *Humanity: A Moral History of the Twentieth Century* (1999).

For example, a feminist activist in Britain who wants to help, say, to remedy some features of women's disadvantage in Africa or Asia, draws on a sense of identity that does not work through the sympathies of one nation for the predicament of another. Her identity as a fellow woman may be more important here than her citizenship. Similarly, many NGOs—Médecins sans Frontières, OXFAM, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and others—explicitly focus on affiliations and associations that cut across national boundaries.

Even commercial linkages and market relations can establish human connections. Indeed, as early as in the 1770s, David Hume noted the importance of increased intercourse in expanding the reach of our sense of justice:

... again suppose that several distinct societies maintain a kind of intercourse for mutual convenience and advantage, the boundaries of justice still grow larger, in proportion to the largeness of men's views, and the force of their mutual connexions. History, experience, reason sufficiently instruct us in this natural progress of human sentiments, and in the gradual enlargement of our regards to justice, in proportion as we become acquainted with the extensive utility of that virtue.⁸

Global justice cannot but embrace identities that go well beyond citizenship.

This topic, which has always had strong ethical interest, has become especially prominent in recent years, partly as a result of protesting demonstrations—from Seattle and Washington to London and Prague. One of the first features to note about the recent demonstrations against globalisation is the extent to which these protests were themselves globalised events—drawing on people from very many different countries and distinct regions in the world. This is not the occasion for me to try to present an analysis of the institutional response needed to deal with issues of global justice and equity (this I have tried to do elsewhere).⁹ The concerns of the demonstrators have often been reflected in roughly structured demands and crudely devised slogans, and the *themes* of these protests have been consistently more important than their *theses*. In the present context, it is, however, particularly important to see that the sense of identity which finds expression in these movements—and also in many other

⁸ David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (first published 1777); republished, La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1966, p. 25.

⁹ In particular in my *Development as Freedom* (New York, and Oxford, 1999). See also the text of my Commencement Address at Harvard University, 'Global Doubts,' *Harvard Magazine*, Sept.–Oct. 2000.

expressions of global concern—goes well beyond national identities. The world is not just a collection of nations, but also of persons, and international justice cannot exhaust the claims of global justice.

8

I return now to the multi-ethnicity of contemporary Britain. I discussed earlier why it is important, in this context, to take fuller note of ‘plural identity’ and I want now to comment briefly on the importance of ‘identity choice’ in this exercise. Just as the global world cannot be seen only as a collection of nations, similarly a multi-ethnic British nation cannot be seen as a collection of ethnic communities. This differs somewhat from the vision that has been outlined in the Report of the Commission on the Future of Multi-ethnic Britain. As its Chairman, Lord Parekh, explains, we should think of Britain as ‘a looser federation of cultures held together by common bonds of interest and affection and a collective sense of being’.¹⁰ This is a well articulated position, and Bhikhu Parekh ably presents the reasoning behind this conclusion.

And yet, I must argue that a person’s relation to Britain need not be mediated through the ‘culture’ of the family in which he or she may have been born. A person may decide to seek identity with more than one of these predefined cultures, or just as plausibly, with none. Also, a person may well decide that her ethnic or cultural identity is less important to her than, say, her political convictions, or her professional commitments, or her literary persuasions. It is a choice for her to make, no matter how she is placed in the ‘federation of cultures’.

These are not abstract concerns, nor are they specific features of the complexity of modern life. Consider Cornelia Sorabji, who came to Britain in the 1880s. She was variously described by herself and by others as an ‘Indian’ (she did return to India and wrote an engaging book called *India Calling*), as being at home in England as well (‘homed in two countries, England and India’), as a Parsee (‘I am Parsee by nationality’), as a Christian (full of admiration for ‘the Early Martyrs of the Christian Church’), as a sari-clad woman (‘always perfectly dressed in a “richly coloured silk sari”’, as the *Manchester Guardian* described her), as a lawyer and a barrister-at-law (at Lincoln’s Inn), a fighter for women’s education and for legal rights particularly for secluded women (she specialised

¹⁰ Bhikhu Parekh, ‘A Britain We All Belong To’, *Guardian*, 11 Oct. 2000.

as a legal adviser to ‘purdahnashins’), a committed supporter of the British Raj (even accused Mahatma Gandhi, not particularly fairly, for enrolling ‘babies as early as six and seven years of age’), always nostalgic about India (‘the green paroquets at Budh Gaya: the blue wood-smoke in an Indian village’); a firm believer in the asymmetry between women and men (proud to be seen as ‘a modern woman’); a teacher at an exclusively men’s college (‘at eighteen, in a Male College’); and ‘the first woman’ ever of any background to get the degree of Bachelor of Civil Law at Oxford (requiring ‘a special decree from Congregation to allow her to sit’).¹¹ She chose her plural identities influenced by her background, but through her own decisions and priorities. In the last respect, she was not unique, despite the uniqueness of her chosen combination of identities.

In addition to acknowledging the importance of individual freedom in making one’s own choices, it is also important to take note of the fact that the so-called ‘cultures’ do not reflect anything like some *uniquely* defined sets of attitudes and beliefs. For example, Indian traditions are often taken to be intimately associated with religion, and yet Sanskrit and Pali have a larger literature in defence of atheism and agnosticism than can be found in any other classical language: Greek or Roman or Hebrew or Arabic. Consider, for instance, an assertive anti-religious view:

there is no after-world, nor any religious practice for attaining that. Follow what is within your experience and do not trouble yourself with what lies beyond the province of human experience.

Or consider the more aggressive and combative view:

The injunctions about worship of Gods, sacrifice, gifts and penance have been laid down in the Shastras [Hindu scriptures] by clever people, just to rule over [other] people and to make them submissive and disposed to charity.

These views might be seen as quite unacceptable if expressed by some indigenous—or ‘native’—British critic, who could get into trouble in the newly conceived ‘federation of cultures’. And yet they are direct quotations from the *Ramayana*, and reflect points of view that found room for expression in that two-millennia-old Indian epic, which is sometimes taken as a definitive sourcebook of orthodox Hinduism.¹² Indeed, similar diversities of views can be found in a great many other old Indian texts, including the *Mahabharata* (the sister-epic of *Ramayana*) and several other ancient documents that combine expressions of belief along with

¹¹ See Cornelia Sorabji, *India Calling* (1934), and Vera Brittain, *The Women at Oxford* (1960).

¹² The translation is taken from Makhanlal Sen, *Valmiki Ramayana* (Calcutta, 1989), pp. 174–5.

disbelief. There is also elaborate exposition of anti-religious scepticism in the writings of the 'Lokayata' and the 'Charvaka' schools, some of which are respectfully included in authoritative compilations, such as the classic *Sarva-darshana-samgraha* ('The Collection of Philosophies'), written by Madhava Acharya in the fourteenth century.¹³

Indeed, many of the 'cultures', which are frequently interpreted in rigidly narrow terms by contemporary religious leaders, contain enormous internal variations of attitudes and beliefs. One of the dangers associated with the programme of creating a 'federation of cultures' is to submerge the freedom of members of the community to take their own view, to arrive at their own interpretations, of the contents of these cultures. Indeed, these cultures have often taken much broader and more tolerant views than the officially recognised religious leaders allow today. For example, Muslim emperors in Turkey, or the Moghal rulers (such as Akbar) in India, were often much more liberal on religious matters than their European contemporaries. To take another example (from many others), when the great Jewish scholar Maimonides, in the twelfth century, had to run away from an intolerant Europe (where he was born) and from its persecution of Jews, he chose the security of a tolerant and urbane Cairo and the patronage of Sultan Saladin. Similarly, in the light of recent attempts by some Hindu political leaders to target Christian advocacy in India, it is important to remember that India already had large Christian communities from the fourth century—at least two hundred years before Britain had any Christians at all.

If the school curriculum in Britain is to include more history of other cultures, which is not at all a frivolous demand, it is very important to make sure that the guardianship of what to include and what to leave out is not placed in the hands only of officially recognised leaders of these communities and cultures. This is, of course, not a part of Lord Parekh's programme. He himself is too wise and too well informed to go that way (and indeed Parekh's introductory statement includes the dual assertion that 'Britain is both a community of citizens and a community of communities'). But the view of Britain as a 'federation of cultures' does arouse the deepest suspicions about how the cultures would be represented in this newly conceived federation. The alternative unitary but freedom-centred conception of Britain as a society of persons, with various backgrounds, who are free to choose their own identities and

¹³ For an English translation, see E. B. Cowell and A. E. Gough, *The Sarva-Darsana-Samgraha: Or Review of the Different Systems of Hindu Philosophy* (New Delhi, 1976).

priorities, has merits that the ‘federation’ view does not have. It is bad enough to have what Anthony Appiah has called the ‘new tyrannies’ of identity, but to have them with official patronage would be altogether tragic.

9

I come, finally, to the last of the three identified questions, concerning identity, namely transcendence, or what was called ‘beyond identity’. Even after due recognition is given to ‘plural identity’ and ‘identity choice’, we still have to consider the claims of other people who do not share our own identities. This is, of course, a very big subject, and I can only touch on a few of its elementary aspects.

Perhaps the first point to note is that universalist demands need not necessarily take the form of identifying with all, but that of considering the interests and claims of all *whether or not* one identifies with them. Indeed, the basis of our concern for others need not be confined only to identifying oneself with others. Moral or political inclusion is not the same thing as identity. There is an inescapable crudity in thinking that we cannot sympathise with the joys and miseries, with the predicaments and achievements, of others without actually seeing them as some kind of an extension of oneself. For example, taking sympathy to be nothing other than some extended form of self-seeking through the device of seeing others as oneself may have nobility of its own, but it is surely possible to entertain sympathy without actually inserting one’s own self into the lives of others.

In dealing with Kantian arguments, to which I made a reference earlier, or with the reasoning to be found in Adam Smith’s demand for invoking the ‘impartial spectator’,¹⁴ what is very important is to have impartiality as well as universal coverage. In doing this exercise, there are two quite different uses of identity, namely an ‘epistemic’ use, in trying to know what others feel and what they see by placing oneself in the position of others, and an ‘ethical’ use, in counting them as if they were the same as oneself. The epistemic use is inescapably important, since our knowledge of other people’s minds has to be derivative, in one way or another, on our placing ourselves in the position of others. But the ethical use may be far from obligatory. To respond to the interests of others, we can see

¹⁴ Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1790; republished, Oxford, 1976).

ourselves as 'impartial spectators', as Smith called that role, but this demand of impartial concern is not the same thing as promoting the interests of others on the ground that they are, in some sense, an elongation of oneself. As people capable of abstraction and reasoning, we should be able to respond humanely to the predicaments of others who simply are different and seen to be different. Identity-based reasoning may have its domain in moral and political thinking, but it cannot exhaust the entire dominion of reasoned ethics.

Similarly, political inclusion can be very important for political justice, whether or not any great identity issue is invoked in that inclusion. The Report of the Commission on the Future of Multi-ethnic Britain notes that in many ways Britain has been more successful than some of its European neighbours—Germany for example and to some extent France as well—in keeping intense racism and anti-immigrant agitations at bay. In explaining the difference, it is quite important to look at differences in political inclusion that the respective voting laws have allowed.

For example, in Germany, a legally settled immigrant does not have the political right to vote because of the difficulties and delays in acquiring citizenship. Britain has, to a great extent, avoided this problem through a historical connection. Because of the imperial tradition, taken over by the Commonwealth, the right to vote is determined in the United Kingdom not exclusively by British citizenship, but also by the citizenship of the Commonwealth. Indeed, any citizen of the Commonwealth—any subject of the Queen as the head of the Commonwealth—immediately acquires voting rights in Britain on being accepted for settlement. Since most of the non-white immigrants to Britain have come from Commonwealth countries (varying from Jamaica and Trinidad, to Nigeria and Ghana, to Uganda and Kenya, to India, Pakistan and Bangladesh), they have had the right of political participation in Britain immediately on arrival on a permanent basis. This does not, of course, give them the right to immigration, but once settled in Britain, political inclusion comes immediately and effectively.

If a right-wing extremist in Germany makes strongly anti-immigrant statements, he does not lose the votes of immigrants (since they have none), whereas he can gain votes of those who are inclined in the same anti-immigrant direction. In Britain, in contrast, while anti-immigrant statements may please some, they also immediately bring in a backlash from immigrant voters, even when they have not yet acquired British citizenship. This has made the British political parties quite keen on wooing the immigrant vote, and this clearly has served as a brake on the

earlier attempts at racist politics in Britain. There is no reason for complacency in Britain (since there are still many problems to be dealt with), but there is reason for some satisfaction here, and more importantly, the need to see the significance of political inclusion, which has consequences and achievements of its own that need not be confused with any notion of social identity.

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To conclude, in my critique of identity-based social thinking, I have presented three theses. First, I have argued that it is extremely important to recognise that identities can be plural (and not merely singular), even when they compete with each other. Second, it has been argued that identities can be chosen, and not just discovered, even when the choice is constrained (as all choices are). And third, I have also argued that identities, important as they are, are not all important, even when the broadest form of identity—identifying with all—is taken into account. Moral and political inclusion transcends the domain of identity. These issues are not only of interest for our social understanding, but also of relevance in facing some of the most difficult practical problems in the contemporary world. There is need for clarity on all this.