

# Course Syllabus

## FS 65J: Who Do You Think You Are?: 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.

### Objectives:

### Students will learn ways of engaging with the following questions:

- How should each of us negotiate between identities that prioritize different values?
- What role should our identities play in the task of crafting a life and sense of self?
- What claims, if any, can groups organized around identity make on individuals? (“You are one of us, so show some solidarity with our struggle.”)
- What claims, if any, can individuals make on identity groups? (“This group ought to be more inclusive to people like me.”)
- What is to be done when groups hold views about identity that are helpful to some but may cause injury to others, both within groups and outside groups? (“We can’t accept you and still be true to who we are.”)



- When, if ever, should institutions organize individuals into identity categories and relate to them through these categories? (Is it ethically appropriate to use identity categories to institutionalize affirmative action? The census? Scientific research on race and sex? The very idea of a nation-state?)

**Office hours:** Office hours will be by appointment. I am well aware of the literature that suggests students think “by appointment” means “don’t bother me.” I can only hope you take me at my word that I intend nothing of the kind. Student schedules are so varied that a fixed time would surely be inconvenient if not impossible for at least some of you. I will make every attempt to accommodate all of you (and am happy to meet on evenings and weekends); my preference is to meet via FaceTime, rather than zoom (but, of course, can manage zoom or google hangouts, or whatever else you might need to use).

**Collaboration and Integrity:** You are encouraged to discuss your posts (see below) or assignment/paper topics or projects 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 (or editing, curating, or whatever activity is relevant to your chosen medium) process, but your posts and your finished assignments should present your own ideas, writing (or...as above), and bibliographic work.

Plagiarism and other forms of academic dishonesty are serious offenses that undermine the trust on which the scholarly endeavor rests, and can lead to serious penalties up to a requirement to withdraw from the College for a year. Please make sure that all your work conforms to the College’s policies on academic integrity. You may access these policies and resources [here \(https://honor.fas.harvard.edu/students/\)](https://honor.fas.harvard.edu/students/).

**Mental Health:** I very much care about your well-being. I am not, of course, a mental health professional; all the same, if you think it might be helpful, I encourage any student facing stress or mental health concerns to approach me (in addition to your Resident Dean) for guidance to Harvard’s resources; you may review the main resources [here \(https://camhs.huhs.harvard.edu/\)](https://camhs.huhs.harvard.edu/).

**Laptops and Tablets:** As almost all the readings will be available electronically, you may use laptops and/or tablets in this class, **but not phones**. These devices are for participating in class 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](http://www.thenewatlantis.com/publications/the-myth-of-multitasking) ) and [here](http://www.thenewatlantis.com/publications/the-myth-of-multitasking) )

(<https://www.scienceabc.com/humans/can-humans-actually-multitask.html>) makes clear that no one is actually good at such multi-tasking. Stay focused on what is happening in the classroom. I know this can be hard. Please turn off all notifications that might present you with difficult-to-resist distractions.

## Books:

The only book you should own is Kwame Anthony Appiah, *The Ethics of Identity*. It is available in paperback and ebook formats.

## Assignments:

### Sept. 6 Prologue

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

Adriana Cavarero, *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*, introduction and chapter 13 (pp. 1-4; 139-144) (PDF)

### Blind spots and gatekeeping

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

Adolph Reed Jr., “[From Jenner to Dolezal: One Trans Good, the Other Not So Much](https://www.commondreams.org/views/2015/06/15/jenner-dolezal-one-trans-good-other-not-so-much)  (<https://www.commondreams.org/views/2015/06/15/jenner-dolezal-one-trans-good-other-not-so-much>)”

**Sept. 13 Personal Identity**

John Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, chapter 27 (focus primarily on sections 9-29, approximately 20 pp. depending on the edition you use; this is available free)

David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, part 4, section 6 (approximately 12 pp., again depending on what free edition you use)

*Oedipus the King* (I recommend the translation by Robert Fagles, with an introduction by Bernard Knox in *Three Theban Plays*, Penguin edition, which will cost a few dollars. There are multiple translations available online at no charge, which should be adequate for our purposes).

Adriana Cavarero, *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*, pp. 7-16 (PDF)

**Sept. 20 The Value of Individuality**

Appiah, *Ethics*, Chapter 1, pp. 1-35

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

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

**Sept. 27 Autonomy and Its Challenges**

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

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

Gerald Dworkin, *The Theory and Practice of Autonomy*, 3-20, 34-47

### **Oct. 4 Identities, Multiculturalism, and the Problem of Neutrality**

Appiah, *Ethics*, Chapter 3, pp. 62-99

Ian Hacking, "Making up People" (PDF)

Lisa Martín Alcoff, "Racism and Visible Race" and "Latinos, Asian Americans, and the Black-White Binary" in Alcoff, *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self*, chapters 8 (19pp.) and 11 (16pp.)

### **Oct. 11 Continuation**

Martha Minow, *Not Only for Myself: Identity, Politics, and the Law*, pp. 7-58

Wendy Brown: "Wounded Attachments" (PDF)

### **Oct. 18 Recognition, Limits, Parameters**

Appiah, *Ethics*, Chapter 3, pp. 99-113

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

Charles Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition" in *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*

## Oct. 25 Culture

### Culture as a Vector of Identity

Appiah, *The Lies That Bind*, pp. 187-213

### Culture and Value

Appiah, *Ethics*, Chapter 4, 114-141

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

Eamonn Callan, "The Ethics of Assimilation."

## Nov. 1 Diversity and Monism

Appiah, *Ethics*, Chapter 4, 141-154

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

Students will watch Trevor Noah's response to the French Ambassador regarding French/African identity

(<https://youtu.be/COD9hcTpGWQ> → [https://urldefense.proofpoint.com/v2/url?u=https-3A\\_youtu.be\\_COD9hcTpGWQ&d=DwMF-g&c=WO-RGvefibhHBZq3fL85hQ&r=6aWwaBa--CqY-FivB4llm2sKI0JF3d-](https://urldefense.proofpoint.com/v2/url?u=https-3A_youtu.be_COD9hcTpGWQ&d=DwMF-g&c=WO-RGvefibhHBZq3fL85hQ&r=6aWwaBa--CqY-FivB4llm2sKI0JF3d-)

[135nkjWID7zk&m=hqZG6yBolmAxtZtX3RGqyeweKFR4QdeM1V5SzSaSYQA&s=sz2R4biAKFIUdKO8lzfSWgFc](#)  
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## Nov. 8 Persons and States

Appiah, *Ethics*, Chapter 5, pp. 155-192

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

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

## Nov. 15 Identity and Education

Appiah, *Ethics*, Chapter 5, pp. 192-212

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

## Nov. 29 Cosmopolitanism

Appiah, *Ethics*, Chapter 6, pp. 213-272

Martha Nussbaum, *The Cosmopolitan Tradition: A Noble but Flawed Ideal*, chapters 1 and 6, pp. 1-17, 206-235.

## Requirements:

The goal of this class is to cultivate dialogue around these complex issues. As such, it is essential 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.

Students must complete 2 significant assignments, which may be written or in one of the other media noted below. Assignments are in two tracks: Track #1 is more reflective, Track #2 is more analysis “at a distance.” Students must do **one** assignment from each track, in whatever order suits them.

There are no exams in this course.

Finally, students will be required to post questions to the course site or slack channel before lecture at regular intervals. The intervals will depend on the number of students in the class. This requirement is very much intended to be “light-lifting.”

## First assignment, due after week 5 (Oct. 4):

### Track #1 Option: Life story reflective essay

a). Write out your life story (real or imagined, for those who may not wish to share personal details) up until this point.

b). Then use it to reflect on the role of narrative on your construction of self. Some questions to think about:

- How do you negotiate the tensions between “identifying as” and “being identified as?”
- What role should your identities play in the task of crafting a life story and sense of self?
- To what extent can narrative help to achieve a unified sense of self?
- How important is narrative coherence to your own understanding of self?



Track #2 Option: Character in a novel analysis

Pick one of your favorite works of fiction/memoir. Analyze the central character in a way analogous to how Appiah analyses Mr Stevens in Chapter 1 of *The Ethics of Identity*. Some questions to think about:

What is a plan of life? Does this character have one? If not, does this hinder her?

- What identity/identities are important to this character? Is the character constrained by these identities? What benefits do these identities offer the character?
- How does your character negotiate between identities that prioritize different values?
- What role should your character's identities play in the task of crafting their life story and sense of self?

**Second Assignment, after week 11 (Nov. 15):**Track #1 Option: Analytic Commentary

Choose option A, B or C (below) to provide an analytic commentary (in one form or another!) of the course concepts and frameworks. Reconsider the following prompts to guide your multi-media creation or essay:

- How do you negotiate the tensions between “identifying as” and “being identified as?”
- What role should your identities play in the task of crafting a life story and sense of self?
- To what extent can narrative help to achieve a unified sense of self?
- How important is narrative coherence to your own understanding of self?

A: Film

Plan a film about the course concepts e.g. a series of interviews with contemporary thinkers on the various course topics. Outputs can be part of the film itself, scripts for the film if there are interviews/exposition parts, a film poster and/or film pamphlet for film festival audiences.

B: Podcast

Plan a long podcast e.g. 20 mins or a couple of short ones e.g. 10 mins about a unit/s of the course. The podcast could take the form of an interview (a la [Philosophy Bites](https://philosophybites.com/) [⇒ \(https://philosophybites.com/\)](https://philosophybites.com/) or [Unmute](https://unmutetalk.podbean.com/) [⇒ \(https://unmutetalk.podbean.com/\)](https://unmutetalk.podbean.com/)) or a summary of the course material (ala [History of Philosophy without any Gaps](https://historyofphilosophy.net/) [⇒ \(https://historyofphilosophy.net/\)](https://historyofphilosophy.net/)) or a discussion (a la [Partially Examined Life](https://partiallyexaminedlife.com/) [⇒ \(https://partiallyexaminedlife.com/\)](https://partiallyexaminedlife.com/)).

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### C: Personal Essay

If you did not choose track one for the first assignment, you may here write about your life story (again, real or imagined) until this point, and using the concepts you've engaged with in this course, analyse your story of self and identify how the perceptions of your personal narrative have changed. Consider the questions above to help guide your essay.

### Track #2 Option: Exhibition Curation

Select objects/artifacts from an online archive (e.g. Smithsonian, Harvard Art Galleries, etc) for a virtual exhibition to accompany the next iteration of the courses' Culture module. Select the artifacts and produce an exhibition guide which makes the links between the artifacts and course concepts. Concepts to consider in your curation and exhibition guide include:

- When, if ever, should institutions organize individuals into identity categories and relate to them through these categories?
- What is to be done when socio-cultural views about identity are helpful to some but cause injury to others, both within groups and outside groups?