Social Unity and the Identity of Persons

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A PERSON’S citizenship, gender, and ethnicity can be part of her “identity,” as can her language, her religion, life projects, ethical commitments, and the like. This idea of “identity” is important both to moral and to political philosophy, but it has not been given an adequate philosophical explication. Indeed, it might be that there is not a single idea of “identity,” but that instead there is a family of ideas that have not been well distinguished from one another. My goal in this paper is to explicate an idea of “identity” and to illustrate its usefulness in political philosophy. I believe the idea I will introduce is important to a proper understanding of the bases of social unity, both the unity that is forged by shared commitments and friendships, and the political unity of multinational and multicultural states.

The metaphysics of “personal identity” is not at issue in this context. It is a familiar fact that people continue to exist as time passes, despite the many physical and psychological changes that they undergo. The metaphysical problem of personal identity is to explain what is necessarily involved in the continued existence of a person over time. A proposed solution to this problem is a proposal about the nature of the metaphysical glue that joins the various stages in a person’s life into a single life.¹ But whatever view we take about the nature of this metaphysical glue, there is the quite different issue in moral psychology that is my topic here.

The idea is that some facts about a person are central to her personality, her character, or her view of herself, such that understanding what these facts are is crucial in some important way to understanding her. I will propose an account of this idea of identity in terms of self-esteem. I do not claim that my account is a fully accurate analysis of a clear pre-theoretical concept, but I do claim that it captures important central features of our thinking about the issues in moral psychology that I will be addressing. In addition, I claim that the account is theoretically useful in a wide variety of contexts. In this paper I will focus on issues in political theory. I will suggest that the concept of identity as I explicate it—self-esteem identity—can help to explain the phenomena of nationalism and patriotism and the difficult problem of social unity faced by multinational states.²

¹For a recent, celebrated discussion of the metaphysics of personal identity, see Derek Parfit, Reasons and Persons (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984).
²This has been said before, about “identity”: see Will Kymlicka, Multicultural Citizenship, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995); Yael Tamir, Liberal Nationalism (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993).
It might also help to explain what is at issue in at least some cases of so-called “identity politics,” including the politics of multiculturalism. Some might object that it is unreasonable, immoral, or illiberal to permit one’s membership in a state or a nation to be part of one’s identity, perhaps because this might cloud one’s ability to assess the state or nation dispassionately, or perhaps because of the familiar atrocities that have been motivated by nationalism. I believe that this objection is mistaken, but it needs to be taken seriously, for, if I am correct, the viability of liberal multinational and multicultural states might depend on whether citizenship is a part of the identities of enough of their citizens.

I begin, in section I of the paper, with a brief discussion of some existing accounts of identity. In Sections II and III, I introduce and refine my own conception of identity, and in Section IV, I compare my conception with the accounts of identity discussed in Section I. I argue that self-esteem identity has a variety of intuitive and theoretical advantages. In the rest of the paper, I make a number of suggestions about the usefulness of the idea of self-esteem identity, beginning, in Section V, with issues in moral psychology. I introduce the idea of a “wide self” and use it to suggest how issues in moral psychology can be connected with issues in politics. In Sections VI and VII, I discuss the relation between self-esteem identity and the problem of social unity in states, especially multinational states. Finally, in Section VIII, I reply to the objection that it is unreasonable, immoral, or illiberal to permit one’s citizenship or national affiliation to be part of one’s identity. My arguments in the last half of the paper are somewhat speculative since the issues I will be addressing go well beyond the scope of a single paper. My goal in this part of the paper is to suggest connections, not to establish conclusions.

I. THE IDENTITY OF PERSONS: SOME EXISTING ACCOUNTS

It appears that the use of the term “identity” to express a psychological notion of the sort I have in mind is fairly recent. Erik Erikson claims that the notion itself was an innovation in the field of psychoanalysis. Despite this, he writes, “identity concepts have secured themselves rather quickly a place of familiarity in the thinking or, at any rate, the vocabulary, of a wide range of readers in a number of countries.” Erikson leaves the concept of identity

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4The *Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1933) does not give an entry for “identity” with anything like the relevant meaning. The closest is the metaphysical concept of personal identity, for which the dictionary cites Locke and Hume, among others. In the 1976 *Supplement* to the O.E.D., however, the term “identity crisis” is given, with the first cited usage being 1954.

undefined, and this may well suit his purposes. A number of writers have attempted to explain the concept, however, and I will briefly discuss a variety of proposals. In section IV I will return to these proposals in order to explain the advantages of my conception of self-esteem identity.

Charles Taylor suggests that a person’s identity is given by her answer to the question, “Who am I?” Given an appropriate context, it might be true that if Maurice Richard had been asked Taylor’s question, he would have answered that he is Québécois, which plausibly would have given an aspect of his identity. But as I will illustrate in section IV, a person might answer Taylor’s question in different ways at different times depending on her mood and on what facts about herself were salient at the time. And in many contexts, she might cite a trivial distinguishing characteristic that is not plausibly taken to describe any aspect of her identity. If I were walking in my neighborhood, for example, I might identify myself as a person who lives in the house with the red door. One trouble with Taylor’s suggestion, then, is that we need already to know what identity is in order to know whether an answer to Taylor’s question plausibly gives a person’s identity or not. The question cannot be used to define the idea of identity.

The social psychologists Michael Hogg and Dominic Abrams explain people’s identities in terms of their “concepts of who they are, of what sort of people they are, and how they relate to others.” Similarly, Erikson talks about a person’s “self-image.” These ideas are ultimately no more helpful than Taylor’s. For what is my self-image, and what is my concept of who I am? Perhaps my concept of myself is my answer to the question, “Who am I?” If so, then this proposal is no different from Taylor’s. Perhaps my concept of myself, or of what sort of person I am, is given by my beliefs to the effect that I have such and such properties. But it is not plausible to count every property I believe myself to have as part of my identity. An account of identity needs to be more selective than this, as I will explain.

Christine Korsgaard and David Miller have proposed that a person’s identity is a system of characteristics that the person has and values having. I do not deny that there is a concept of such a system of characteristics, but the concept I want to draw attention to is different from this, and it is

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6In doing so, he says he takes heart from the fact that Stuart Hampshire has written approvingly that the concept of identity “serves to group together a range of phenomena which could profitably be investigated together.” Quoted in Erikson, ibid., p. 18, from Stuart Hampshire, in the Observer (London) (December 1, 1968).


9Erikson, Life History and the Historical Moment, p. 46.

important partly because it allows for cases in which a person disvalues an aspect of her identity. During the period of apartheid in South Africa, for example, when blacks were abused and humiliated on account of being black, it is likely that many of them did not value being black, but being black nevertheless is a property that we presumably would want to treat as part of their identity. In another place, Miller speaks of a person’s identity more simply as a system of values, and this idea is echoed by Yael Tamir. But again this view does not allow for cases in which a person disvalues an aspect of her identity in the way that many black South Africans might have done under apartheid. I will return to these proposals.

K. Anthony Appiah has suggested that the identity of a person is a set of “properties important for social life,” which might “matter to their bearers in very different ways.” Appiah’s account deals well with the example of the South Africans, for, whether or not a black South African valued being black, the property of being black was certainly important for social life under apartheid. But Appiah’s account does not deal well with our intuitions about certain other examples. It might be no part of Kim Campbell’s identity that she is tall, even if this property is important socially. But she might be tormented by a trivial event that occurred in her childhood and that she takes to be quite central to her life even though, and perhaps because, it was not important socially. We would presumably want to treat this as an aspect of her identity. It appears, then, that our intuitions in certain kinds of cases do not track Appiah’s notion of identity.

There is an important difference between Appiah’s account and those of the other writers I have discussed, however. On the accounts provided by the other writers, a person’s own psychological responses to her properties determine which set of properties constitutes her “identity.” Her identity is given by the properties she would cite in answering a diagnostic question, or by the properties of herself that she herself values. For Appiah, it is the responses of other people to a person’s properties that determine which set of properties constitutes her identity. Appiah is interested in the fact that the way a person is seen by others, such as, for instance, as a “feminist,” or as “black,” can cause her to be categorized politically and socially, by herself as well as by others, as a member of a group that might not otherwise have been at all significant to how she understands herself. We might say that Appiah is interested in properties that constitute our “social identity” whereas the other authors are interested in properties that constitute our “subjective identity.”

Appiah is correct, I think, that the various aspects of a person’s identity typically do not all matter to her in the same way. Erikson pointed out that a

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11See Miller, ibid., p. 45, and Tamir, Liberal Nationalism, p. 23.
A person might try to “submerge” certain aspects of her identity, if she views them as undesirable. The accounts of subjective identity we have considered so far cannot accommodate these insights very comfortably since they make a person’s identity turn on her own attitudes to properties she takes herself to have. Appiah is also correct that the attitudes of other people can powerfully affect one’s identity. Were it not for racism and the history of slavery, for example, it is unlikely that such a high proportion of African Americans would have the fact that they are black as part of their identity. Erikson stressed that our society, community and family provide models that can help us to establish our identities. A person’s identity is shaped by her history and by the culture of the surrounding society. I will try to accommodate these suggestions in my own account of identity.

It might seem that the issue among the authors I have mentioned is merely the verbal issue of which set of properties of a person, or which set of propositions about her, we are going to call her “identity.” Yet we do have intuitions about identity, and, as I will argue, my account of self-esteem identity captures central features of these intuitions better than the competing accounts. There are also substantive, explanatory issues, and different accounts of identity might have different explanatory merits. It seems to me in fact that Appiah and I have somewhat different explanatory purposes, and that for this reason, my notion of self-esteem identity should not be viewed as in direct competition with his notion of social identity. I will suggest in what follows that the notion of self-esteem identity may have explanatory significance in a wide variety of contexts due at least in part to the fact that the propositions about a person that constitute her self-esteem identity ground emotions of esteem in specific ways that I will now go on to explain.

II. IDENTITY AND EMOTIONS OF ESTEEM

A person’s identity is relatively enduring, but it can be different in different periods of her life. We should therefore speak of a person’s identity “at a given stage in her life.” Not every fact about a person is part of her identity, not even every enduring fact is—the fact that you still have your appendix need not be any part of your identity. And a falsehood can be part of a person’s identity. Identities can be fictional. Accordingly, we should think of a person’s identity as a set of putative facts about her, or a set of propositions about her. Which set of propositions? There is an important clue in Hogg and Abrams’ account of “social identity theory,” which draws a connection between identity and self-esteem.15

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14Ibid.
Similar ideas are suggested by John Deigh, Gabriele Taylor and Jerome Segal.\textsuperscript{16} I will follow these clues in proposing that a useful and relatively clear notion of identity can be defined in terms of the grounds of self-esteem.

The notion of self-esteem merits more attention than I can give it here. But it is clear I think that self-esteem is a matter of the degree to which one feels satisfied or good or happy on balance with oneself, and this is a matter of having a certain emotional stance toward oneself, a sense of \textit{worth}. So understood, the idea of self-esteem needs to be distinguished from a variety of other notions. The term “self-esteem” suggests that what is involved is a kind of estimation of oneself, but if so, the relevant kind of estimation is not, I think, a set of beliefs about one’s relative worth. One can believe oneself superior to others, but have very low self-esteem, feeling unworthy and insecure. One can believe oneself to be mediocre or below average, but, I think, despite this, one might have a solid sense of self-esteem. Self-esteem needs to be distinguished from a sense of superiority. Self-esteem is not essentially comparative. One can feel happy and satisfied on balance with oneself without feeling superior to others. Self-esteem also needs to be distinguished from valuing oneself, or believing oneself to be valuable, for a person might value herself and believe herself valuable but have low self-esteem, feeling unworthy and insecure.\textsuperscript{17} Finally, self-esteem needs to be distinguished from self-respect, as David Sachs has pointed out. One might be self-respecting but have very low self-esteem.\textsuperscript{18}


\textsuperscript{17}Robin S. Dillon points out that there is a disagreement between, on the one hand, those who think of self-esteem as primarily a matter of self-evaluation, a matter of what \textit{judgment} one makes of one’s worth, and, on the other hand, those who think of self-esteem as primarily a matter of affect or \textit{emotion}, a matter of having a “sense” of one’s worth. I aim here briefly to defend the latter view. See Robin S. Dillon, “Introduction,” \textit{Dignity, Character, and Self-Respect}, ed. Dillon, pp. 30–1. Deigh takes a cognitive view, defining self-esteem in terms of belief, in “Shame and self-esteem,” p. 137. Where I view self-esteem as primarily a matter of one’s sense of worth, Deigh defines self-esteem as a matter of beliefs about one’s worth. More specifically, on p. 137, he proposes the “definition” that “one \textit{has self-esteem} if, first, one regards one’s aims and ideals as worthy and, second, one believes that one is well suited to pursue them.” It seems to me that it would be more plausible to define self-esteem in terms of the belief that one is worthy \textit{oneself}. But in any event, I think one could have the beliefs Deigh mentions but have low self-esteem, feeling worthless despite believing oneself to have worthy goals that one is suited to pursue. Of course, it needs to be said that there is controversy regarding the extent to which emotion must be understood in terms of belief. This controversy is not relevant to my essay. My account of self-esteem in terms of emotions is compatible with whatever view one takes of the nature of emotion.

oneself or of one’s life that is at issue. Rather, I believe, self-esteem involves an emotional assessment of oneself, and I believe that a range of emotions is involved.

The emotions in question—“emotions of esteem”—have either positive or negative “valence.”19 On the positive side, a person can feel comfortable with herself, or have a sense of her worth or a sense of security or confidence in herself. A person can take pride in various things, or even in others, such as her own children, to whom she is related in a relevant way. Also on the positive side, a person can feel satisfied, or feel sustained and enheartened, or feel boosted, bolstered or “enhanced” by something. On the negative side, a person might feel worthless or despondent or have a sense of insecurity or lack of confidence. A person can feel shame, humiliation, or embarrassment, or feel disgraced, or feel discredited, or feel embarrassed or mortified. She can feel insulted. She can feel “diminished” by something. All of these emotions can enter into a person’s relevant feelings about herself.

I propose to take the measure of a person’s self-esteem to be the range of emotions of esteem that she experiences or would experience if she brought to mind her relevant beliefs. Let me call this the “actual measure” of a person’s level of self-esteem. A person whose “actual measure” of self-esteem is “low”—a person of low self-esteem in this sense—experiences on balance rather more in the way of negative emotions of esteem than of positive emotions of esteem, or would do so if she brought to mind all that she believes about herself. There is also, however, a normative notion of the measure of self-esteem. In the normative sense, low self-esteem consists in a tendency not to experience the positive emotions of esteem even on occasions when, or to the degree that, it would be appropriate to experience them. Healthy self-esteem consists in a tendency to experience these emotions as is appropriate. The actual and normative notions are related, but they are nevertheless different. For example, an extremely accomplished pianist might have quite low esteem in the normative sense, for she might not recognize the merit of her playing and feel unaccomplished. But, despite this, the actual measure of her esteem might be reasonably high, for she might feel more content with her life than most people do. The normative notion will not be important in what follows.

The grounds of a person’s emotions of esteem are propositions that she believes, each of which is such that either it is the object of an emotion of esteem, or it explains such an emotion, in that she might cite it as her reason for feeling the way she does. A cluster of beliefs is generally involved. Kim Campbell takes

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19Gabriele Taylor uses the term, “emotions of self-assessment,” in “Shame, integrity, and self-respect,” p. 168. Taylor’s essay contains helpful discussions of such emotions. She holds that self-esteem is primarily to be understood in terms of pride and humiliation (p. 173). Deigh also has useful discussions of emotions of esteem in “Shame and self-esteem.” He relates self-esteem to such emotions as feeling comfortable with oneself, feeling “boosted” or “bolstered,” or feeling crestfallen, despondent, or disappointed in oneself (pp. 135–9).
pride in the fact that she was the first female Prime Minister of Canada. She would perhaps explain this by remarking that she overcame many barriers to the political success of women. In this case, the proposition that she was the first female Prime Minister of Canada is an object of her pride, and her belief that she overcame many barriers to the success of women explains her pride. Both of these propositions ground her emotions of esteem.

It needs to be noted that beliefs can affect emotions of esteem in ways that are not relevant. Suppose the fact that Campbell missed the opportunity to eat some strawberries yesterday causes her to weep, and suppose that this weeping causes her to feel ashamed. The fact that she missed the opportunity to eat the strawberries is not among the grounds of her emotions of esteem in this case, for she is not ashamed that she missed eating the strawberries, nor would she cite the fact that she missed eating the strawberries as her reason for feeling shame. She is ashamed that she wept. We are interested in believed propositions that ground emotions of esteem in the way that Campbell’s memory that she wept ground her shame or her beliefs about her Prime Ministership ground her pride.

In some cases, emotions of esteem are rather fleeting and non-recurrent. For example, it might be a merely temporary and short-lived fact about Campbell that she feels shame at the fact that she wept over missing the strawberries. In this case, the fact that she wept does ground her shame, but her overall sense of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with herself arguably is not affected. That is, her self-esteem is not affected. Suppose, however, that Campbell feels shame whenever she remembers that she wept. If so, then even if the shame itself is short-lived, it is a stable and relatively enduring fact about her that she feels shame when she recalls weeping over relatively trivial matters such as this. In this case, her self-esteem is affected. We are interested in stable and enduring facts of this kind about the grounds of a person’s emotions of esteem.

With this understood, we can define the set of propositions believed by a person that grounds her self-esteem. The propositions in this set are propositions about the person that are believed by the person and that ground the person’s emotions of esteem in a stable or relatively enduring way. We might define a person’s identity as consisting in this set of propositions.

Given the cultures of contemporary Western societies, for example, it is likely that the identity of a gay man living in such a society who is aware that he is homosexual would include the fact that he is homosexual. For similar reasons, it is likely that most African Americans identify as such, that most women identify as such, that most Jews who know they are Jewish identify as such, and so on. Given the culture, most people who are aware that they have these characteristics are also such that their belief that they do grounds emotions of esteem, such as pride or shame, discomfort or resignation. This can work in two ways. Consider pride. Someone might be proud that she is a woman, or that she is African American. In this case, the fact that she is a woman or an African American is part of her identity. Alternatively, someone might be proud of something else and
explain her pride by citing the fact that she is a woman and African American. Perhaps, for example, she is proud of the accomplishments of female African Americans and gives as her reason that she too is a woman and an African American. This will not mean, of course, that the accomplishments of other female African Americans are part of her identity, for her beliefs about these accomplishments are not beliefs about her. But it will mean that the fact that she (too) is a female African American is a part of her identity.

III. REFINING THE PROPOSAL

As we saw, Erikson pointed out that people can view certain aspects of their identity as undesirable and therefore attempt to “submerge” them. Deigh pointed out that shame can move a person to protect his sense of worth with concealment. There are psychological complexities in this area due to the fact that such “concealment” can range from cases of willfully ignoring or forgetting certain things about oneself to cases involving a more full-fledged and successful self-deception. Now, according to my account of self-esteem identity, self-deception can affect a person’s identity, for according to my account, a fact about a person is not a part of her identity unless she knows about it or believes it. This means that in cases where a person successfully deceives herself about a certain characteristic that she has, her identity does not include the fact that she has the characteristic since she does not believe she has it. Let me illustrate this point.

Suppose, for example, that a gay man knows he is gay, but attempts to conceal this from himself, telling himself that he is not gay. Suppose that if he were to acknowledge that he is gay, he would be mortified. In this case, my proposal would count the fact that the man is gay as a part of his identity, even though he attempts to hide this from himself, for we are imagining that he knows he is gay. In this way, my account can accommodate the insight that we can attempt to submerge certain aspects of our identity. But we do not yet have an example of full-fledged self-deception. Imagine, then, that the man eventually persuades himself he has been foolish to entertain any suspicion that he is gay. Imagine that, in time, he does not at all believe he is gay. In this case, even if the man would be mortified if he came to realize that he is gay, my proposal would not count the fact that he is gay as part of his identity. I think that this implication of the proposal is quite plausible. For despite the potential emotional significance of his homosexuality, it is not part of this man’s self-conception that he is gay since he does not believe he is gay. It would be much more plausible to say that it is part of his identity that he is heterosexual. Unfortunately, however, my proposal as it stands would not treat the man’s identity as including the fact that he is heterosexual.

heterosexual since, as I am imagining the case, the man’s belief that he is heterosexual does not actually ground any emotions of esteem.

The example suggests that I need to refine my proposal to enable it to account for cases in which a belief that seems to be central to a person’s identity does not actually ground any emotions of esteem. Consider, for example, white heterosexual males in typical Western societies. Such men typically are not proud to be white heterosexual males, and most of them do not have feelings of pride or shame or the like that are explained by their belief that they are white heterosexual males. Yet I think it is part of the “self-image” of many such men that they are white, heterosexual, and male. This suggests that this fact about them ought to qualify as an aspect of their identity. The interesting question is how precisely to capture this idea.

The answer is that we need to look at the emotions of esteem that such men would experience in relevant kinds of hypothetical circumstances. The first kind of case to consider is the most simple. A man might be such that he would experience relevant emotions of esteem if he somehow came to believe that he was not white or heterosexual or male. Consider the gay man in the previous example who has successfully deceived himself so that he is quite convinced he is heterosexual. Suppose that if he somehow came to realize that he is in fact gay, emotions of esteem would be engaged. He might be mortified at the thought that he is not heterosexual. If so, I say, his being heterosexual ought to be counted as part of his identity.22 The proposal needs to be amended to take this kind of case into account.

There is a second, more complex, kind of case. Consider, again, a man in whom no emotions of esteem are actually grounded by his belief that he is a white male. Suppose, however, that he would feel shame if he learned that a particular cowardly act, one that he had believed no-one “like him” would do, had in fact been done by a white male. Suppose he would feel shame that the act was done by a white male. If he would explain his shame by citing the fact that he (too) is white and male, this fact about him should qualify as part of his identity.23 The issue in cases of this kind is whether a person is such that, even if her beliefs about herself and her values were unchanged, her emotions of esteem would be affected if, counterfactually, she believed certain things about other

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22This does not mean that any proposition about myself, the negation of which could ground an emotion of esteem, is part of my identity. For example, suppose I realize that I am no athlete. If I believed to the contrary, and valued athleticism more than I do, I might be proud of myself on this basis. Still, the fact that I am no athlete is not part of my identity, for the closest possible world in which I believe I am something of an athlete is one in which my values are just as they are in fact. In that world, (I assume) my belief that I am something of an athlete has no effect on my esteem. For these purposes, I am assuming David Lewis’ account of the truth conditions of counterfactuals. See David Lewis, Counterfactuals (Oxford: Blackwell, 1973).

23Nomy Arpaly helped me with this kind of example. There are additional complexities. I suggested before that one can regret an aspect of one’s identity. Perhaps I am ashamed, for example, that being a white male is an aspect of my identity. If so, then the fact that being a white male is an aspect of my identity will itself be an aspect of my identity.
people, or about a group or an entity, to which she takes herself to be relevantly related.24

Here, then, is my suggestion. The “self-esteem identity” of a person S during a stage s of her life is a set of propositions about her properties or relations to others. To assess whether a given proposition that she has a property F is an element of a person’s identity, first determine whether she believes that she is F and whether the belief that she is F grounds an emotion of esteem in one of the ways I have laid out. If so, then, the proposition that she is F is part of her identity. If not, then determine whether either of the following is true: There are propositions about others whom she takes to be F such that, if she believed them, she would then have emotions of esteem that would be grounded by the belief that she (too) is F. Or, if she were to come to believe that she is not F, then, other things being equal, the thought that she is not F would ground an emotion of esteem. If so, then again the proposition that she is F is part of her identity. The proposal can be generalized as follows.

The proposition that S is F or that S is R-related to Q is an element of S’s identity during a stage s of her life just in case S believes the proposition during s and either:

(a) this belief grounds a positive or negative emotion of esteem in a stable or relatively enduring way during s; or
(b) it would do so, if S had certain beliefs about Q or about other people whom she believes to be F, or to be R-related to Q; or
(c) if S were to come to believe during s that she is not F, or that she is not R-related to Q, then, other things being equal, this belief would ground an emotion of esteem in a stable or relatively enduring way during s.

In brief, we could say, a person’s “identity” at a particular stage in her life is the set of propositions about her, each of which she believes, where her belief grounds an emotion of esteem. In some cases, her belief actively grounds an emotion of esteem. In other cases, her belief grounds an emotion of esteem potentially in one of two ways. Either it would ground an emotion of esteem if she had certain other relevant beliefs, or, if she came to believe its negation, this belief would ground an emotion of esteem.

A person’s self-esteem identity can be viewed as a selective narrative about her life, history, situation, social context, plans, and projects. I think it is plausible to call this narrative her “identity” because it is a narrative about her that she

24 We do not want to count the fact that a person wears size thirteen shoes as part of his identity merely because he would be proud that he wears such large shoes if he came to believe that this is somehow an accomplishment. On the current suggestion, we are to consider how the person’s emotions of esteem would be affected if he had somewhat different beliefs about other people who he thinks wear size thirteen shoes—holding constant his beliefs about himself and his values. We are to ask ourselves, for example, whether the person would feel pride on learning that someone who wears size thirteen shoes accomplished something he thought no-one wearing such large shoes could accomplish. Perhaps he would be impressed, without feeling any emotion of esteem.
herself believes and that grounds her own basic emotional attitude toward herself. If she came to have different beliefs about herself, with the result that this narrative changed, she would feel differently about herself. Hence, it is part of Kim Campbell’s identity, as we have imagined it, that she was the first female Prime Minister of Canada, that she overcame many barriers to the political success of women, and that she has a tendency to weep over minor disappointments. The fact that she believes each of these things about herself, and that these beliefs ground stable tendencies to experience emotions of esteem, such as pride and shame, constitutes this narrative as part of her identity.

IV. INTUITIVE ADVANTAGES OF THE CONCEPT OF SELF-ESTEEM IDENTITY

At this point I want to compare my proposal with the somewhat different accounts of identity that I considered earlier. As I suggested, we can view Appiah as proposing a conception of “social identity” and the other authors as proposing conceptions of “subjective identity.” Self-esteem identity is a conception of subjective identity since it takes our identity to be constituted by propositions toward which we have a certain characteristic psychological attitude. I therefore begin by comparing my account with the other accounts of subjective identity.

As we saw, Taylor suggests that a person’s identity is her answer to the question, “Who am I?”25 But there is no canonical answer to this question. In answering the question, I might cite virtually any proposition I believe about myself, depending on the circumstances and on what is salient in the circumstances. Taylor might say that every proposition I would cite in some situation is part of my identity, but if so, then virtually every proposition I believe about myself that distinguishes me from anyone else is part of my identity. Suppose that if I were shown a photograph of my grade two class and asked Taylor’s question, I would identify myself as the kid in short pants. In this case, the fact that I was wearing short pants when my grade two class was photographed counts as part of my identity even if this fact is of no significance to me except in the situation where I am shown this particular photograph. Alternatively, Taylor might relativize identity to situations and say that every property I would cite in a given situation in answering the question is part of my identity in that situation. But if so, then my identity might change from situation to situation even if I do not change in any significant way. Perhaps, for example, if I were shown one photograph I would say that I am the kid in short pants, but if I were shown a different photograph I would say that I am the kid in long pants. But neither of these facts about myself is plausibly taken to be part of my identity. We do not want an account that permits my identity to include trivial distinguishing facts, or to exclude characteristics that are

important to me but that do not distinguish me from others, or to exclude embarrassing facts that I would not mention in answer to Taylor’s question, or to vary from situation to situation depending on trivial circumstances. We can now see two advantages of the notion of self-esteem identity. First, it is selective. Only certain propositions that a person believes about herself constitute her identity. And second, it is stable. The facts it selects as constituting a person’s identity remain stable parts of her identity during periods of her life in which the grounds of her self-esteem do not change.

Hogg and Abrams explain identity in terms of people’s “concepts of who they are, of what sort of people they are, and how they relate to others.”26 Erikson talks about a person’s “self-image.”27 Suggestions of this kind are too vague or indeterminate to be helpful. The ideas of a “self-image” and of a “concept of who one is” are too imprecise to be helpful. Hogg and Abrams’ idea of explaining a person’s identity in terms of her “concept” of what “sort of person” she is, and of how she “relates to others,” is perhaps more useful. But the ideas of a “sort” of person and of a “way of relating” to other people are not sufficiently selective. For example, a person with a freckle on her knuckle is a “sort” of person, and a person who is of average height “relates” to others in a specific way—a way that differs from the way that a person of greater than average height relates to others, for instance. Virtually any belief a person has about herself can be viewed as a belief about what “sort” of person she is, or as a belief about how she “relates” to others. Hence, on Hogg and Abrams’ account, virtually any such belief is presumably a part of the person’s identity. But we want our account of identity to be more selective than this since we want it to have some explanatory significance. Here again we see two advantages to the notion of self-esteem identity. It is selective. And it is selective in the right way, for it selects as aspects of a person’s identity propositions that have a distinctive kind of psychological significance.

The proposals of Korsgaard and Miller also have these advantages, however. Korsgaard and Miller explain a person’s identity as consisting in a system of characteristics that the person has and values having.28 Accounts of this kind are no less selective than mine, and the properties of a person that they select as aspects of her identity have psychological significance since the person values them. My main objection to accounts of this kind is that, as I said before, a person can disvalue an aspect of her identity. It is likely that many South African blacks did not value being black during apartheid, yet it seems to me that their race might nevertheless have been an aspect of their identity. It seems to me that when a characteristic of ourselves that we disvalue is as significant in the way it affects our lives as the characteristics that we value, an account of identity ought to treat it as equally well qualified to be constitutive of our identities. The notion

26Hogg and Abrams, Social Identification, p. 2.
27Erikson, Life History and the Historical Moment, p. 46.
28Korsgaard, Sources of Normativity, p. 101; Miller, On Nationality, p. 43.
of self-esteem identity accommodates this thought, for it treats beliefs that
ground feelings of shame as being equally important aspects of the identity of a
person as beliefs that ground feelings of pride. Given the way that blacks were
treated under apartheid, it is likely that many of them felt worthless or shamed or
diminished on account of being black. If so, then the fact that they were black
would count as an aspect of their self-esteem identity even if they did not value
being black. I think that this is the appropriate way to think of cases of this kind.

In one place, Miller speaks of a person’s identity as a system of values, and Tamir expresses a similar idea.29 The intuition that our values are aspects of our
identity can be accommodated by the notion of self-esteem identity. If a person
values honesty, for example, it is likely that the fact that she values honesty will
be an aspect of her self-esteem identity. She would presumably feel ashamed of
herself if she were to act dishonestly, for instance, and she would also feel
ashamed of herself if she came to believe that she is not an honest person. If she
had no tendency to feel ashamed in such circumstances, I think we would
question whether she actually does value honesty. Hence I can agree that a
person’s values typically figure in her identity. As we have seen, however, a
person’s self-esteem identity includes beliefs she has about herself that have
comparable psychological significance to her values. This seems to be an
advantage of the idea of self-esteem identity over the idea that a person’s identity
is given by her values.

I described Appiah’s account of identity as an account of “social identity” rather
than an account of “subjective identity” because he views the responses of other
people to a person’s characteristics as determining her identity. He stresses that the
way a person is seen by others can lead her to be categorized in a way that is
“important for social life,” and he views a person’s identity as consisting in a set of
such properties, properties that are “important for social life.” His proposal seems
to be, then, that we should take a person’s identity to be the set of all properties
that the person is viewed by others as having, where the fact that she is viewed this
way is important for social life.30 For example, the property of being intelligent
and competent will be an aspect of a person’s social identity only if certain
significant other people, such as her teachers and employers, see her as competent.

I agree with Appiah that, for certain purposes, we might be interested in a
person’s social identity, as Appiah defines it, regardless of how the person
understands herself. So I do not intend my account of self-esteem identity as a rival
to Appiah’s notion of social identity. The two notions complement each other in
interesting ways. First, certain aspects of a person’s social identity can ground
emotions of esteem and can therefore be aspects of her self-esteem identity.31 For

31To be more exact, a property that is included in a person’s social identity might be such that the
person believes she has the property and this belief might ground an emotion of esteem. If so, the
believed proposition would be included in her self-esteem identity.
example, a person might feel proud to be known as brilliant, or feel humiliated that her skin color is given social significance. So elements of her social identity can be elements of her self-esteem identity when emotions of esteem are engaged in a relevant way. From the point of view of my proposal, then, facts about a person’s social identity are one kind of fact that can enter into a person’s self-esteem identity. But second, the fact that something is not an aspect of a person’s social identity can also be included in a person’s self-esteem identity. A person can feel diminished by the fact that something she believes of herself, and that grounds emotions of esteem, is not treated as socially important by others. For example, a person might feel diminished by the fact that her intelligence is not acknowledged. In such a case, my proposal would count both the fact of the person’s intelligence, and the fact that her intelligence is not socially acknowledged, as aspects of her self-esteem identity. Appiah’s account apparently would treat neither of these characteristics as aspects of the person’s social identity.

In summary, then, I believe that my proposed concept of self-esteem identity has a number of advantages over other conceptions of subjective identity. First, it is defined more clearly and precisely than many of the competitors. Second, it is appropriately selective. Third, it only includes in a person’s identity beliefs that have a distinctive kind of psychological significance. Fourth, it is stable. The beliefs it treats as parts of a person’s identity are included in her identity as long as the grounds of her self-esteem do not change. Fifth, it treats a person’s beliefs about herself that ground negative emotions of esteem as being equally significant for her identity as her beliefs that ground positive emotions of esteem. It treats properties of ourselves that we disvalue in the same way that it treats properties that we value. It thereby accommodates Erikson’s insight that a person might attempt to submerge certain aspects of her identity because she views them as undesirable. For all of these reasons, if we are interested in identity as a psychological phenomenon, then I think my account has many advantages over competing subjective accounts. In addition to the advantages I have been discussing, as I will go on to suggest, self-esteem identity might help to explain certain political and social phenomena.

V. IDENTITY, THE UNITY OF A LIFE AND “WIDE SELVES”

Before turning to politics, however, I want briefly to suggest ways in which the concept of self-esteem identity might be useful in moral psychology. Even though I cannot pursue these ideas in detail in this paper, it is worth pointing out the role that self-esteem identity might play in this area in order to suggest that the explanatory potential of the concept is not restricted to politics. Moreover, as will become clear, there is a continuity between the role that self-esteem identity can play in moral psychology and the role that it can play in politics. I shall propose that self-esteem identity can be a factor in moral motivation, in uniting the family and connecting friends, and in uniting a person’s disparate goals into a
whole based in the grounds of her self-esteem. Identity can unify the self and the family just as it might unify the state.

There are various “projects” around which you have planned your life. These might include raising a family, finishing your current book, being well liked in your community, dealing fairly and honestly with others, and so on. The degree to which you are content with yourself is a function in part of the degree to which you take yourself to be succeeding in these projects. That is, the degree to which you are content with yourself is grounded, among other things, in the degree to which you believe you are finding success in these projects. Since self-contentment is an emotion of esteem, this means that the fact that these are your projects and that you are succeeding in them is an aspect of your identity.

Among your projects are certain moral commitments, and moral commitment is also entangled with your identity as we have already seen. A person who subscribes to a moral principle would feel ashamed or guilty if she failed to comply with it, and she might feel content with herself if she succeeded in complying with it, especially in the face of temptation. Feelings of shame, guilt, or contentment would be grounded in her record of compliance with the principle. Indeed, the fact that a person subscribes to a given moral principle typically is an aspect of her identity, for such a person typically would feel ashamed if she came to believe that she does not actually subscribe to the principle. And the things a virtuous person believes about her moral character are also normally part of her identity, since they ground emotions of esteem such as pride or shame, either actually or potentially. A virtuous person would normally see herself as honest, as not manipulative, and so on, and she would feel ashamed or diminished if she came to see herself as dishonest or as manipulative. Hence, the identity of a virtuous person would normally include propositions such as that she is honest and non-manipulative.

I have been suggesting that our identity organizes our projects and commitments into a whole that is centered on the bases of our self-esteem. Just as important, I now want to suggest, is that, because we can experience vicarious emotions of esteem—emotions of esteem that are grounded by beliefs about other people or groups to whom we take ourselves to be related in certain characteristic ways—our identity can structure our relationships with other people. A person with friends and loved ones can feel pride at their successes and shame at their vices. She might, for example, take pride in the fact that her son won a prize, or that a friend won it, or someone from the neighborhood or a fellow countryman. The object of her pride might be that so-and-so won the prize, and she might

32This must surely inhibit her from wrongdoing and from acting viciously or otherwise out of character, but to say this is not to say that, for example, a virtuous person tells the truth in order to guard against experiencing such emotions. A similar point has often been made about the pleasure of helping people in need. Altruistic people get pleasure from helping others, but this is not their reason for helping. See Joseph Butler, *Fifteen Sermons*, Sermon XI, in W. E. Gladstone, ed., *The Works of Joseph Butler* (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1995), vol. 2, pp. 185–208.
explain her pride by remarking that so-and-so is her son, or what have you.\textsuperscript{33} In this case, on my account, the person’s self-esteem identity includes the proposition that so-and-so is her son, or what have you, for her belief in this proposition grounds her pride. On this proposal, our identities typically include propositions about our relations to other people and groups with whom we “identify” on some basis or other.

It might be objected that it is contingent whether a person’s self-esteem is enhanced when she experiences positive emotions of esteem in such cases—and whether it is diminished when she experiences negative emotions of esteem in such cases. A mother might deny that her self-esteem is enhanced when she takes pride in an achievement of one of her children. She might say that she still feels just the same as she used to feel about herself, that in fact it is her child who is the object of her pride, not herself. There is obviously something correct about this objection. We need to distinguish between a case in which a person is proud of herself because her child won a prize, say, and a case in which a person is proud of her child for winning a prize. Yet in both kinds of cases, what the parent feels is pride. Imagine a mother who merely admires a child of hers for an achievement. To merely admire the child, without having any feelings of pride, she would have to feel distanced from the child in an unusual way. But if what she feels is pride in the child’s achievement, she must take it that the achievement reflects on her in some way.\textsuperscript{34} If she feels pride, she must take it that the achievement reflects on her in some way such that she feels enheartened or boosted, bolstered or enhanced as a result. Her “sense of worth” must be enhanced. This is just the kind of emotional response that is involved in enhanced self-esteem.

To avoid misunderstanding, it is worth mentioning that what I called the “normative measure” of the mother’s self-esteem need not be affected by the pride she feels. If she has low self-esteem in the normative sense, for example, in

\textsuperscript{33}Philippa Foot said that a person cannot be proud of “the sky or the sea” unless he has some unusual beliefs—perhaps “he is under some crazy delusion and believes that he has saved the sky from falling, or the sea from drying up.” Unless he has some such beliefs, Foot holds, whatever he feels will not be pride. Foot suggests that “The characteristic object of pride is something seen (a) as in some way a man’s own, and (b) as some sort of achievement or advantage.” A corresponding point could presumably be made about shame. See Philippa Foot, “Moral beliefs,” in her Virtues and Vices (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), pp. 110–31, at pp. 113–14. Nomy Arpaly reminded me of Foot’s path-breaking discussion of pride. Perhaps Foot would say that, in my examples, the woman must see the fact that her son won the prize, or that her friend won it, or her neighbor or her countryman, as “in some way her own,” but I think there can be cases of vicarious pride in which it would stretch the language to insist that the person sees the object of his pride as in some way “his own.” There are many questions about emotions of esteem that I cannot address in this paper.

\textsuperscript{34}Gabriele Taylor would say that the mother must see herself as so related to the child that the child’s assets and defects reflect on her worth. But the mother in the example might not take it that her worth is affected as a result of her child’s winning the prize. Taylor says, “I may feel shame not about something I have done, but feel it rather about the deed or state of somebody else to whom I see myself as so related that his defects reflect on my worth. My father has done something disgraceful, and the sense of my value based on the conception of being the daughter of this father is now undermined.” See Gabrielle Taylor, “Shame, integrity, and self-respect,” p. 169.
that she has a tendency not to experience positive emotions of esteem even when appropriate, she likely would continue to have low self-esteem in this sense. But what I called the “actual measure” of self-esteem must be affected if it is pride that the mother feels, for she must then feel enheartened or enhanced. Similarly, she could not feel shame in something done by a child without her self-esteem being affected, for she must feel disgraced or diminished by what the child did if what she feels is shame. It seems to me that it would be self-deceptive in either case for her to deny that her self-esteem is affected to some degree, even though, to be sure, she is not proud or ashamed of herself, but rather of her child.

In any event, it is clear that we can experience vicarious emotions of esteem. We can take ourselves to be related to another in such a way that emotions of esteem are grounded either actually or potentially in beliefs about him and his relation to us. A narrow notion of self-esteem would deny that a person’s self-esteem is affected by vicarious emotions of esteem, while a wide notion would concede that a person’s self-esteem is so affected. Nothing in my account turns on whether we have a wide or narrow conception. Those who have a narrow conception should realize that my account explains self-esteem identity in terms of emotions of esteem, such as pride and shame, rather than in terms of self-esteem as such.

I have suggested, then, that in a case of vicarious pride, the object of a person’s pride might be that so-and-so won an honor, and the person’s pride might be grounded in her belief, say, that so-and-so is her son, or is a friend, or is from her neighborhood, or is a fellow countryman. In this case, the person’s identity would include the proposition that so-and-so is her son, or is a friend, or is from her neighborhood, or is a fellow countryman. To generalize, my idea is that a person can feel an emotion of esteem about a deed or property of some other person, or of a group or entity, only if her identity includes a proposition she believes to the effect that she stands in some relevant relation to the other person, or to the group or entity.

Let me say that a person “identifies” with a person or group or entity when she sees herself as so related to that person or group or entity that she can feel emotions of esteem, such as pride or shame, in it, or in its assets and defects. That is, a person “identifies” with a person, group, or entity, G, just in case her identity includes propositions about G, such as that G is her friend or her country, or that it is her F, for some relevant F. In this case, certain beliefs about G or about G’s assets or defects, its deeds or states, ground positive or negative emotions of esteem in a stable or relatively enduring way, or would do so if the person had certain other beliefs about G. I will say that a person identifies “positively” with another when (a) she identifies in this sense with the other, and, in addition, (b) beliefs she has regarding what she sees as the other’s assets, such as its achievements, do, or would tend to, ground positively valenced emotions of esteem in relation to the other, and beliefs she has about what she sees as its defects, such as its moral failings, do, or would tend to, ground negatively valenced emotions of esteem. For example, a mother normally identifies positively with her children and a citizen...
typically identifies positively with her country. There can be cases in which a person identifies with another person but does not identify positively in this sense. For example, if you view someone as an enemy, you might want him to fail, but you might also tend to feel chagrined if he succeeds, especially in competition with you or with someone with whom you identify positively. You do not identify positively with an enemy in the way you do with a friend.

In what follows, I will mainly be concerned with positive identification. For this reason, to simplify terminology, I will normally drop the qualification and speak of a person as “identifying” with someone or something only if she identifies “positively.” If you identify positively with another person, or with a group or entity, I will say it is “part” of your identity and you have a “wide self.” In this sense, your friends are normally “part” of your identity.

We are accustomed to thinking of the boundaries of the self as following the envelope of the skin. But since we can have wide selves, there is a sense in which our boundaries can extend beyond our skins. When we have wide selves, the accomplishments and failures of certain other people, groups, or entities are important to us emotionally, for their accomplishments and failures can ground emotions of esteem. This kind of emotional connection with those with whom we identify could not be forged by a mere desire that they do well. We might desire that someone do well without identifying with her, without having any tendency to feel pride or shame on learning of her successes or failures. If we identify with a person, we are emotionally bound to her and to her successes and failures and her achieving of her own good in something of the way that we are emotionally bound to our own successes and failures and the achieving of our own good.\(^{35}\)

VI. IDENTITY, PATRIOTISM AND NATIONALISM

It is common for a person’s citizenship to be part of her identity. Even a person who is not proud of her country might have an identity that includes her citizenship, for she might be ashamed or embarrassed about certain episodes in her country’s history. And a person who seems indifferent to her country might

\(^{35}\)Deigh briefly discusses a phenomenon he calls “emotional identification” in his essay, “Empathy and universalizability,” *The Sources of Moral Agency*, ed. John Deigh (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 175–6. He gives the example of a boy who so “identifies” with a favorite ballplayer that he “loses himself” in imagining that he is this ballplayer. Deigh remarks that when one identifies with another person in this sense one can lose “the sense of oneself as separate from the person with whom one identifies.” Identification in his sense can run counter to a secure sense of “one’s own identity,” and it can therefore be something to regret. I am concerned with a different concept of identification, one which I used in defining the idea of a wide self, and which is itself explained in terms of emotions of self-esteem, not in terms of imagining oneself to be another. The boy in Deigh’s example need not “identify” with the ballplayer in my sense. He might identify in Deigh’s sense without having any tendency to feel pride in the ballplayer’s achievements, or shame in his failures, except imaginatively, when he imagines that he is the ballplayer. The difference between the two ideas of “identification” can be brought out if we notice that it might be part of the boy’s identity (in my sense) that he identifies (in Deigh’s sense) with the ballplayer. For example, he might be ashamed that he “loses himself” in imagining that he is the ballplayer. I owe this reference to Patricia Greenspan.
be such that, if she came to believe that she is *not* a citizen of it, she would then feel diminished—or perhaps enhanced. If so, her citizenship would also be part of her identity. People who have identities that include their citizenship commonly also *identify* with their country in the sense explained before. That is, their identity grounds “positively valenced” emotions of esteem in relation to their country, or it *would* do so if they had relevant beliefs about its accomplishments or assets. They would be proud of their country, or have at least some positive emotion of esteem in relation to it, if they had relevant beliefs.

In thinking about our patriotic emotions, we tend to think of the country as if it were a single entity, and in what follows I will generally write as if this were so. But the term “country” is used in ordinary speech to refer to a complex entity that consists of a territory, a population, and a state, where the state is the governmental apparatus that administers the legal system and the programs of government. Our identification with our countries is grounded in a mixture of beliefs about the territory, the population, and the state. An attachment to the state as such might seem fetishistic, and because of this a person might insist that she does not identify with the state, but only with the land or the people. Nevertheless, the bits of territory and the people with which a person identifies in such cases might have in common little more than that they are in the jurisdiction of the state. Suppose we are proud that the Great Barrier Reef is in our country. Spelled out more fully, the thought that grounds our pride is that the reef is in the territory of the state of which we are citizens. But then this proposition about our state is part of our identity, and this is the kind of thing that is involved in identifying with the state as well as with the country.

Even if a person identifies with her country, the valence of the emotions of esteem she has in relation to it depends on what she believes about it. A person cannot be *proud* of her country, for example, or *ashamed* of it, unless she has relevant beliefs about its characteristics. If she identifies with it, then she *would* have positive emotions of esteem in relation to it if she had appropriate beliefs, but her actual beliefs might lead her to feel shame, rather than pride. Let me call the narrative a person accepts about her country—the narrative that grounds the valence of the emotions of esteem she has in relation to it—the “identity” she gives to the country. A narrative of this kind is selective; it could not include every fact about the country. A person’s narrative would not even include every belief she has about her country since some of her beliefs would not ground any emotions of esteem. Of course, narratives of this kind need not be factually accurate, and perhaps they typically are not.

The members of a country typically have different views about the country’s history and they disagree about the importance of various facts, either to the history or to the country’s culture or distinctiveness. They disagree in their moral evaluations of a country’s actions. Some Americans assign their country an identity according to which the bombing of Hiroshima was a shameful and terrible taking of innocent life, but others interpret the history differently and
view the bombing as necessary to save lives. Similarly, while many Germans view the Holocaust as a shameful part of the country’s history, others might even deny that the Holocaust occurred. These cases illustrate that a country’s identity can become a matter of public political dispute. Notice the complexity of these cases. A person can take pride in the fact that the people of her country agree in assigning it an identity according to which some event was shameful, if she agrees that in fact it was shameful. The existence of a widespread moral agreement about the country’s history might be part of the identity one assigns to the country. Or it might be part of the identity one assigns to one’s country that people do not agree about its identity.

A state might attempt to undergird the loyalty of its members by sponsoring an official narrative about the country in the hope that its people would accept it and that it would ground positive emotions of esteem. A state might attempt in some such way to influence whether its members identify with it, and whether they are proud of it, but these matters are not under its control. If its population includes significant groups that do not identify with it, but instead identify with an ethnic group or a nation, attempts by the state to change the status quo might backfire and breed resentment.

VII. SOCIAL UNITY AND IDENTIFICATION IN MULTINATIONAL STATES

One consequence of the fact that we have “wide selves” is that there can in principle be groups where each member is included in the identity of every other member. Groups of this kind would exhibit a striking kind of emotional solidarity. In a group with evil purposes, this kind of solidarity clearly would not be a good thing, but in a group with good purposes, it presumably would be a good thing. Solidarity of this kind would tie together a moral community in a way that would not otherwise be possible. It is unreasonable to suppose that any country might constitute a community in this sense, but countries can be unified in a similar way when their members identify with them. By the degree of “social unity” of a state, I mean the degree to which members of the state identify with the corresponding country.

One might think that the social unity of a state is not important politically. After all, social unity is compatible with a great deal of disagreement about specifics in the history and current politics of the state. It is compatible with some people feeling shame about circumstances that lead other people to feel proud. In short, it is one thing for people to identify with a country; it is another thing for them to share positively valenced emotions of esteem in relation to it. Furthermore, the basic justification of states is instrumental, and, in many circumstances, a state might function well and be supported by its members even if they do not identify with it. Imagine, for example, a world in which the boundaries between states correspond to natural fault lines between pre-existing
societies and where societies and states correspond one-to-one, so that no state contains a minority that constitutes a distinct society. Imagine that in this world there are no significant cultural differences between societies and no significant differences in the institutions, policies, goals, or laws of different states. In such a world, the social unity of a state might not be of major political significance.

Even in such a world, however, positive identification with the country might help to motivate voluntary compliance with law. A person’s motivation to obey the law might be more secure if his esteem were enhanced by his membership in the country. Moreover, as David Miller has suggested, if people identified positively with the country, they might be more willing than otherwise would be the case to make sacrifices for the overall good. Hence, even in my hypothetical world, a shared positively valenced identification with the country might be important to a state’s ability to serve the overall good. Of course, people can be morally motivated to obey the law and to contribute to the overall good, and, in fortunate circumstances, they can be so motivated by self-interest. In less fortunate circumstances, unhappily, self-interest might move people otherwise. People with wide selves, however, have in effect a wider self-interest. People who identify with their country have motivations grounded in their own emotional structures to do well by the state and its people.

In the real world, social unity is much more clearly important than it is in my hypothetical world. The boundaries between states are largely the result of a history of warfare or struggle. The fault lines between societies often follow the boundaries between states rather than vice versa. If the people governed by a state realize that its boundaries do not coincide with borders that had any antecedent social significance, and if they do not identify with their country, but rather make their support of the state conditional on its instrumental utility to themselves, then the country might be difficult to govern democratically. For the policies of any state affect the interests of their members in different ways. Some members’ interests are better served than others’. Even if a given state is doing well overall at serving the general good, those members who think that their interests would be better served if the world were carved up differently into states might not support their state. Because of this, their state might not be able to do as well at serving the overall good as it otherwise could. And the disaffected citizens might not support efforts to improve matters. They might instead support dividing the state into more than one state, or uniting it or a part of it with a neighbor.

In the real world, moreover, most countries are multicultural, multinational, multiregional, federal, or divided by class conflict. This means that virtually every

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36I am here alluding to the concept of a society that is familiar in sociology. I have offered an explication of the concept in David Copp, Morality, Normativity, and Society (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), ch. 7.


country contains minority societies or cultural groups or minority protosocietal entities with which people typically identify. If the members of such a state do not identify with the country, but instead identify with the federated unit they belong to, such as their province, or with their nation or cultural group or region or class, then again the state might be difficult to govern. In cases where it is arguable that the existing state is not serving the interests of the province, the nation, the region, the class, or the cultural group as well as it might, then even if the existing state is doing well enough and is not unjust, the members of the unit in question might not support it. They would be inclined to assess the efficiency of the state in relation to how well it serves the interests of the group with which they identify rather than the interests of the entire population of the state.

The unity problem in multinational countries can be especially acute, partly because the members of nations often, and perhaps typically, not only identify with their nation but also have at least some desire for statehood for their nation, and in many such cases the nation could feasibly form a state for itself in a part of the country’s territory. This is the situation of the Québécois in Canada. In cases of this kind, as Will Kymlicka has pointed out, there is an acute problem of social unity, especially if the state aspires to be a liberal democracy.39 The problem would be less serious if the members of the minority nation, such as the Québécois, came to identify with the larger country as well as with their nation.40 This would require them to have complex identities since they would identify both with their nation and the country. The resulting psychological complexity is reflected in a remark of the nineteenth-century English theorist, A. V. Dicey, who said that the citizens of a stable multinational state “must desire union, and must not desire unity.” The Quebec nationalist, Henri Bourassa, said that the stability of Canada requires the French Canadians to develop “a more general patriotism that unifies us, without fusing us.”41

It is true of every country, however, that it must compete for the allegiance of its citizens, given that citizens have allegiances to themselves and their families, not to mention allegiances to other groups and organizations within the country. Such allegiances represent a kind of centrifugal force that could perhaps be counteracted to some extent by means of the centripetal force of allegiance to the country. This means that in order for any state to be socially unified, its citizens will likely need to have complex identities. Complex identities of this kind are actually quite commonplace. Most of us identify with our children, our

39Kymlicka has said that “A fundamental challenge facing liberal theorists . . . is to identify the sources of unity in a democratic multinational state.” Will Kymlicka, Multicultural Citizenship, p. 192.
41Both quotations are from Will Kymlicka, Multicultural Citizenship, p. 192. Kymlicka cites Ramsay Cook, French Canadian Nationalism (Toronto: Macmillan, 1969), p. 149, as the source of the quotation from Bourassa.
extended families, our religions, our ethnic background, and our countries or nations. These complexities can lead to psychological conflict in cases where the good of the country conflicts, say, with the good of one’s family or the good of one’s nation, but there is no necessity of such conflict. Indeed, if one sees that one’s country is serving well the needs and interests of oneself and one’s family, and of others with whom one identifies, this can strengthen one’s identification with the country. Similarly, then, if the members of a nation within a multinational country see that the country is serving well the needs and interests of their nation, this might strengthen any tendency they have to identify positively with the country.

Suppose then that a multinational state is in favorable circumstances of the following sort. First, there is a harmony between the needs and interests of the included nations and cultural groups and the needs and interests of the larger country. Second, with the support of the citizenry, the state is trying to do well by the national and cultural groups it contains. Third, the state and the bulk of its citizens recognize the importance of doing so to the future of the country. Fourth, there is a widespread awareness that all of this is so and that the state is fundamentally just. If a multinational country were in favorable circumstances of this kind, then a narrative stating all of this would have the potential to serve as an identity for the country that would ground a positive identification with it on the part of all its members. The members of the included nations might identify with the country and have positively valenced emotions of esteem in regard to it on the basis of its history of trying to do well by the needs and interests of their nations. The state might come to have a multinational and multicultural identity.

There is of course no guarantee that a multinational state will be able to secure its unity in this way. The state might not be in favorable circumstances, or the members of a minority nation might not see that it is. Or even if they see this, they might have reached a point where it makes no significant difference to their attitude to the country. Despite the best efforts of the leaders of the state, people who belong to minority nations within the country might not feel that the country as a whole is their homeland.42

VIII. THE DARK SIDE OF IDENTIFICATION WITH THE STATE

It might seem that it would be unreasonable, immoral, or illiberal, or indicative of a character flaw, to identify with one’s country, or to identify with a minority nation in a multinational state. One cannot ignore the horrors that states have been responsible for, and the horrors that have been caused by nationalism. Identification with the country or nation makes it possible for people to be manipulated in dangerous ways. It means that their self-esteem can be affected negatively by what they believe to have been harms done to their country or

42Charles Taylor suggests that the strength of the movement for secession in Quebec is due to a sense that Quebec’s distinctiveness has not been properly recognized by Canada. Taylor, “Shared and divergent values,” esp. p. 64.
nation. They can feel humiliated. Identification can make people susceptible to irrational epistemic error. It can make them liable to misread evidence as to whether their country or nation has been harmed, and to discount evidence of the moral shortcomings of their country or nation in order to avoid the shame they might otherwise experience. People might even feel proud of atrocities committed by their state in cases in which, if it were not for their identification, they would recognize the atrocity for what it is. In the grey areas of history, we want to think that our country or nation won, so we can take pride in its history, or if it lost, we want to think that this was despite heroism on our side, or that it was due to treachery on the other side, or both, so that we can be proud or resentful, but avoid feeling ashamed or humiliated. In these ways, identification with the state or the nation can undermine our ability to be dispassionate about politics, make us liable to manipulation, and lead to epistemic and moral error. It is important not to ignore the dark side of nationalistic identification.

Identification can be morally appropriate or inappropriate both in its object and its valence. It is possible, for example, for a person who identifies with her family to feel proud of atrocities committed by her siblings—recall, for example, the fictional Corleone family. But this does not show that identification with one’s family is generally a bad thing. In general, the moral appropriateness of a person’s identification with something other than herself depends on the moral character of what she identifies with and on the appropriateness of the valence of her emotions of esteem. This means that the moral appropriateness of identifying with a country depends on the moral appropriateness of countries as such, but more importantly, it depends on the moral quality of the particular country with which one identifies.

I cannot argue the point here, but I think that states have a morally defensible role to play in society. Societies need to be organized into states in order best to meet their needs. States are needed to assure the security of their members against threats from others and otherwise to assure respect for their basic rights. States are needed in order for societies to discharge their duties with respect to their members and with respect to other societies. It appears there need be nothing inappropriate in identifying with one’s country on the basis (in part) that it is doing well in these moral tasks provided it is doing well and provided it is not unjust.

It is arguable, moreover, that a failure to identify with one’s country would require a regrettable kind of alienation. A person might be so alienated from her country that she would not feel any differently about it if she believed that it was implicated in an atrocity, or if she believed it had had a noteworthy success, than she would feel about any other country. This kind of alienation would be regrettable, however, or so it seems to me. Similarly, it would be regrettable for a

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person to be so alienated from her family that she would not feel any differently about a sibling if she believed that the sibling was implicated in an atrocity, or if she believed he had had a noteworthy success, than she would feel about any other person. I believe, then, that identifying with one’s state can be desirable, in much the way that identifying with one’s family can be desirable, because it is bound up with having a desirable sense of belonging.

The dark side of nationalistic identification is evident to students of history and politics, and we must not ignore it. I am urging, however, that it is also important to pay attention to the better side. To have an accurate appreciation of the phenomenon of identification, we need to see it as continuous with other aspects of our identities, and with aspects that we do value despite the fact that they too have dark sides, such as identification with families.

I conclude, then, that there need not be anything irrational or morally suspect about identifying with the state or with a nation. Our identification with others and with groups to which we belong can be constitutive of various moral goods. The phenomena of identity and identification are central to our self-esteem, they enter into moral motivation, and they might help to constitute families and community. I speculate that any stable democratic political society would be unified in part by the interlocking identities of its members and by the identification of its members with its central institutions. It seems to me, for these reasons, that we need to take into account the phenomena of identity and identification in constructing theories of the state.45

IX. CONCLUSION

My goal in this paper has been to introduce the concept of self-esteem identity and to suggest a variety of theoretical contexts in which it might be useful. I

45It might be worthwhile briefly to consider whether the view I have been developing is threatened by the arguments given by Catherine M. Frost, “Survey article: The worth of nations,” *Journal of Political Philosophy*, forthcoming. Frost’s paper is a survey of views about the “moral worth” of nations and nationalism, where, in the relevant sense, nations are not necessarily states, and where, as she explains, “nationalism involves a call for expanded political or cultural autonomy” for the nation. In this paper, of course, I am not attempting to defend nationalism in Frost’s sense of the term, nor am I attempting to defend the moral worth of nations. Instead, I am attempting to show, among other things, the importance of the notion of self-esteem identity in political theory. I am also arguing that there is a continuity between the phenomenon of identification with the nation and other aspects of our identities, aspects that we value but that can also have dark sides, including identification with the family. In section V of her paper, Frost discusses so-called “self-esteem theories,” according to which nationalism (in her sense) can be justified on the basis that identification with the nation provides a source of identity to the members of a nation, which arguably is important to individual wellbeing. To illustrate views of this kind, she cites Charles Taylor, “Nationalism and modernity,” *The Morality of Nationalism*, ed. Robert McKim and Jeff McMahan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 36–45, and Ashivai Margalit and Joseph Raz, “National self-determination,” *Journal of Philosophy*, 87 (1990), 447–50. As against such views, Frost objects that identification with the nation is only one source of identity and that identification with an existing state could in principle be as significant for wellbeing as identification with an aspiring nation. I agree with her on this point. She argues that even if identification with the nation has value for individuals, it does not follow that it is a good thing in general. I also agree with this. As I pointed out, a similar thing could be said about identification with one’s family. As far as I can see, there is nothing in Frost’s paper with which I need to disagree, given my purposes in the present paper.
suggested that a person’s friendships and family relationships can be part of her identity. We have “wide selves.” In politics, I think that we need to take the phenomena of identity and wide selves into account in order to understand nationalism and patriotism. Multicultural and multinational states face problems of social unity partly because, I think, the identity of typical members of the component cultural groups or nations is partly constituted by their membership in such groups. Even if a multinational state is just and efficient, and even if the way of life of its component nations is quite secure, it still might face a problem of social unity if members of these nations do not also identify with the larger country. Because of this, I think, the viability of a liberal multinational and multicultural state can depend on the nature of its citizens’ identities.46

46A brief version of this paper was presented to the philosophy departments at Simon Fraser University, Macalester College, the University of Maryland at College Park, Arizona State University and Concordia University. A version was also presented to the Ethiks Zentrum at the University of Zurich, to the 1997 Meetings of the Western Canadian Philosophical Association, to the 1998 Meetings of the Australasian Association of Philosophy, and to the colloquium series in Ethics at the University of Miami. I am grateful to those who participated in the discussions on these occasions for their helpful suggestions. I am especially grateful to Nomy Arpaly and Patricia Greenspan for extensive written comments and suggestions. I have also been helped by Sam Black, Peter de Marneffe, Martin Hahn, Marina Oshana, Michael Smith, David Zimmerman and by anonymous referees. This paper was begun with the assistance of a fellowship from the Centre for Applied Ethics, University of British Columbia. The main part of the research was completed while I was a research fellow in the Philosophy Program of the Research School of Social Sciences, Australian National University.