Who am I? Who are we?
The Ethics and Politics of Identity.

Kwame Anthony Appiah

Two and a half millennia ago, Confucius insisted that our ethical responsibilities to other people depend on our relationships with them. We have distinctive obligations, he saw, to our spouses, our children, our siblings, our friends, and our rulers. Not much later, Aristotle recognized that individual welfare can depend directly on the what happens to other people. He argued that the successes of our children, even after our deaths, can add to our *eudaimonia*, which is the measure of how well our lives have gone. Much more recently, John Stuart Mill argued that people had the right to settle for themselves certain elements of what was good for them, because, as he put it, individuality is one of the elements of well-being. But it's only relatively recently—in fact, only since the Second World War—that the development of the notion of a human identity, rooted both in sociological and psychological theory, has allowed us to bring all these ideas into a single ethical picture.

In that vision, each of us has many identities, and they play a part in defining for us what it is for our lives to go well. These identities are all deeply social, because their definitions and their meanings for us, as well as the way they affect how others treat us, are the subject of social debate and interpersonal negotiation. What it is to be a male or female or non-binary, Swiss or Ghanaian or American, gay or straight or bisexual, is not settled by individuals, nor only by people who bear those labels.

Some identities—as poets and philosophers, say—we can adopt or reject; though the fact that we call some, like these two, vocations, suggesting that they *call* to us, reflects the way in which even these *elective* identities can seem unavoidable. But many are hard to escape. As trans and non-binary people often discover, most of us have bodies that generate expectations about our identities. And if we disappoint those expectations by refusing to act in the ways conventionally associated with those identities, we may pay a steep cost. Think, to give another example, how often members of a group ostracize or threaten those who do not meet the demands conventionally associated with membership: as "un-American activities," like joining the Communist party, could lead to persecution and imprisonment in the 1950s in the United States.

The ways in which identities shape our behavior are not fixed only by ourselves. Often we do things because of our identities, adopting a view about what follows from them that is a social product. The clothes I wear, indeed my whole bodily hexis, as Bourdieu called our distinctive ways of moving and speaking, are marked by gender and class and ethnicity. You can try to resist local norms of bodily movement—as when a male walks in ways marked as female—but that may lead others to respond with puzzlement, insult, or assault. However we identify, others have expectations based on what they suppose our identities to be.

Still, whether our identities are elective or inescapable, we can adopt a variety of attitudes towards them. You can think of our gender as something with which you identify deeply, caring to be, as it were, a manly man or a feminine woman. Or you can wear it lightly, not giving it much weight in your practical life. For some African-Americans, pride in their race and its achievements, especially against the adversities imposed by racism, means that they identify deeply as Black. Many, though, live their lives aware that others will think of them as Black, and knowing that that will produce expectations, but caring relatively little about their racial identity; something that White people, mostly not faced with racial adversity, routinely feel free to do. So even if an identity is inescapable, each of us has some control over what it means to us, despite the fact that we cannot control the meaning given to it by others. As for the more elective identities, these too we can shape, to some degree, to our purposes. A novelist can reject the stereotype of the moody artist and thus pick a distinctive way of being a novelist. There is plenty of scope for individuality in shaping our individual identities. Our subjective identifications—which elective identities we take up and which inescapable ones we give practical or emotional weight to—are one of the many things we develop to in shaping our lives.

In politics, identities play an especially important role in our dealings with strangers. A national identification, a sense of fraternity with tens or hundreds of millions of our fellow citizens, can motivate us to give of ourselves; in the extreme, it can lead someone to think, as Horace put it, that it is a sweet and fitting to die for your country. People die for their faiths, too, because the flourishing of their faith, like the successes of their children, is important enough to their sense of who they are.

Though identities play many positive roles in our ethical lives, they also, of course, have pathologies: identities can close us off from people whose identities we do not share, turning nationalism into xenophobia. Over-identification with one label can close you off to solidarity with people with whom you share other labels: conservatives can refuse conversation with Lutherans, or with Catholics, or with fellow citizens, whose politics they do not share. So, while we must recognize that identities play a crucial role in our moral and social lives, we need to manage them carefully if their many benefits are not to be swamped by their potential costs.

In this lecture, then, I will sketch a picture of what identities *are* and how they shape the ways we act and think and feel. And I will suggest some ethical ideas about how to *manage* them.