IDENTITY AS THEATRE?

APPIAH, GOFFMAN, AND THE DRAMATURGY OF SELF

BY

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Introduction

This paper identifies the benefits and weaknesses of viewing identity as a form of theatre. Kwame Anthony Appiah (2018, 2005) repeatedly refers to collective identities as 'scripts' for everyday life. Identities help us 'perform' and 'act' the different 'roles' that we have in our lives. This account of how people interact borrows many terms usually found in the theatre: performances, roles, acts, scripts. Together, these dramaturgical elements comprise a personal story of who we are, where we come from, and who we want to be. This view of the self corresponds with an idea about identity that is prominent and popular in modern culture, namely that our identity is a narrative identity. What are the merits of looking at identity through this dramaturgical lens? What ideas do these metaphors reveal about identity? Why is the narrative

conception commonly accepted in contemporary culture? And what are the drawbacks of looking at identity as theatre?

In this paper, I want to draw on Erving Goffman's dramaturgical theory to address these questions. Dramaturgical analysis was popularized by Goffman in the 1960's, and soon became a foundational sociological theory. The similarities between Appiah and Goffman are striking. Both emphasize that social identities create normative expectations and how these identities are not material possessions but rather conducts and behaviours enacted by the individual in daily life. Moreover, Goffman prefigures an important element of the current debate on identity by claiming that there is a moral right to recognition. But there are also differences. Goffman brings to bear the role of emotions, which is an understated element in Appiah's account. Goffman's micro-analysis illuminates how established social roles, similar to Appiah's scripts, create understanding and expectations as people try to manage their performance in social encounters.

The paper begins by addressing (Section 1) two central themes in the theatrical account of identity: the relation between identity and truth and between identity and narrative. Next, it examines (Section 2) Appiah's account of social identities as scripts and elaborates on three of its features (labels; norms of behavior; norms of treatment). It then presents (Section 3) Goffman's micro-level account by way of clarifying how social identities function in everyday lives. Here we get a better view of three aspects that characterize the connection between identity and social scripts (established social roles, normative expectations, and the moral right to be accepted). Finally, the paper shows (Section 4) how these three aspects bring emotions (specifically, embarrassment) into the picture, and argues that the concept of narrative should be approached critically as a product of modern culture.

I

Identity, Truth, and Narrative

Theatrical accounts of identity draw some kind of connection between identity and theatre. The emphasis put on elements from theatre can vary widely, but two themes tend to occupy these accounts; one is a particular relation between identity and truth, the other between identity and narrative. Firstly, if identity consists of various roles and performances, the question arises if there is a true self 'behind' the outward performances. Secondly, though a person's daily roles vary greatly, they are typically seen as part of one narrative structure, a personal story about who we are. This section introduces these two themes, truth and narrative, in relation to identity. As it turns out, the two themes are intertwined, because the narrative view of identity comes with its own philosophical commitments on truth.

The idea that identity is a performance akin to theatrical play is deeply rooted in literature and language. The very origin of the word 'person' has its roots in *persona* which stands for 'mask' in Latin. It appears intuitive that, to some extent, each of us performs a certain role that shifts according to the social situation we find ourselves in; we act differently and adopt different scripts around our parents and our friends, are serious with our boss, dreamy around our crush. Who a person is appears to consist of different roles and characters that people adopt depending on who they are with and where they are.

The roles that make up an identity raise a question that goes to the very core of philosophical disputation: are these roles mere representations and fictions distinct from one's true self? The idea of a mask suggests that the mask covers over something that is deeper or more profound. An actress takes off her mask after a performance and then returns to being her 'true' self. Is this the

same for the different roles of our identity? The debate over truth versus representation has waged since antiquity, also in relation to identity and the self. Plato is the most marked exponent of dualism, seeing in the immaterial soul a true self distinct from the material body. Aristotle rejected such dualism and viewed the soul as related to the body in the same way as form is to matter, integrated into a unified whole person (Barresi and Martin 2011, 35).

In modern times, an influential account connecting the self to performance is found in Jungian psychology. Carl Jung emphasizes the artificial nature of the persona or mask and that it is important not to succumb one's authentic self wholly to the outward persona. Crucially, however, Jung regards the persona as a healthy component of the individual because it enables people to flourish in society by adhering, at least outwardly, to shared norms and behaviours (Jung 1953). Therefore, Jung is decidedly Platonic in his outlook, seeing the outward persona as distinct from the authentic self (Weldon 2017). In a similar vein, Jean-Paul Sartre gave his famous example of the waiter. The waiter is a typical profession where we assume that a mask is worn. The mask conceals who the waiter really is and what they truly think, else running the risk of coming across rude or offensive. Restaurants where owners and waiters do not wear a mask are expressly praised for being authentic and giving the customer the experience of feeling at 'home', that is, at least, only if the unmasked owner is pleasant. But Sartre's concern is not with the waiter who drops his mask, but rather with the waiter who is 'too much' of a waiter, one who plays the role too eagerly: "His movement is quick and forward, a little too precise, a little too rapid" (Sartre 1969, 59). This waiter, Sartre says, is inauthentic and an actor in bad faith. The waiter 'plays at' being a waiter, thereby denying his own freedom to act outside the mechanically prescribed performance of the supposed proper waiter. Moreover, the act can take on excessive forms, making the very action that is being performed

difficult to realize. Sartre illustrates this with the student who is so busy seeming attentive at a lecture that he forgets to actually pay attention: "The attentive pupil who wishes to be attentive, his eyes riveted on the teacher, his ears open wide, so exhausts himself in playing the attentive role that he ends up by no longer hearing anything" (*ibid.*, 60).

With Sartre, we see cracks appearing in the Platonic divide between mask and self. Sartre's illustrations introduce something normative in the mask: masks that are mechanically performed are less authentic than others. Hence, not all performances are artificial, but some can be truer than others. The sociologist Erving Goffman takes this intuition a step further. For Goffman, masks can even be considered the truer self. At times, the performance a person gives in a certain role is a role that the person strives to live up to. A mask can be the self that the person truly wants to be and through the performance comes to believe that they are (Goffman 1971, 19). For instance, a person who wishes to see themselves as helpful rather than selfish might offer their help to others in an effort to cultivate and 'grow into' a caring character. This view accepts that the self itself is often a site of contradictory and conflicting motives and aims. This interaction between the mask and the self comes closer to the Aristotelian view of the self; the mask and the self are inseparable in the same way that substance cannot be without form, a poem cannot be without its lyrical devices, or a speech without rhetoric. Without presentation, the self amounts to nothing comprehensible. Goffman's position is discussed in detail in Section 3, but first we will introduce the theme of narrative identity.

A theme that enters in modern debates and was absent in discussions on the self in antiquity, is that of narrative.[1] Despite the various roles we play in daily life, these roles all belong to ourselves. The performances are part of one unitary structure, a personal narrative about who we are. Many contemporary theorists of identity share this narrative view of identity, the idea that there is some link between narrative and selfhood (Schechtman 2011, 395). Charles Taylor is a prominent advocate of the narrative view. Taylor argues that human life is always in the process of becoming. We assess our lives relative to what is valuable to us, and since we are continuously challenged by new experiences and grow more mature, our self-image is under constant change and revision (Taylor 1989, 47-52). In other words, the self is situated against a horizon or background of meaning – "suspended in webs of significance," as Clifford Geertz has it (1973, 5) – that gives weight and significance to the choices people make, the daily roles they fulfil, and the actions they perform. Understanding a person's identity thus involves grasping how their life is woven into an unfolding story. In the same vein, Paul Ricoeur suggests that identity comes about through plotting one's life story, which is continuously being redrafted as we face new life events. The narrative form meets this essential human need, and is in fact necessary, because it allows the heterogenous circumstances, incidents, actors and interactions of life to come together in a meaningful way (Ricoeur 1984, 65-66). Narrative, therefore, is a fundamental component of being for many people.

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[1] This may have to do with the fact that in ancient philosophy the question whether the self is a fiction never arose (Barresi and Martin 2011, 42). It was from Locke's account of personal identity that the suggestion arose that the concept of the self may be a useful fiction to support the continuity of individual identity. Subsequently, Hume argued that the idea of a persisting self over and above personal experiences is an illusion and compared the mind to a theatre in which perceptions make their appearance and vanish (Hume 1975, 253).

The idea that life is a narrative has become well-established in the public imagination. The idea draws acceptance in fields across psychology, philosophy, therapy, popular media, and spawned a range of self-help work, a storytelling industry, and inspirational literature. By way of example, take Nobel Prize laureate Toni Morrison's address to college students in 2006:

> You are your own stories and therefore free to imagine and experience what it means to be human. (…) The theme you choose may change or simply elude you, but being your own story means you can always choose the tone. It also means that you can invent the language to say who you are and what you mean. But then, I am a teller of stories and therefore an optimist, a believer in the ethical bend of the human heart, a believer in the mind's disgust with fraud and its appetite for truth, a believer in the ferocity of beauty. So, from my point of view, which is that of a storyteller, I see your life as already artful, waiting, just waiting and ready for you to make it art. (Morrison 2006, 215)

The connection between identity and storytelling clearly has a strong foothold in our culture. In Section 4 of the article, we will discuss what makes this connection so amenable and straightforwardly understandable to the public ear.

Identity as a form of theatre thus raises compelling questions about truth and narrative. The link between truth and narrative goes further, though. It is not simply fortuitous that the thinkers mentioned in this section develop a narrative view of the self in relation to identity. A specific, phenomenological conception of truth underlies these theories. At the core of this conception is a first-person perspective on what one's experiences and identity amount to. It rejects objectivistic approaches whereby the person distances themselves from their own experience to determine who

they are. The idea that knowledge about ourselves arises by "looking inside" ourselves for something that is already there, is rejected. This Cartesian idea assumes that there is a 'real' identity behind our acts and appearance in the world. Such a disengaged view of the self is rejected by proponents of the narrative view (e.g. Taylor 1989, 162). Rather, a person's identity arises through their history, experiences, values and ideals, which are continuously being retold and reshaped as life progresses and the story unfolds. Though much can be said about the hermeneutical and phenomenological accounts of truth that underlie the narrative view, this introduction of the themes served to move to the topic of theatrical accounts of identity. In the next section, Appiah's view of collective identities as scripts for people's everyday lives is discussed.

II

Identities as Life Scripts

This section examines the notion of identity laid out by Kwame Anthony Appiah in *The Lies that Bind* (2018) and *The Ethics of Identity* (2005). An important aim for Appiah is to understand how collective identities work. His main objective is to push back against the idea of essentialism. Essentialism is the view that each person in a group has some core or essence in common (2018, 26). Appiah contests that there is any deep similarity at the core of collective identities, whether ethnic, sexual, religious or otherwise, that binds people of that identity together. Rather, identities are continuously morphing and changing in accordance with the social setting people find themselves in.

However, despite their fluctuating and anti-essentialist character, collective identities have an important anchoring function in people's lives. Collective identities, Appiah argues,

"provide what we might call scripts: narratives that people can use in shaping their projects and in telling their life stories" (2005, 22). What does it mean that collective identities 'provide' scripts? What Appiah points to is that in making our life stories, these stories are interwoven with and moulded by collective narratives that are not fully within our sphere of influence. In other words, the way our life stories unfold is partly shaped by attachments, such as family or ethnicity, that we find ourselves in. Appiah writes: "We do make choices, but we don't, individually, determine the options among which we choose" (*ibid.*, 107). Collective identities thus structure possible narratives of the individual self and provide models for telling life stories. Collective narratives are, in a way, 'sources' for our individual stories. For example, Appiah explains, gay identities may organize lives around the narrative of coming out; Pentecostalists structure narratives around being born again; and black identities in America often engage oppositional narratives of self-construction in the face of racism (*ibid.*, 23). The collectives that provide these scripts do not have to be longstanding religious or ethnic groups and can sometimes be formed in a prompt transformation. A recent example is the MeToo-campaign, which provided for many survivors of sexual assault a script through which to interpret and cast past experiences into a renewed personal narrative. Moreover, a script does not have to pertain only to a small, minority group but can affect how a large swath of society develop their self-understanding. An example is the so-called 'loss of innocence' of a child entering adulthood. The narrative of loss of innocence is only intelligible within a cultural script where childhood is wedded to innocence, and would not make sense in a culture with a view of children as inherently desiring and sinful (for instance in 17th century Puritan belief, see Bernstein 2011, 4).

Appiah explains how collective identities function as 'scripts' for everyday life by elaborating three shared features (2018, 10-12).

First, collective identities come with *labels* about who they apply to. Characteristics and criteria are given about who belongs to a group and why. These characteristics are often deeply contested, but there is some degree of understanding on how to identify those to whom the labels apply. Appiah also calls these labels "social conceptions" (2005, 67). Secondly, identities give us reasons to *behave* in a certain way. Identities have normative significance for people in the sense that they come with norms of identification: rules about how one should behave given their identity. Thirdly, identities give reasons to others to *treat* us in a certain way. People might be helpful to others or cautious depending on what identities the other is assigned. Thus, identities are labels that shape how people behave and treat others. This is how identities affect the everyday lives of people.

The three features of social identities roughly correspond to three psychological 'truths' that Appiah distinguishes. Firstly, the labels that identities provide come with the risk that people are prone to *essentialism*. As mentioned above, essentialism is the idea that everyone in a group has a shared characteristic or essence. Appiah rejects the idea that identities indicate anything innate: "There isn't some inner essence that explains why people of a certain social identity are the way they are. (…) And most of the things that most people do aren't done *because* they are women or men, of this or that ethnicity or race or religion." (Appiah 2018, 29). There are two elements here that we might want to tell apart: that a group has some essential feature and that someone does something because they are a member of that group. The former is a matter of stereotype, for instance "all liberals trust The New York Times." Meanwhile, the latter involves reducing someone's motivation to the group they belong to. This can occur even if we acknowledge that there are no essential traits in a group, for instance: "you trust The New York Times just because you are a liberal (even though I recognize that not all liberals rely on the

same media).'' Though motivation is often reduced to an essentialist stereotype about the group, the two can nevertheless be separated. Both aspects are contained in Appiah's notion of essentialism: stereotype and motivation.

The second component of identity, behaviour, is connected to the fact that people have a *habitus* shaped by their various identities. Appiah, following the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, defines habitus as "a set of dispositions to respond more or less spontaneously to the world in particular ways, without much thought" (*ibid.*, 21). We have habits, ways in which we conduct our bodies and speech, that are inculcated from a young age and depend on the different identities that we belong to. For example, the clothes that we learn to wear and consider normal hinge greatly on interlocking identities of class, ethnicity, creed and gender. Our habitus influences our conscious behaviour but shapes many unconscious behaviours as well. One's sense or taste for what clothing is good-looking or refined is deeply affected by their habitus. Essentialism also comes into play here; the way habits reveal the different identities that a person belongs to can invite to reduce one's behaviour to their identity. For Appiah, this remains a pitfall to avoid.

Thirdly, identities are sources for different ways of treatment, and this is related to the psychological observation that we have *clannish* tendencies. People are inclined to distinguish between in-groups, who belong to the same identity they belong to, and out-groups, those that do not belong to the same group. We treat these groups differently, Appiah writes, in that we prefer our own kind and take more easily against outsiders (*ibid.*, 31). This tendency might have an evolutionary explanation; reliance on group members could have been an adaptive strategy to survive.

Put succinctly, collective identities function as scripts for everyday life in three ways: by shaping how we are labelled, how

we behave, and how we are treated. These traits are linked to three observations about how people engage with identities: identities may come with essentialist biases, distinctive habitus, and clannish tendencies.

There are two relevant ways in which Appiah's account of identity is distinct from the discussion in Section 1. Firstly, Appiah has two uses for the term 'narrative': narratives refer to both collective identities, such as family stories or national histories, which are scripts feeding into our sense of who we are, and that individual story itself. Our personal stories are interwoven with other narratives, of other individuals as well as collectives. Narrative thus takes on both a collective and individual significance. The double use of narrative mirrors Appiah's understanding of identities, which can be personal and collective. The main difference between these two is the social practice of labelling. According to Appiah, social categories such as race only exist owing to social practices associated with the racial label. On the other hand, personal attributes such as cleverness work independently of social construction (Appiah 2005, 23). One could ask whether this distinction between personal and social identities holds, and whether personal attributes can turn into social categories and vice versa. What is clear is that, for Appiah, the study of narrative is mainly focused on collective identities, because only collective identities function as scripts.

Secondly, Appiah makes a distinction between identities based on whether they can be chosen. Some identities, Appiah argues, are based on conventions and a person can choose to adopt that identity. It is these identities that Appiah regards as 'roles' that a person may wish to play or adopt: "You can choose whether or not to play a certain conventional role, and, if all there is to an identity is a conventional set of behaviours, and you are capable of them, then you can chose whether to adopt the identity" (*ibid.*, 69-

70). On the other hand, there are identities whose criteria include things over which a person has no control. Sexual orientation and racial identity are two examples that Appiah considers part of this category, because they "are responding to a fact (about desire or ancestry) that is independent of their choices, a fact that comes, so to speak, from outside the self" (*ibid.*, 70). This distinction is tricky, as Appiah immediately acknowledges. Referring to the example of Sartre's waiter mentioned in the previous section, Appiah notes that even the waiter takes on an identity, or a profession, that "has a function outside himself." What this means, and where the line is drawn between roles that are based on conventions and those that are not, is unclear. Moreover, it is debatable whether convention is indeed something that a person does control, rather than a complex set of norms that a person feels compelled to act on.

Precisely these thorny questions are key in the dramaturgical theory of Erving Goffman. Goffman's incisive analysis of everyday situations is an interesting intervention on the issues Appiah's discussion raises and can contribute to a deeper understanding of how identities work as scripts in everyday life. His account of identity is discussed next.

III

The Presentation of Self

The previous section discussed Appiah's idea that social identities function as scripts for people's individual narratives. It was explained that this happens through labels and norms of behaviours and treatment. However, the process by which collective identities work as scripts and shape the life of the individual remained quite abstract. It is worthwhile to think more carefully about scripts in order to get a concrete idea about how

identities work into one's everyday life. The idea of scripts portrays identities in a particular storytelling way: identities function as scripts with social roles which are performed in the story of life. This narrative way of understanding the self has led many authors to compare life to art, literature and theatre. In sociology, this paradigm finds its most convincing expression in the American sociologist Erving Goffman, who used the theatre as a metaphor to examine everyday life. Where Appiah describes how scripts work at an abstract level, Goffman provides a description of micro-level social encounters such as eating at a restaurant or going to the doctor. This unique way of analysing everyday life leads to an account of human behaviour that sheds additional light on how collective identities work as life scripts.

Goffman argues that when people interact with others, they try to manage the impression others have of them (1959, 15, 26). For instance, a doctor puts on a professional demeanour to make the patient feel at ease about their expertise. A family visiting another for dinner may try to appear orderly and loving to come across as relatively well-functioning, while the host family is attempting to do the same. Even inside one's own home, stepping outside one's room and interacting with others involves changing one's demeanour and comes with certain roles and performances. The same goes for social identities. For instance, a person with a bicultural background visiting their family or friends from one cultural background might, in order to save themselves the embarrassment of being seen as 'too assimilated' into the other culture, perform some additional affinity with their family's culture.

These various roles that people enact are not roles supplementing who they 'truly' are, they are in fact central and fundamental to their identity. Citing the sociologist Robert Ezra Park (1950, 249), Goffman states:

It is probably no mere historical accident that the word person, in its first meaning, is a mask. It is rather a recognition of the fact that everyone is always and everywhere, more or less consciously, playing a role. (…) It is in these roles that we know each other; it is in these roles that we know ourselves (Goffman 1971, 30).

Identity and masks are thus inexorably connected. Goffman's analysis of this connection is intricate and wide-ranging, but we will focus our attention on three aspects that relate to Appiah's identity scripts: established social roles, normative expectations, and the moral right to acceptance.

Firstly, central to Goffman's analysis is that performances are achieved by controlling one's 'front'. Goffman defines the front as "the expressive equipment of a standard kind intentionally or unwittingly employed by the individual during his performance" (*ibid.*, 22). The 'expressive equipment' that can be employed in performance has two parts: the setting and the personal front. The setting comprises the background items, the physical lay-out and the decor, such as the workplace or the living room, where the performance is played out. The personal front includes the items and characteristics that we associate with the individual: sex, age, ethnicity, size and looks, facial expressions, accent, and so on. As much as there is a front, there is also a 'backstage.' This is where the role one fulfils can be dropped, like a waiter in the kitchen of a restaurant or lawyers in a backroom before going into a meeting with clients. This is not necessarily a place where people are their 'true' selves; rather, it is where they prepare for their role, unwind after performing, and look back on their performance and evaluate it. Moreover, the division between the front- and backstage is not necessarily physical, but can also be virtual. In our Covid-19 era we are all too familiar with this: there is always a moment of checking

ourselves, adjusting, and a slight shift in character, before we click 'Start video' on a Zoom call.

The fact that the front can be employed, as Goffman says, 'intentionally or unwittingly' is crucial. For instance, a commuter can deliberately pull out a copy of *The Brothers Karamazov* on the train to appear interesting and well-read. But other performances are less calculated because they come in roles that are imbued with social norms and traditions. On the same train, a woman might, without giving it any thought, sit with her legs and knees neatly aligned instead of aggressively 'manspreading'. Hence, though a person can create their unique performances, many are shaped by social norms and conventions. These *established social roles*, Goffman says, usually already come with a particular front (*ibid.*, 27). It is here, in Appiah's parlance, that collective identities offer 'scripts' and expectations for how people think and behave in their daily interactions. Collective identities such as ethnicity, gender, creed or race offer various roles and ways of expression that are performed in daily life. These collective identities are therefore not material possessions, but rather ways of conduct that are affirmed in daily encounters, as Goffman highlights: "To *be* a given kind of person, then, is not merely to possess the required attributes, but also to sustain the standards of conduct and appearance that one's social grouping attaches thereto" (*ibid.*, 81). Social identities are not things that people have, but materialize in interactions and performances. As Appiah suggested in a similar vein, social identities come with certain rules of behaviour, or habitus, which include norms of conduct, presentation, and speech. These norms can be so detailed and deeply embedded that they are often performed unwittingly.

Since the various social roles that a person has can come with prescribed fronts, people generate *normative expectations* about the behaviour and appearance of others. Goffman notes that based on a person's social identities we quickly make assumptions as to

"what the individual before us ought to be" (1986/1963, 12). This relates to Appiah's norms of identification that were mentioned before: social identities come with expectations about how a person will behave. These norms are often based on stereotypes that we have about a social category. We not only have these expectations of those outside our own social groups, but also, and perhaps more so, of members of our own group. For instance, an academic philosopher might expect of her colleagues that, at the very least, they have read Wittgenstein's *Investigations*. Goffman notes that these normative expectations are, in effect, demands; they are demands about how a member of a group should be. If incongruence exists between our expected appearance and actual reality, either the expectation or the image of reality will have to be adjusted.

The third connecting feature between Goffman and Appiah exists where Goffman addresses the moral character of performances. According to Goffman, there is a fundamental dialectic that underlies all social interaction. On the one hand, when a person presents themselves before others, there is an expectation that others will treat that person in an appropriate manner. Goffman calls this principle a *moral right to be accepted* as we present ourselves (*ibid.*, 24). This formulation comes very close to the right of recognition advocated over recent decades by the likes of Appiah, Charles Taylor and Axel Honneth. As Goffman notes elsewhere: "One builds one's identity out of claims which, if denied, give one the right to feel righteously indignant." (Goffman 1956, 271). On the other hand, according to the second principle, others have a justified expectation that a person with a certain social characteristic and presentation is indeed who they claim they are. This is because, when entering into an interaction, there is a common understanding that both parties are seeking to gather information about the other from all the sources available to them, both spoken and unspoken. In other words, there is an expectation

that people are not deceiving one another by presenting themselves as someone they are not.

Numerous contemporary identity issues can be analysed through the lens of Goffman's dialectic. For instance, debates over the pronouns to be used for transgender or non-binary persons revolve essentially around the principle of acceptance. There is a moral demand to treat, and in this case address, people as they seek to present themselves. The second arm of the dialectic, on the expectation created by people's impressions, is also cause for ample controversy. One example is the discussion over cultural appropriation. Here the interesting question is not only about giving a misguided presentation of oneself, but also whether assuming certain social characteristics and items that belong to dominated groups can be considered an oppressive impersonation. Goffman's two principles thus offer a novel and interesting way of reformulating contemporary debates on recognition. Goffman's formulation stresses not only the right of the person with a certain identity, but also sheds light on how performances might create legitimate demands by others. This raises important questions on whether there are duties tied to a right to recognition and, if so, what these duties entail, an often overlooked topic in the recognition debate.

To summarize, this section discussed three notions that are central to Goffman's dramaturgical analysis: established social roles, normative expectations, and the moral right to acceptance. These notions enrich Appiah's account of identity in several ways. Firstly, the established social roles provide a framework for how collective identities can enter into individual lives as scripts. Secondly, the normative expectations created by social roles fit into the idea that identities involve norms of identification. Thirdly, the moral right connected to daily performance is a valuable contribution by Goffman to the longstanding debate on the right

to recognition. In the next section, we will argue that these three notions build up to a contribution on the role of emotions in identity, a theme that is understated in Appiah's work.

IV

Identity, Emotions, and Narrative

IV. 1. *Identity and embarrassment*

The previous section discussed three notions of Goffman that enrich Appiah's account of social identities: established social roles, normative expectations, and the moral right to acceptance. In Goffman's work these notions build up to an important reflection on the role of emotions in daily life. Given that emotions are significant for Goffman, it is useful to consider how they fit in the theatrical account of identity. This is all the more significant because, in Appiah's work on identity, emotions do not feature as components of his theory. Emotions are absent or, perhaps more accurately, their presence is implied and understated. This section examines the significance of emotions in Goffman's work, especially the emotion of embarrassment, and relates this to Appiah's account of identity. Finally, the section reflects on how the concept of narrative is significant for both identity and emotions.

A key question left unanswered in the previous section's discussion of Goffman's work is: why do people seek to manage their impressions on others? This psychological question leads Goffman to consider the role of emotions in everyday life. As mentioned above, Goffman argues that there is a basic dialectic at work in social interaction: people wish to be accepted as they present themselves and others expect a person to present themselves for who they are. The question thus arises what

happens in case of misrecognition, that is, when the performance of a person fails or others do not accept their presentation. In the many examples of everyday situations that Goffman gives, the main motive of managing one's performance is to avoid feeling embarrassed. Goffman calls these instances where embarrassment arises 'incidents'. Goffman says: "When an incident occurs, the reality sponsored by the performers is threatened. The persons present are likely to react by becoming flustered, ill at ease, embarrassed, nervous, and the like. Quite literally, the participants may find themselves out of countenance" (Goffman 1971, 206). It is therefore the possibility of embarrassment that drives the drama of social life. The main consequence of a failure to be accepted as one presents oneself is embarrassment. For this reason, Goffman points to the central importance of being tactful in interactions. Preventing embarrassment for ourselves and for those we interact with is a critical part of workable social relationships. This need to prevent embarrassment is driven by a "desire, above all else, to avoid a scene" (*ibid.*, 224). Goffman argues that embarrassment is a constant threat to social interaction and that the need to prevent it is cross-cultural (*ibid.*, 25; cf. Schudson 1984, 636).

There can be several ways for embarrassing incidents to occur with regard to one's social identities. First, someone might fail their performance causing their mask to 'slip'. Take the example of the bicultural person mentioned earlier, who emphasises different parts of his personality depending on which family members or friends he is with. It might be the case that many cultural references or words in a different language will go over this person's head, but he will be able to mostly avoid commenting or just smile and go along with the conversation. When he is pressed for a comment and there is no way to glean the meaning of a word or reference, however, this may lead to an embarrassing situation. The embarrassment here is contextual and augmented by the fact that it is tied to a social identity that the person is seeking to perform –

or in Goffman's terms, the reality that he is sponsoring. In other words, not knowing a foreign language word or cultural reference in itself is not what is embarrassing. But since the person is trying to maintain an image of being culturally aware in front of his family members, the situation will feel like a character slip. Another way for a failed performance to take place is when others are unwilling to accept one's presentation. This can be the case for a transgender person, also mentioned earlier, where others decline that person's claim to belonging to a certain gender. Sometimes a person's presentation of self will be seen as an infringement on the collective they claim to belong to. Infamously, this happened with Rachel Dolezal, whose performance as a black woman was condemned by a large number of the African American community for being insulting after it turned out that, in fact, she was not black.

Now, taking embarrassment as the only emotion involved with social identities is clearly reductive. Goffman connects embarrassment in a triad together with shame and humiliation (Scheff 2004, 237; Scheff 2016, 35). Embarrassment thus links to a range of emotions which differ in levels of intensity that are involved when a person's identity is at stake. Yet, there are plenty of situations where many other emotions are at play. For instance, not granting due recognition to a transgender person can lead to feelings of anger and injustice, but also depression and anxiety. Other emotions are also at stake in ethnic and religious identities. For instance, during the civil strife in post-2003 Iraq, having a certain name could indicate a person's affiliation to a particular creed. Here, being misidentified is a source of fear, and embarrassment would be the last thing on a person's mind. Embarrassment is, therefore, only one of many emotions involved in the process of identity. Nevertheless, the reason for Goffman to discuss more mundane life situations of embarrassment is to demonstrate that managing one's social identities is an everyday

practice. The way social identities work by virtue of being scripts that are acted out in daily situations has a microscopic effect on how people behave, interact, and feel. Embarrassment thus serves as a starting point from which to explore the role of emotions, encouraging additional work to understand and theorize the many other emotions that people feel in relation to their identities.

There are two reasons why expounding on emotions in the context of identity more than what has been done thus far in the literature, including Appiah's, can be valuable. Firstly, the contemporary debate on the recognition of identities is greatly improved by a deeper understanding of how and which emotions are involved. In connecting embarrassment and shame, Goffman comes close to the view of Axel Honneth. Honneth develops a theory of recognition and places shame at the centre of the emotional experience of having one's identity misrecognized. Shame is, for Honneth, "the most open of our moral feelings," because it involves a lowering of one's feeling of self-worth and an experience of being of lower social value than one had assumed (Honneth 1995, 137-138). This emotional response can be triggered, Honneth argues, when, in a social encounter, a person's identity is questioned and disrespected: "Hence, the moral crisis in communication is triggered here by the agent being disappointed with regard to the normative expectations that he or she believed could be placed on another's willingness to respect him or her." (*ibid.*, 138). Like Goffman, Honneth argues that there are normative expectations regarding a person's presentation that they can justifiably anticipate others to respect. Moreover, both Honneth and Goffman recognize the emotional interests that are at stake when a person's identity is involved. It was argued above that Goffman's reliance on embarrassment overlooked other emotions. The same criticism can be levelled at Honneth, whose sole reliance on shame as the most open of the moral emotions seems unsubstantiated and demands further scrutiny.

The second reason to explore emotions is that, like social identities, emotions are also often scripted and tied to a narrative. The most lucid philosophical articulation of this view is that of Peter Goldie. According to Goldie, emotions are not merely brief reactions but "complex, episodic, dynamic and structured" (2000, 12). Emotions, on this view, are enduring attitudes or episodes that are structured, or more specifically, are embedded in a narrative structure. Emotions arise in a way that is intelligible in light of a person's past experiences, beliefs and character. Therefore, to make sense of emotional experiences, it is necessary to see them as part of a larger unfolding narrative, not isolated symptoms. Goldie, in agreement with Taylor's view mentioned in Section 1, sees people's lives as following a narrative structure, that is to say, they comprise "an unfolding, structured sequence of actions, events, thoughts, and feelings" (*ibid.*, 4, 13). A feature of narrative is that it captures the way things matter to people, and emotions are central to understanding people's relation to things in their lives. Goldie calls this the "emotional import" which reveals the meaningfulness of a situation, place, person or thing to a person's life. Echoing Taylor, one's personal narrative and identity thus reflects what is meaningful to a person.

A similar view is advocated by Ronald de Sousa, who develops a perceptual model of emotions. Here, emotions are considered neither cognitive thoughts nor mere appetites and feelings. Rather, De Sousa likens emotions to a kind of perception, in particular in that emotions perceive values: emotions direct our attention to things that are important and valuable for us (1987, xv). This is a more general trend in the philosophy of emotions, which increasingly sees emotions as sources of salience, that is, emotions renders salient different things (Brady 2013, 16). For instance, anger can limit a person's ability to make rational decisions and accept counterevidence, but can open one's eyes to an injustice that is taking place. It follows that emotions are not either positive or

negative, but of a complex makeup, each with its own epistemic benefits and epistemic weaknesses. As such, emotions are mental phenomena that, by directing attention to what matters and is potentially significant or valuable, are essential for guiding action. In perceiving values, however, emotions are not arbitrary or subjective. Emotions are rather held to certain standards of appropriateness, which is why we can, at times, think of a person's emotional response as being appropriate given the circumstances or not. For instance, someone who is laughing and joking whilst breaking up with their partner is usually regarded as acting out of place. These standards of appropriateness are set by what De Souza calls paradigm scenarios: social situations in which the significance of an emotions is first understood and learned. This is where De Souza refers to the "essentially dramatic structure" of emotions: "The key idea is that our emotions are learned rather like a language and that they have an essentially dramatic structure. The names of emotions do not refer to some simple experience; rather, they get their meaning from their relation to a situation type, a kind of original drama that defines the roles, feelings, and reactions characteristic of that emotion" (De Souza 1987, xvi). Therefore, norms of emotional behaviour are set by scenarios with their own appropriate roles, feelings and expressions.

Narrative thus proves a persistent and useful concept; it is central for understanding both identity and emotions. Firstly, Appiah argues that social identities offer narratives that people merge into the personal stories about who they are. Goffman demonstrated incisively how these roles are performed in everyday life. Subsequently, emotions were found to be key in motivating and shaping behaviour in social interaction. These emotions themselves are also scripted and come in structured dramas with roles and feelings that are suitable for a given situation. Therefore, narrative as a concept illuminates how complex processes like identity and emotions function in human lives.

IV. 2. *The inescapable narrative*

The story of narrative is not all positive, however. There are individual and social implications attached to the view of human life as a narrative. It was mentioned in Section 1 that the idea of life as a story finds relatively unproblematic acceptance in common culture. Why does this idea appear to suit the particular cultural moment of our time so well?

Cultural theorist Eva Illouz suggests that narrative is a highly effective mode of organizing the modern self because it speaks to several deeply embedded elements of modern culture. Narrative enables us to succeed at goals that are accepted as paramount in contemporary life, such as self-actualization, sexual liberation, and professional success. This has to do with the form of narrative: narrative allows one to plot their story retrospectively. With a goal in mind, for instance romantic intimacy, a person can find in their past the obstacles as well as the means toward achieving that objective: Why do I have difficulties achieving intimacy? What are the obstacles that hindered me on earlier occasions? In a narrative, "the 'end' of the story initiates the story" (Illouz 2008, 173). Illouz thus argues that the narrative form allows the individual to retroactively construe the reasons and motives for one's successes and failures. Illouz summarizes this mode of thinking as follows:

> Past and present events, spoken or unspoken problems, figures of the past and current relations would now all be connected in a seamless narrative of identity in which the self would seek its lost 'origins,' neuroses, and secret desires. The process of telling the story of one's self would be the process of exercising a new art of personal memory, transforming the past into a ghost that perpetually haunts, structures, and explains the present" (*ibid.*, 46-47).

Illouz is not all optimistic about this feature of modern life. The psychologization of the self expands the realm of what is considered treatable through individual means of medicine and self-help. This benefits a self-help and pharmaceutical industry that banks on finding individual solutions to looming social and structural problems. The recognition, categorization, and institutionalization of mental behaviour, for instance through the DSM, cemented the authority of psychological discourse in public and made "emotional health a new commodity produced, circulated, and recycled" (*ibid.,* 171). The current proliferation of mental health apps and their partnership with business firms is a clear instance of emotional health and industry becoming entangled. Emotional success is thought essential for better work performance and the burden of having a stable mental life is placed on the individual, rather than the workplace conditions themselves.

Besides overt industrial interests, Illouz argues that intertwined with the psychological narrative discourse are motives of self-interest, efficiency and instrumental calculation, all of which make up a routine of 'emotional capitalism' (*ibid.*, 59-60). In narrative, responsibility is placed first and foremost with the individual as the starting point for change. Take a recent study in the United Kingdom showing that professional, middle-class Brits often misidentify their origins as working class (Friedman et al. 2021). In other words, privileged people often frame their experience and life as an upward story. This indicates an internalisation of meritocratic values of hard work and struggle. People thus contribute to the success story of meritocratic capitalism by making their story sound like meritocracy works. The experience of self-authorship is in itself an attempt to attribute control to the self. This experience might be shared by many, or could merely be an 'emotion of authorship' that some people possess while others feel that their life "just happens" (Strawson 2015, 287). Whether

widely shared or not, the idea of being a master of one's narrative creates a significant responsibility that falls on the individual.

Another oversight of the narrative approach has to do with the performativity of emotions. Naming an emotion often causes one to feel that emotion. This active component of naming, known as affect labelling in psychology, actually brings feelings to life and makes one go through the emotion. For instance, realizing and articulating that one is angry can bring about feelings of irritation and spite, even if the reason for the anger has long passed. Emotion requires motion. This means that emotions not only guide our attention, as De Souza and Brady argue, but we also shape our emotions. Moving one's emotions in this way can also be triggered by a broader social current. Sara Ahmed recalls the death of Princess Diana, where feelings of grief in the general public prompted many individuals to feel grief, leading to accusations that such grief was inauthentic (2004, 9).

To take the example of Goffman's interactions, a shortcoming in his illustrations of social encounters is that the feelings of embarrassment seem to come out of nowhere and come to us naturally, from the 'inside out'. For Goffman, when someone fails to enact a social role, that person will somehow immediately feel embarrassed. But clearly this is often not the case. At times feelings of embarrassment only come to us once we recognize, perhaps through the suggestion of a friend, that what occurred was a faux pas. Only then does embarrassment come into play. This is not just a matter of us 'understanding' at a later time that what occurred was embarrassing. More often than not, feelings are complex, fuzzy and contradictory and there is no straightforward emotion that can be distinguished. Naming the emotion compartmentalizes these contradictory feelings and directs one's attention to the emotion label.

Therefore it is naming, articulating and admitting that a situation was embarrassing that makes the embarrassment come to life. The same applies to other emotions, such as fear, anger and envy, in that articulating them has a performative effect. Here too, Illouz warns that there is a danger in trying to stir the emotions too much: "Pianists or social actors who become too intensely aware of themselves and of the rules they use, of their bodily and emotional movements, play their social score awkwardly, without the flow and fluency that distinguish virtuosity from rote learning. In short, mental awareness of one's emotions is not always possible, nor is it always desirable" (Illouz 2008, 207). The undesirability of too much emotional awareness, Illouz suggests, lies in a creeping rationalist assumption that articulating and going 'intelligently' about one's emotions is a superior condition. This assumption, again, corresponds to objectives of regulation and disciplining that boost economic interests.

It is useful in this connection to think of Judith Butler's criticism of Goffman in her seminal essay on gender performativity. Butler argues that, in the case of gender, it is more accurate to think of gender as an 'act' rather than a 'role' (1988, 528). This adjustment underlines her central claim that in performing one's gender, one materializes and brings gender identity to life. Gender is performatively produced through behaviour. This criticism does not seem entirely fair to Goffman though since, as noted above, he does indeed emphasize that identities are not material possessions but exist by way of our conduct. What Butler is concerned about, however, in a way that Goffman is not, are the unconscious processes at work in performativity. The valuable lesson to be taken from Butler is that identities (and emotions) do not simply occur but are shaped by social and cultural processes.

We can extend Butler's criticism of Goffman to morality. In as much as emotions for Goffman seem to have no historical or

social precedent, neither do they have a moral one. The feelings of embarrassment lack a moral context in which the Goffmanian individual is situated. This weakness is the reason why Alasdair MacIntyre, who is perhaps the foremost proponent of the narrative approach, strongly rejects Goffman's ideas: "The unit of analysis in Goffman's accounts is always the individual role-player striving to effect his will within a role-structured situation. The goal of the Goffmanesque role-player is effectiveness and success in Goffman's social universe is nothing but what passes for success." (2007, 115). MacIntyre's complaint is part of a broader critique of the modern, liberal self. The liberal self is typically neutral, rational, and unencumbered. For MacIntyre – who is often classed as communitarian, but ironically so against his will (*ibid.*, xiv) – the self which lacks moral orientation toward the common good is unable to live in accordance with human virtues. The liberal self thus resorts to instrumental and calculating conduct, doing "nothing but what passes for success." The broader implication of the liberal self-orientation is that society as a whole lacks directedness towards a common good, leading instead to market-driven instrumentalization, efficiency-based policies, and social fragmentation. Illouz and MacIntyre are both critics of a neoliberal mode of existence where morality has been replaced by markets. The detrimental role that narratives have in entrenching this mode should be at the forefront of any critical effort.

The relevance of these considerations for social identities is that they bring out a crucial dilemma in Appiah and Goffman's theories. On the one hand, Appiah's account of scripts suggests that social identities provide certain ready-made roles and performances and narratives that the individual can enact. The same is true for the established social roles discussed by Goffman. In this sense, social identities relieve the individual of having to create their own impressions at all times and means that both performer and audience can rely on certain normative expectations

that come with different roles. The risks attached to this function of identities, primarily stereotyping, essentialism, and tribalism, were discussed earlier. On the other hand, the notion of scripts is connected to a narrative account of identity that comes with its own vulnerabilities. The individual acting out various roles carries the burden of being authentic, creative, and narratively coherent and stable. It is not by chance that the actor here is conceived as an artist and life as a work of art (Appiah 2005, 107; see also Taylor 1991, 61). The creativity that is required when life is a story that each individual tells about themselves generates a responsibility on the individual that is possibly outsized. Appiah therefore rightly rejects the life-as-art metaphor because we do not simply make up any self we choose. This shows what kind of dilemma the theatrical metaphor poses to identity: it illuminates many aspects of social behaviour, but at the same time overlooks the historically and morally situated self.

The concept of narrative, therefore, needs to be critically approached in so far as it functions to cast an odious neoliberal mindset deeper into our lives. Questions need to be addressed such as: What kinds of narratives do people tell about themselves and about society, and what do the particular narratives say about the modern self? What is the structure of these various narratives? Are there societal and industrial pressures insisting on people to conceive of their life as a narrative and to improve upon it, and why? Who gains from an increasingly lucrative narrative industry, and who are the ones that lose out? Answering these questions will help create a more critical understanding of the role of narrative in our time and to distinguish both the beneficial effects it has as well as its adverse features.

Conclusion

This paper explored Appiah's idea that social identities function as scripts in people's everyday lives. Identities do this, Appiah suggests, by shaping how we are labelled, how we behave, and how we are treated. To get a more concrete idea of how identities function as scripts, Goffman's theory of dramaturgy was introduced. There are striking similarities between the ideas of Appiah and Goffman: both emphasize that social identities create normative expectations, that there is a moral right to recognition, and how identities are not material possessions but rather conducts and behaviours enacted by the individual in their everyday life. Goffman's work contributes the metaphor of theatre which illuminates how established social roles, similar to Appiah's scripts, create understanding and expectations as people try to manage their performance in social encounters.

The central motivation for people to be understood in the way they present themselves is to avoid embarrassment. By considering the emotion of embarrassment, Goffman adds a crucial element to the analysis of social identities. It was argued that taking into account the emotions contributes to debates in recognition theory and that other emotions, besides embarrassment, need to be explored. A drawback of Goffman's analysis is that a person's feelings of embarrassment appear to come out of nowhere. There are cultural, historical and moral factors that shape and delineate embarrassment. These factors are absent in Goffman but need accounting for.

Throughout the paper, narrative proved to be a central concept. Narrative is pivotal in any theatrical account of identity and many contemporary theorists place narrative at the heart of understanding both identity and emotions. For Appiah, the concept has a twofold function: social identities provide narratives that are incorporated into the narrative of the individual.

Meanwhile, philosophers of emotion increasingly also view emotions as tied to narrative, providing roles, feelings and expressions that circumscribe the appropriateness of specific emotions. Narrative as a concept thus carries a lot of weight and its connecting function between both identity and emotion warrants further exploration. At the same time, the final section of the paper pointed toward the adverse features of narrative that function to promote motives of self-interest, efficiency and instrumental calculation. The widespread public acceptance and popularity of the idea of narrative therefore has to be examined as a cultural phenomenon specific to modern society. Where narrative obscures or neglects structural problems, the story needs investigating.

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