

Interview - Kwame Anthony Appiah

Written by E-International Relations

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This interview is part of our Black History Month features. The interviews speak to the fundamental aims of Black History Month and discuss current research and projects, as well as advice for young scholars.

Kwame Anthony Appiah is Professor of Philosophy and Law at New York University. He was born in London, but moved as an infant to Kumasi, Ghana, where he grew up. He took BA and PhD degrees in philosophy at Cambridge and has taught philosophy in Ghana, France, Britain, and the United States. He explored questions of African and African-American identity in *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture*; examined the cultural dimensions of global citizenship in *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*; and investigated the social and individual importance of identity in *The Ethics of Identity*. He's also written three mystery novels. He has been President of the PEN American Center and serves on the Board of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the New York Public Library and the Public Theater. In 2012 he received the National Humanities Medal from President Obama. His most recent book is *The Lies that Bind: Rethinking Identity*.

Where do you see the most exciting research and debates happening in your field?

For me the most exciting debates are always in the classroom, where undergraduates struggle with big questions and some of them really come to love the subject! I don't want to sound like a caricature of an analytic philosopher, but it's just true that "exciting" is one of those words that's a two-place relation masquerading as a one-place predicate. To say that something's exciting is to say that it excites me and people like me. And so the questions in the areas of moral and social philosophy today that most excite me are, of course, questions I'm working on. I continue to think there's good work on identity going on, but I've become interested in the growing body of work on what I think of as the "hard problem" of social justice today: how to find ways of involving people in meaningful activity that will, at the same time, distribute the social product by giving everyone a satisfactory income while producing the goods and services we need.

In the United States, automation hasn't produced a low employment economy. But it *has* produced huge dislocations in the lives of many workers and it *has* come with lots of very low quality jobs that are low-paid and uninteresting or unpleasant. And too many of us are doing what the anthropologist David Graeber has dubbed a "bullshit job," defined as, "one so completely pointless, unnecessary, or pernicious that even the employee cannot justify its existence." Artificial Intelligence isn't likely to produce more interesting jobs either and it may produce fewer jobs overall. (Take just one example: more than three and a half million people do jobs that involve driving. How will driverless cars affect them and their prospects?) Unemployment levels in a country like France reflect a different policy choice than the one in the US, namely to have a high degree of legally-guaranteed job security. Both solutions clearly have problems, then. In a conversation about these questions you need to draw on history and the social sciences as well as on ethics and moral theory. And that makes them like the questions in the ethics of identity that I've worked on for a few decades now.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

The biggest shifts between my earliest work and now have come from the fact that I've worked a good deal in

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interdisciplinary programs in African and African-American Studies, and that has convinced me that to do the best ethical work you need to be informed by fiction – novels, television, film – and by history and the social sciences. So it's colleagues in these fields who have taught me the most: economists like Jerry Jaynes, literary scholars like Henry Louis Gates Jr., philosophers like Tommie Shelby, sociologists like William Julius Wilson and Larry Bobo.

What is the importance of Black History Month, and what does it represent to you?

The main effect of Black History Month in my life in the United States is that I get more invitations to talk in February! But I think in places in the North Atlantic world whose political and intellectual traditions are so shaped by race and racism, it's good to focus regularly on work by and about black people. The aim, of course, is to infuse an awareness of these issues across the curriculum, so that race questions aren't ghettoized into one season. But the level of basic knowledge about black history in Britain and the United States today is pretty low. (Of course, historical understanding is generally not in great shape!)

You have been a critic of some theories of Afrocentrism that share core presuppositions of nineteenth-century Enlightenment thought, for instance in your 1993 article "Europe Upside Down: Fallacies of New Afrocentrism". What are the most significant problems of these theories?

I thought that the sort of work that was done by self-described Afrocentrists often reflected (as is perhaps inevitable) too many of the weaknesses of the work they were criticizing: a reliance on unexamined or incoherent or just false ideas about race; an undemocratic tendency to celebrate the achievements of the powerful (history as the doings of kings and queens and the people around them); organicist notions of culture, essentialism about identity, homogenizing the diversities of Africa and her diasporas. I'm sure that some work has taken these sorts of points on board. But I'm not up to date on what's going on in self-described Afrocentrist work.

Your work combines and draws on ethics, philosophy, literature, and (African) history. How does this combination help us to better understand questions of political inclusion and exclusion of groups of people?

You can only understand politics and how to make positive political change if you think historically and sociologically. And the big questions all require an ethical input. You need to distinguish, for example, between legitimate and illegitimate forms of partiality, which is an ethical issue; it requires a grasp of some issues in ethical theory. (By partiality, I just mean the opposite of impartiality.) But you can't really see what forms of partiality make sense and conduce to the good without looking at how identities work out in the world and in history. Not every appeal to race is helpful, but not every appeal is unhelpful either. Racism and allophobia are morally different from racial solidarity, though both involve defections from racial impartiality. This is one thing that has become clearer to me over time.

In your recent book *The Lies that Bind: Rethinking Identity*, you argue that there is no inherent similarity in identities, which binds a group of people of that identity together. Can you explain this argument?

So, most identities involve a form of practical essentialism, in which people in a labelled group are treated as if they share some central defining properties that explain why they belong together. But most actual groups have fuzzy boundaries, because the criteria of membership are contested or confused. Is the grandchild of a Ghanaian soldier, who had a child in Burma during the Second World War and went home without ever seeing the child, black? And, if so, what does that mean for her normatively? Are all the various intersexes really just men or women? One problem with the essentialist answer, when the identities are important for political life, is that it takes identity as something given as opposed to recognizing that it has to be made. Solidarity is never automatic. It has to be built.

In your book *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*, you explore the responsibilities of humans as they live together in an interconnected world. What does it mean to be a global citizen? In other words, what are the ties that could connect rather than separate people?

Well, as one of the great African writers of the European tradition, the playwright Terence (who called himself

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“Publius Terentius Afer” – and “Afer” means African), put it: “Homo sum: nihil humanum a me alienum puto.” “I’m a human being: I think nothing human is alien to me.” So, it’s sometimes worth remembering that we are all humans and that normal healthy human beings have an enormous amount in common. Still we’re also quite various, too. And the thought that we’re fellow citizens of the world means, more particularly, that we have obligations to one another, the basic moral obligations, and that we have to manage the earth, our common home, so that it can nourish and sustain us all, while also valuing our differences.

When I interact with particular people, whether round the corner or round the world, it’s not just our common humanity or our shared citizenship of the planet that we have to rely on: there’s always more particular things, shared interests or tastes that aren’t universal, that make us different from others. And it’s the recognition that our differences are valuable as well as our similarities that lies at the heart of cosmopolitanism. I like to say that cosmopolitanism is universality plus difference. And that thought – that we need to interact across differences as well as within commonalities – is important within nations, with our literal fellow citizens, as well as with our figurative global fellow citizens. Our societies are dangerously divided today – between conservatives and liberals, Republicans and Democrats, Brexiteers and Remainers. You can’t run a democracy successfully if the population is divided into feuding tribes each of which thinks the others are wicked, crazy or daft.

In light of the rise of populist and far-right politics and the normalisation of extremist political views, do you think morality can help to counter these trends? More broadly, what are the necessary conditions for moral progress to happen?

Moral progress happens, at least very often, when social movements mobilize the collective power of groups to get people to see that they have to work together to make something happen. It’s not enough just to articulate a moral case, you have to bring it to life. And very often that requires people to get together and say this thing that is going on in *our* society dishonours us, is a source of shame for *us*. That makes identity central to moral progress. That’s what I argued in my book *The Honor Code: How Moral Revolutions Happen*. What brought footbinding or slavery to an end wasn’t just seeing that it was wrong, it was mobilizing national honour – British national honour in the abolitionist movement, for example, and Chinese in anti-footbinding societies – to get the thing done.

What is the most important advice you would give to young scholars?

Follow your hunches. You’ll make the best contributions to your field by combining understanding the major trends with resisting them when evidence and arguments lead you away from them. I was trained in a philosophical tradition that was only interested in the past through past philosophers. But history matters deeply to social and ethical analysis. Just following the questions that I cared about led me away from that aspect of my tradition. Fortunately lots of other people made the same move around the same time!