Discounting Identity

I recently remarked: "Appealing to your identity is a reason to *discount* what you say, not a reason to pay extra attention." Why do I believe this?

Well, suppose you want to make people agree with you. You've got two main routes.

1. Offer arguments in favor of your view to change what listeners sincerely think.
2. Make continued disagreement feel uncomfortable so listeners pay you lip service.

Only #1 is epistemically respectable. But it has a major downside: Good arguments are scarce. #2 is epistemically sleazy, but it has a major upside: It is open to everyone, regardless of the merits of their views.

So what rhetorical route should we expect speakers to take? Well, if you've got at least halfway-decent arguments, you'll probably make them – hoping to change your listeners' *minds* as well as their words. In contrast, if your arguments are flimsy, you'll probably play on people's emotions. You won't really convince them, but at least they might *act* convinced.*

What does this have to do with identity? Simple: When someone you disagree with appeals to their identity, it is usually uncomfortable! If I want to discuss the prevalence of sexual abuse among Catholic clergy, and a listener responds, "*As a Catholic*…" they're not-so-subtly telling me, "You better tread lightly, lest you insult my faith!" If I want to discuss the right to burn flags, and a listener responds, "*As an American*…" they're not-so-subtly telling me, "You better tread lightly, lest you insult my country!"   The same goes for all of the standard appeals to identity – religious, national, ethnic, gender, etc. When you invoke them, you are undermining the truth-seeking mission of the conversation – and the reasonable response is to discount what you say.

But can't identity provide extra information? Once in a while, yes. But again, the truth-seeking route is normally to simply *share* your extra information without making identity an issue. In special cases, admittedly, you can't certify your credibility without mentioning your identity. For example: "I've attended Catholic Church for 32 years, and never seen the slightest sign of clerical sexual abuse." Even here, though, truth-seekers will acknowledge their identity *casually* to keep information flowing freely.

In any case, your identity provides far less information than you think. For two reasons:

1. Belonging to a group lets you learn lots of details about the group, but this *depth* comes at the expense of *breadth*. Being Danish teaches you a lot about what Danes are like.

But the more energy you invest in your Danish identity, the less you learn about non-Danes.

2. The more you identify with a group, the worse your myside bias normally becomes. When you invest energy in your Danish identity, you grow more likely to overestimate the wonder of Danes and underestimate Danish shortcomings.

By analogy: Each of us knows more about our own lives than anyone else on Earth. But the more you dwell on your own life history, the less you're likely to know about what life is like for *anyone else*. Furthermore, the fact that you know lots of details about your own life does *not* make you a reliable judge of your own merits and failings. Quite the opposite.

The knowledge that identity provides is cut from the same cloth as self-knowledge. Indeed, it's probably worse, because the social sanctions for personal arrogance are far stronger than the social sanctions for group arrogance. Even your parents and closest friends will roll their eyes if you say, "*I* am the greatest." But among people who share your identity, declaring "*We* are the greatest" might even make you friends.

The "discount appeals to identity" maxim can plainly be abused. An Indian nationalist could selectively use it against Pakistani nationalists – and Pakistani nationalists could return the favor. But the same goes for any de-biasing rule. You can't make the whole world reasonable. But you can still be the change you want to see in the world.

* Needless to say, both claims are only tendencies; people with good arguments occasionally appeal to emotions, and people with bad arguments occasionally make them anyway.