

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

THE IDENTITY TRAP

February 20, 2024

Let's begin by sharing our general reactions to Yascha Mounk's book, The Identity Trap. Was it readable? Enjoyable? Valuable?

The following topics and questions will be used to guide our discussion. Feel free to bring up other matters related to this book that you feel merit our attention.

1. Per Mounk, the identity synthesis is "concerned with the role that identity categories like race, gender, and sexual orientation play in the world" (p. 9). Do you agree with Mounk that these categories are having excessive influence on matters ranging from education to health care? Is this focus on identity needed to overcome historical and ongoing injustices, or is the focus on identity counterproductive in this regard?
2. Chapter 1 traces the identity synthesis to postmodernists like Michel Foucault who were skeptical of "grand narratives," denied the existence of objective truth and universal values, and asserted that modern societies control the thoughts and behaviors of their members through the pervasive influence of powerful "discourses." Your thoughts on postmodernism?
3. In Chapter 3, Mounk discusses the work of Derrick Bell and other critical race theorists who argue that "the apparent progress of the civil rights era turned out to be a function of the racial self-interest of whites" and who "saw American racism as a permanent condition that might shift its nature but would never attenuate" (p. 62). Do you agree?
4. Chapter 5 explains the influence of social media in transforming the role group identities play in the lives of young people, especially among white and highly educated Americans. Have you observed this effect of social media, either in your own life or in the lives of people you know?
5. An influential concept promoted by the identity synthesis and diffused by educational institutions and social media is "white privilege," which refers to "inherent advantages possessed by a white person on the basis of their race in a society characterized by racial inequality and injustice." What about this concept? What are its benefits and limitations?
6. Mounk then describes how the influence of the identity synthesis spread through major institutions, beginning with higher education, then spreading through non-profit organizations, before eventually penetrating large corporations. Have you had any personal experiences that pertain to this development?
7. The growing influence of the identity synthesis was fostered by groupthink and other group dynamics which discourage dissent, discussed in Chapter 7. These dynamics include group polarization, in which deliberations within groups tend to reach conclusions that are more

extreme than those of their individual members. What can be done to encourage dissenters and the endorsement of more moderate positions?

8. Chapter 7 also discusses Ibram Kendi and Robin DiAngelo, whose writings and training sessions have injected the diversity synthesis into the American mainstream. Thus, “according to Kendi, the sole criterion of whether a particular act, person, institution, or public policy is “racist” or “antiracist” is whether it helps to increase or decrease the gap in income (or wealth or some other desirable metric) between white and Black people” (p. 123). Mounk’s summary of DiAngelo: “All white people are racist. And if you disagree, that merely proves how racist you are” (p. 124). Have you read books by these authors or attended training sessions reflecting their views? Your reactions to this work?

9. Part III of the book discusses the flaws of the identity synthesis, beginning with standpoint theory (Chapter 8) which claims that: “Citizens drawn from different groups can never truly come to understand one another. Those who are comparatively privileged should therefor defer to the factual assessments and political demands of those who are comparatively marginalized” (p. 130). Mounk challenges both the epistemological claim of special identity-based knowledge and the demand for deference by the dominant group. What’s your take on standpoint theory?

10. Chapter 9 addresses charges of cultural appropriation, the assertion that groups possess “a form of collective ownership over their cultural products and artifacts” that limits “how people who do not belong to those groups can legitimately make use of them” (p. 130). Mounk challenges the notion of collective ownership on which this concept is based, and argues that we can all benefit from mutual cultural influence. What should be encompassed by the concept of “culture”? When is cultural appropriation acceptable, when not?

11. The identity synthesis also challenges our culture’s commitment to free speech, arguing that minority groups are often exposed to hurtful or bigoted speech, thus the need for a “consequence culture” in which people are held accountable for unpopular statements. Mounk addresses this issue in Chapter 10, arguing against censorship by government or private authorities but also against the “cancel culture” practices of the left. What limitations, if any, should society place on individual speech?

12. Offensive speech often takes the form of “microaggressions,” a now commonplace term that shows up sporadically throughout the book. It refers to indirect, subtle or unintentional discrimination—by statements, actions, or incidents—against members of a marginalized group. What about this concept? In what ways does it promote societal health? In what ways might it be harmful?

13. Chapter 11 discusses “progressive separatism,” the argument that “Social and educational institutions should encourage people to identify themselves by the ethnic, racial, religious, sexual and gender groups to which they belong” on the grounds that having spaces reserved for members of such groups “can play an important role in helping people gain political consciousness and take on persistent injustices” (p. 131). Mounk responds by citing social scientific research on intergroup behavior that favors integration over segregation. What is your view of progressive separatism?

14. A final flaw of the identity synthesis, addressed in Chapter 12, is its argument for identity-sensitive public policy: “To redress persistent socioeconomic inequalities between different communities, the state must favor historically disadvantaged groups” by adopting “identity-sensitive” policies, “like prioritizing members of marginalized ethnic minorities for scarce medical resources, which make the way the state treats people depend on the group to which they belong” (p. 131). Mounk questions the ethics, wisdom, and effectiveness of identity-sensitive public policy. What do you think? For instance, what about affirmative action in the workplace or racial preferences in college admissions?

15. Chapter 13’s discussion of structural racism, defined as “policies and practices that exist throughout a whole society or organization and that result in and support a continued unfair advantage to some people and unfair or harmful treatment of others based on race” (p. 226), points out that advocates of the identity synthesis have argued that this concept should supplant the older concept of individual racism. Doing so would, among other things, “make it literally impossible to be racist to a white person” (p. 227) when they are the structurally dominant group. What about this? How should “racism” be defined? Is American society suffused with structural racism?

16. Also in Chapter 13, Mounk takes up the issue of meritocracy, the claim that individual talent and effort does and should enable the best people to rise to the top. Opposed by some on the grounds that it ignores accidents of birth, luck, and other factors individuals aren’t responsible for, the principle of merit is also opposed by advocates of the identity synthesis on the grounds that racial and other biases prevent members of disadvantaged groups from being successful. Mounk offers a “mend it, don’t end it” defense of meritocracy. What do you think?

17. In opposition to the identity synthesis, Mounk offers a universalistic liberal alternative (Chapters 14 & 15). This liberal response challenges the primacy of group identities as keys to understanding our world; endorses universal values; and promotes human equality, individual freedom, and collective self-determination. Mounk supports his position by citing the historical success of liberal democracies in promoting human flourishing. Is this persuasive?