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Appiah's Way: Blackness, Blood, and the Politics of Liberal Philosophy

Commentary on McPherson and Shelby's "Blackness and Blood"

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1. I admire the achievement of Shelby and McPherson's article, "Blackness and Blood." The authors take seriously, and, in my view, take apart, one of K. Anthony Appiah's recent attempts to debunk the idea of blackness. And in the process they offer a thoughtful reading of African American identity, one that strikes me as substantially correct. (They speak throughout without distinguishing 'black' from 'African American.' I'll follow them in this.)

I speak of the article's achievement instead of its argument because I'm struck by McPherson and Shelby's ability to establish and maintain the discipline of argument. If I'd had to write their essay, it would have quickly collapsed into questions like this: Isn't anyone else tired of this stuff? How long will liberal thinkers analyze social identity, ethno-racial identity in particular, by appeal to overly specific and restrictive models of essentialist racial nationalism? More precisely: how long will Appiah devote his considerable,

undeniable talents to ham-handed arguments about race? And why do we still care when he does it? (In these lectures, as elsewhere, Appiah displays his intellectual agility, his confident tone, and effortless breadth. But.)

These are almost questions about Appiah, and I'm meant to be talking about Shelby and McPherson. So let me be clear: I'm wondering about the preconditions for approaching Appiah's argument in the way that Shelby and McPherson do. I wonder why they don't ask the questions I ask, or stumble over the troubling connections that Appiah's piece invites me to make.

So I'll say a bit more about these questions and connections. My hope is that McPherson and Shelby will indicate how and whether my concerns relate to their project. Perhaps they'll tell me that we should talk about these things in the bar at the conference hotel, that my worries are in any case beyond the scope of the actual work of philosophic disputation. If so, I'd take that as reason to worry about the state of philosophic disputation.

2. First, the summaries. The pertinent bits of Appiah's argument go like this: 1) a social identity can block the pursuit of a successful life, especially when it is incoherent—"when the norms associated with it are mutually undermining" (283). 2) When an identity is incoherent, the state ought to be able to intervene in the interpretive processes by means of which people produce and embrace the identity. Refer to this intervention as 'soul-making.' 3) African American identity is one example of an incoherent identity, because 4) it pretends to rely on a procedure for sorting people into races—the one-drop rule—that is never strictly applied, and, moreover, that *couldn't* be strictly applied, on pain of getting in the way of racial uplift. That is, 5) race-thinking has failed black folks again, because the one-drop rule isn't fine-grained enough, and allows people into the race that uplift strategists, race men and women, can't allow into the fold. Think about it: 6) biological racialism is false, not least because the walls of race, as Du Bois once put it, are not clear and straight: because we are all 'exasperatingly intermingled.' So the people we think of as

white tend with surprising frequency to have black 'blood' somewhere in their past. If we really apply the one-drop rule—as we should, since what rational people do is consistently apply the norms that they purport to follow—then today's white people would be tomorrow's blacks. And then affirmative action policies *really* wouldn't work. So 7) African American identity is incoherent: the taxonomic norms that define African American identity undermine the ethical and political norms that also define the identity. QED.

Shelby and McPherson respond to this argument by bracketing, along with much else, the question of whether the state is in general the right vehicle for soul-making. They point out that soul-making is likely the last thing historically subjugated peoples would want their states to do. But instead of pursuing that point further, they focus on the claim that African American identity is incoherent. (They take up this claim in a way that seems to me to develop some of the same intuitions and ideas that have animated my own work (Taylor 2003). So consider yourself warned: I'm not a neutral arbiter.)

They complicate Appiah's incoherence claim by pointing out that there are many ways of thinking about black identity. Blackness, they say, may have racial, ethnic, cultural, national, and political 'modes.' The racial mode focuses on considerations of appearance and ancestry, while the political mode involves shared commitments to, very broadly speaking, the project of racial uplift. (Shelby and McPherson decline to discuss the other modes, out of a reasonable fear that the discussion would grow unwieldy.) Appiah, on their view, divorces the racial mode of black identity from the political mode that usually gives it content, and wrongly assumes that black solidarity is entirely, or essentially, racial, in his derogatory sense of 'racial.'

"Blackness and Blood" demonstrates this connection, call it the priority of the political to the racial, by taking seriously the consequences of Appiah's argument and using it to motivate two thought experiments. The first one goes like this: If a strict interpretation of the one-drop rule leads to the problems that Appiah foresees, then ask yourself what behaviour would follow. Clearly, black folk would reject

literalism about hypodescent before they'd abandon the political norms that define blackness. Therefore the commitment to hypodescent is subordinate to the demands of political blackness—that is, to blackness as a device for responding to white supremacy, rather than as a piece of social ontology. The second experiment goes like this: ask yourself how black literalists about hypodescent would have to live. They'd have to establish a meticulous regime of social surveillance—more rigorous than the storied brown bag and blue vein tests ever were—to police the boundaries of the race and the backgrounds of its members. But no such surveillance regime exists. Therefore racial identity, construed in strict biological terms, is not the primary force behind in-group loyalty and solidarity among African Americans.

As I say, this response to Appiah's argument from incoherence strikes me as absolutely correct. It is also, I might add, pretty obvious. I say that not to minimize the achievement of "Blackness." Far from it: as we know, the burden of the best philosophy is often to find words for things so obvious that they typically escape notice altogether. My point is that Shelby and McPherson do a fine job at a task that one might think we'd no longer need performed. People, black people, have been trying to explain why black folk do, and should, embrace racial identities since the dawn of modernity. And some version of the most reasonable answer—call this pragmatic racialism, or radical constructionism, or, if you must, strategic essentialism—has been available for almost two centuries now. (I'm thinking of the nineteenth century debates chronicled in Eddie Glaude's important book, *Exodus!*) Over the last few years, many people have given this view explicitly philosophical articulation, often in direct response to Appiah. (Shelby and McPherson indicate this in their footnotes.) And still we get the same stock moves from mainstream philosophy and liberalism—and, once more, from Appiah: black folk are crazy (that is, irrational), identity-talk entails vulgar nationalism, race-talk presupposes simplistic biologism.

Now do you see why I nearly began by asking whether anyone else was tired of this stuff?

3. One of the quirks of African American and Africana philosophy is that its practitioners spend a lot of their time trying to square the circle. We work in a discipline that is overwhelmingly white, both demographically and ideologically. Or, often enough, we work adjacent to the discipline, in those departments and programs that will let us undertake our projects without insinuating that those projects aren't *really* philosophy. And we spend that time trying to stretch and contort the conceptual resources provided to us by our mostly white discipline until they fit the conditions of African and New World African life.

Don't get me wrong: both we and our conceptual resources are the better for this stretching. I'm not about to exchange Rawls for Egyptian Mtu Ntr and write *A Theory of Ma'at*. My point is simply that philosophical reflection on the Africana lifeworld is an act of translation. It requires someone with an ear, as it were, for the right cadences. Which is to say: I wonder if Appiah has the ear for this work.

What I mean: Of all the race-related phenomena to analyze and mark for eradication, why focus on the potentially liberatory identities that the subaltern have created in the struggle for justice? Why continually ignore the *different forms* of nationalism and racialism that these struggles have created and invoked?

Similarly: Aren't there plenty of ways to motivate political blackness by examining the mutually undermining commitments of incoherent *white* identities? This is, in a way, the lesson of W.E.B. DuBois's entire later career, as exemplified in chapter 6 of *Dusk of Dawn*. (Appiah knows this book, but stops reading it after Du Bois stops offering what seem to be definitions of race. Of 'race'.)

Being tone-deaf in the way I'm suggesting means being indifferent to certain of the exigencies and achievements of new world African life. And that means creating work that calls forth at least three meta-philosophical questions. First: is there something about philosophy that makes Appiah's approach to race theory an occupational hazard? (The beginnings of an answer to this may lie in an unjustly neglected book called *Time in the Ditch*.) Second: is there something about intellectual work in the US and in the

West that makes it possible for Appiah to keep mining the same veins, even when most of the people who do race theory and such things—apart from Walter Benn Michaels—find these mines barren? (The beginning of an answer to this is *yes*.) And third: is there a point at which Africana philosophers should pay less attention to what Appiah says than to his ability to say it, as it were, so loudly? That is: when do we stop rebutting the same old arguments and start diagnosing Appiah's centrality, his ability to narrate and negotiate the encounter between Africana thought and mainstream philosophy, between race theory and liberal opinion?

I mean to be discussing the social-structural and discursive conditions of possibility for race theorists like Appiah. More than this, I mean to be inviting Shelby and McPherson into commenting on their own relation to and stance on these conditions.

4. "Blackness and Blood" offers clear, subtle, and persuasive arguments against the latest incarnation of Appiah's racial eliminativism. But it doesn't explain, or even ask, why we need still more of these arguments. And it gives no hint of the likely fate of this 'debate' with Appiah. While Africana philosophers and race theorists will read this exchange with some interest, most outsiders will continue to see Appiah as the authority in both areas. And most will follow the example of Appiah's essays and scarcely acknowledge that there are arguments on the other side.

In a way, there is no reason for "Blackness" to take up these issues. It engages a set of arguments in the traditional manner, and with consummate skill. But we can use this engagement as a stepping-stone to a broader inquiry, an inquiry into the prospects for liberal race theory and analytic Africana philosophy, an inquiry that restores political philosophy to its political context. Shelby and McPherson do so nicely with the arguments, I'm eager to hear their thoughts on the conditions that make the arguments necessary.

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