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### Social Ontologies of Race

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

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In "Blackness and Blood: Interpreting African American Identity," Lionel K. McPherson and Tommie Shelby challenge an argument Kwame Anthony Appiah makes in his 2001 Tanner Lectures on Human Values, "The State and the Shaping of Identity." Appiah's central question in these lectures concerns whether the state has a possible role in regulating social identities (based on gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, etc.) given their importance in shaping the course, and eventual success, of our lives. Appiah sees benefits in adopting a First-Amendment sort of approach that prohibits the state from making particular social identities official and interfering with their free exercise. Nevertheless, he identifies three circumstances where he believes direct state intervention in "soul-making"—the deliberate shaping of identities—is required: "in the education of the young, in sustaining social identities, and in saving us from our own rational incapacities" (275). It is the third circumstance, "our pervasive irrationalities," that

grounds Appiah's call for "state soul-making" where African-American identity is concerned. The one-drop rule is the traditional basis for identifying oneself and others as African-American. Shared African-American identity provides the basis for "black nationalist" norms of behaviour—for example, race-based solidarity and support for affirmative action programs that improve the lot of African-Americans. The problem, as Appiah sees it, is that these practices are inconsistent with "the fact that very many—perhaps even a majority—of the Americans who are descended from African slaves 'look white,' are treated as white, and identify as such" (284). The dearth of rational criteria for determining who counts as African-American jeopardises the ability of those for whom racial identity is central to live successful lives. It is in such cases, where incoherent individual identities give rise to "norms [that] pull in different directions" (298), that Appiah believes government intervention is indicated.

How might the liberal state intervene in view of this waywardness, to remake souls and redirect lives? The provision of factual information regarding the incoherence of the relevant social identity would be an initial step. Appiah alleges that such attempts have been made already, "to no obvious effect" (283). By this he means not so much the extent of "passing for white" associated with the one-drop rule but the failure of even educated Americans to incorporate the long-established fact that racial classifications are biologically incoherent: "Talk of the 'social construction of race' has become standard in the last few years, but this is a slogan, not the expression of a coherent understanding" (287). People who believe that there are expert definitions of race which sanction their own use of racial designations, a Putnamian "linguistic division of labour," are mistaken: "Many of these experts [biologists, physical anthropologists, medical people] do not use the concept; those that do, employ it in ways that do not conform to much racial commonsense; and many of the experts that employ it are not life scientists but social scientists" (288).<sup>1</sup> Appiah suggests that it is time to contemplate modes of state intervention beyond education—perhaps the modification of racial classification practices by government agencies. As McPherson and Shelby point out, there is precedent for initiatives of this sort:

California's defeated Proposition 54 sought to proscribe the collection of "racial" demographic data altogether (173).

McPherson and Shelby argue that "African American" is not an incoherent social identity, as Appiah claims. According to McPherson and Shelby, most African-Americans interpret the one-drop rule not literally, in a manner that would "fix reference," but metaphorically, as "a trope that stands in for a set of genealogical and somatic characteristics that has social meaning in America" (182). Like Appiah, McPherson and Shelby recognise the definitional inadequacies of the one-drop rule: "the one-drop criterion by itself cannot define who is black, since it includes the undefined category 'black' as a central component of its necessary and sufficient conditions" (182).<sup>2</sup> On their account, this racial aspect of African-American identity is only one of five constitutive dimensions—the others are ethnic, national, cultural, and political. Consequently, racial identity is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the solidarity associated with African-American nationalism. More important is political identity, which those who on the one-drop rule unwittingly "pass for white" lack.

If infinite regress and circularity are taken to be the pressing problems, it seems that the one-drop rule could be made more precise—for instance, by stipulating that persons living in the U.S. are "black" or "African-American" if they have a minimum of one ancestor brought involuntarily from Africa to what is now the U.S. during the period from 1619 when the first Africans arrived in Virginia, through 1808 when the slave trade was banned, and until illegal shipments ceased once slavery was outlawed in 1865 by the Thirteenth Amendment. One can imagine certain purposes for which such a definition could provide at least a starting place for discussion—concerning how reparations might be paid, perhaps. Of course, its utility would be quite limited. As Appiah points out, this version of the one-drop rule would make for many "white" African-Americans, and payment of reparations to Americans whose families have identified and been identified as white for many generations seems unfair. The rule also ignores that immigrants from the Caribbean and Central or South America may share a history of enslavement, and, along with more recent immigrants from Africa, be

recipients of anti-black racism. My point here is that the legitimacy of a particular racial classification, like any other kind of classification, needs to be evaluated with regard to its purposes. It is possible to come up with a definition of racial identity that fulfills logical and empirical criteria and yet fails practically—we might say the classification is inapt or even inept without being irrational or incoherent.

Concerning Appiah's argument that the persistence of race thinking in even educated Americans finds no justification among experts in biology, physical anthropology, or medicine, or in biology itself, McPherson and Shelby agree that there is a "prevalence of confusion among African Americans about the semantic content of the concept of race, that is, about the necessary and sufficient conditions for a subgroup of humanity to constitute a 'racial' group, biologically understood" (186-7). They admit that the continental origins and phenotypic traits that provide the racial dimension of African-American identity on their account are "arbitrary and misleading from the standpoint of the biological sciences" (179). Notwithstanding this agreement amongst Appiah, McPherson, and Shelby, the failure of educated Americans to incorporate facts about the biological incoherence of race is understandable, given that the presumed social constructionist consensus seems to be unravelling somewhat these days.

There has been wide coverage in the press of recent claims by population geneticists that racial and ethnic self-identification can be used to classify participants in biomedical research because these social labels serve as adequate proxies for biologically significant group differences. Several research groups have performed multi-locus genotyping on large numbers of individuals from across the globe and found that clusters derived computationally on the basis of allelic similarities at variable loci across the genome correlate with the geographical origins and ethnic identities of the sampled individuals. This development may seem surprising because over the past 50 years it is population geneticists who have been racial biology's most vocal opponents. It can best be understood by recognising that the evolutionary synthesis of the 1930s and 1940s and the rise of population genetics redefined but did not eliminate

race as a biological concept—what biologists of that period urged was that population thinking replace typological thinking about race (Gannett 2001). Typological thinkers posit absolute, fixed, and essential racial differences in the phenotypic traits of individuals; population thinkers emphasise that it is not individuals but entire populations, or gene pools, that are racially distinct, and that these genetic differences are relative, dynamic, and statistically distributed. This shift from typological to population thinking anticipates the recent clustering results: even if at each locus of the genome within-group differences far exceed between-group differences, across many loci, these small statistical differences accumulate.<sup>3</sup> And to the extent that ancestral ties and geographical origins contribute to both spatial and temporal distributions of DNA variability and social constructions of race and ethnicity, the correlations found in these studies are not surprising.

The lesson in this is *not* what has been proclaimed by newspaper headlines—that our common-sense conceptions of race are not social constructs but have biological validity after all (Wade 2002).<sup>4</sup> The point I wish to emphasise is that biologists are not themselves essentialists about race and ethnicity—nor are they essentialists about species and populations. Among analytic philosophers, philosophers of biology do not tend to share the essentialist approach to natural kinds favoured by philosophers of language, who are governed perhaps by a desire for definitional clarity through the delineation of individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for the application of terms. Many biologists and philosophers of biology conceive of species and populations as ontological individuals constituted on the basis of relations (reproductive, genealogical, or competitive) among the organisms which comprise them. Philosophers of race who are committed essentialists about natural kinds face an inconsistency when they assert that there are biological populations but no biological races, for there is no guarantee that evolutionary processes will yield genetic or phenotypic properties capable of distinguishing each and every organism belonging to one population from each and every organism belonging to another.

Further desiderata in the philosophy of language become implicated in arguments against the social reality of race. The reality necessary for word to attach to world on a referential account of meaning, or for object to fall under a description on an ideational account of meaning, is considered to be biological or physical, not social, since it is assumed to be external to our minds and discourse. Naomi Zack (1999) appeals to John Searle's account of social construction (defended in his 1995 *The Construction of Social Reality*) which holds that social facts are constituted in particular social contexts through the mediation of language when a new status or function becomes assigned to some physical object (or already-existing social construction that is instantiated ultimately by a physical fact). Zack argues that there are no socially constructed races because there are no pre-existing (biological) racial differences, no "intrinsic facts" about race, upon which to tether social meanings. Banks and twenty-dollar bills do better on Searle's account, for who doubts that these constructed objects, shorn of their social meanings, would devolve into hunks of concrete and pieces of paper. But this seems to miss something.

As Ian Hacking (1999) points out, social constructionist accounts are interesting to us because, through these, we come to realise that what we have taken to be natural or inevitable is actually the contingent product of culture, and could have been otherwise. We need ways of understanding how racial differences are *invented within discourse* and *constructed as biologically meaningful*, as natural and inevitable, in the furtherance of social, political, and economic ends. "Race" may be irrational from the point of view of conceptual analysis—the ideal of white purity even more so than the one-drop rule—but it is rational enough in its service of these ends. The same vagueness that Appiah regards as unacceptable and McPherson and Shelby consider as furnishing the flexibility necessary for the fulfillment of political aims attains coherence enough for politicians to manipulate an America still divided by race, from George H. W. Bush's inflammatory Willie Horton ads, to the cynical display of visibly "diverse" faces on the GOP convention stage, to John Kerry's ridiculous duck-hunting getup.

Such political machinations would be ineffective were race not to possess salience as a social category of some sort. While Appiah, McPherson, and Shelby agree that racial identification finds no justification in biology, that race is a “socially constructed” and not biologically real category, they disagree about what this entails sociologically. According to McPherson and Shelby, even widespread conceptual confusion about biology need not lead to an incoherent social identity. They contend that social identity doesn’t depend on being “committed biological essentialists about race” (188), and that race as a biological natural kind is not the only race concept with “social currency” (178). I agree with them on this. In theorising about race as a social category, we might take a page from the pluralism endorsed by a number of philosophers of biology. Biological group concepts are variably understood to denote natural kinds, classes or sets of individuals, and concrete individuals. Similarly, we could welcome multiple social ontologies of race, and recognise these as appropriate for different purposes. This might bridge some differences between Appiah and McPherson and Shelby.

In *On Social Facts*, Margaret Gilbert argues that social groups or collectivities exist in their own right as ontological wholes, and are not simply aggregates or sets of individuals. This is because, in belonging to a social group, individuals are “components of a plural subject” (234). “Plural subjecthood” arises when people intentionally join forces in a “we” who share “in some action, belief, attitude, or other such attribute” by contributing their individual wills to a “pool of wills” (153). Along these lines, races may be conceived as a kind of social group, rather than as a social kind of person. In *There Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack*, Paul Gilroy characterises races as “political collectivities” (149), and race as an “open political category” (39). Whatever content the category comes to contain will be determined within specific contexts of struggle. Ideas about race combine in diverse ways with ideas of nation, homogeneity, biology, culture, political ideology, class, gender, age, etc. in different social formations, but also variably within a given social formation. Gilroy’s construal emphasises that race formation is a dynamic and contingent process and makes visible the work that is

required to institute and maintain racial divisions in the isolation, accentuation, and essentialisation of characteristics such as physical traits, DNA sequences, customs, history, or ancestry.

Michael Root (2000) and Ronald Sundstrom (2002) defend a social kind ontology of race. Social kinds, no less than natural kinds, are embedded in a causal order and provide the basis for scientific generalisations (though local and historical) which predict and explain social phenomena. The forces that create and maintain races arise out of various social practices: from above, people are classified into races by social institutions; from below, people act in ways that are guided by their conceptions of themselves as members of racial groups; and from the side, race-specific social norms and rules are instituted and enforced. For Root and Sundstrom, *coherence* distinguishes “real” kinds—whether natural or social—from “merely nominal” kinds. On their account, racial kinds do not exist simply because societal institutions classify people racially, for people are classified in many ways. The more people’s actions and interactions are shaped by race-specific conceptions of self and others, the greater the coherence of the category, that is, the greater the number of properties likely to be shared by members of the kind. Today, in the U.S., there is a greater likelihood that someone who is racially designated as ‘African-American’ or ‘Native American’ will be less affluent, less healthy, and less well educated than someone who is racially designated as ‘Caucasian.’ Race is a “cluster concept”: while there are no essential properties shared by each and every member of a racial group, various social forces result in a statistical clustering of properties that promotes a “family resemblance” among members of a group.

This suggests the suitability of a social kind ontology for the purposes of sociological research into racial differences in educational attainment, income, health, etc. Root’s and Sundstrom’s account of race as a social kind departs from the reductionism and essentialism of the Kripke-Putnam approach to natural kinds to permit an understanding of such differences as arising from racist and racist societal structures rather than any properties or propensities of race inherent in individuals. An apt

classification scheme would capture racial divisions as these have been promulgated by the racist/ racialist society, and ask subjects to self-classify according to how they believe themselves to be perceived and treated by others rather than by the racial identities they choose for themselves. Conceived in this way, races are more like economic classes, or in biology, predator-prey or parasite-host composites, than the chemical kinds like gold or water favoured by Kripke and Putnam.

But there are complications. In the case of class, people undifferentiated in their inherent characteristics come to take on a determinate role in the capitalist economy when they sell their labour. Racist societies sort out people on the basis of alleged inherent characteristics at the outset, and then assign race-specific functional roles. The system is perpetuated by socialising people into race-classifiers, trained to see race in others and find race in themselves. Where race-markings are not apparent, superficially displayed on skins or faces, people are socialised to look more closely, to discern effects of race's mixtures, to discover race in family genealogy or imprinted on DNA markers. The integral role racial classification plays in facilitating and sustaining racism and racialism raises cause for concern regarding institutionalised forms of racial classification, whether carried out by sociologists, biomedical researchers, or the federal government. The distinction Root and Sundstrom make between real and merely nominal social kinds might be drawn in another way that differentiates between racial kinds of individuals and sets of racially designated individuals so to discourage tendencies to raise the ontological stakes by displacing race from racialising societal structures onto racialised bodies and minds.

A social group ontology seems more appropriate than a social kind or set ontology for the sociological study of race formation. When races are conceived as "plural subjects" or "political collectivities," racial identities come to be founded in a person's commitment to the joint projects and beliefs of a social group, and this involves conscious choices about what to believe and how to act. This process is quite distinct from racial identification that is generated by an ontology of races as social kinds where a person's attention is directed inwards

to "truths of race" imprinted on the body or transmitted genealogically, to what one *is* and not what one *wants*. A social group ontology of race permits people to refuse or change, and to have indeterminate or multiple, racial identities. This is analogous to conceiving populations as ontological individuals in evolutionary biology: below the species level, these groups are rarely discrete, often overlapping, and vary in cohesiveness because they are constituted by relations among organisms which occur by degree and pass in and out of existence (Gannett 2003).

A social group ontology of race facilitates an understanding of ways in which racist and racialist structures are resisted as well as consolidated. Such structures reflect the designs of actual people, not absent architects, and not people singly, as the methodological individualist would have it, but united in social groups. Racial bonds permit a pooling of individual wills that protects and furthers collective interests. People who choose to affiliate with others on the basis of race, for whatever reason, sustain racism. People who choose to affiliate with others on the basis of race in ways that perpetuate the social, economic, and political privilege they share as a racial group sustain racism. A social group ontology of race, by emphasising ways in which racial groups are dynamically constituted and reconstituted within specific contexts of political struggle, erases the distinction often drawn between the theoretical question whether races *do* exist and the practical question whether races *should* exist. The conditions for the continued existence of race lie in choices we face everyday, in our interactions with strangers, intimates, friends, neighbours, family, and co-workers, and as citizens. Controversies about the social reality of race are as much about politics as metaphysics. Black nationalism pays the price of fostering racism at the same time as it resists white racism. Appiah weighs this cost differently than do McPherson and Shelby.

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title from “the social ontology of race” to “social ontologies of race.” I think this is the right move, but realise that a great deal more thinking needs to be done about social causation. Conversations with Michael Patterson Brown about social group identity helped my attempts to reflect on these difficult issues develop in more meaningful ways.

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<sup>1</sup> Along these lines, Appiah argues that while population geneticists may use the term ‘race,’ they do so in reference to populations that are reproductively isolated, and African-Americans, as other “social subgroups” in the U.S., are not such units (1996, 73). In fact, geneticists do treat African-Americans as a breeding population (Gannett 2004).

<sup>2</sup> Zack (1999) makes a similar argument about the lack of a noncircular definition of ‘black’ on the one-drop rule.

<sup>3</sup> As Theodosius Dobzhansky, architect of the evolutionary synthesis and founder of population genetics, wrote in 1950: [T]he probability that an individual taken from a given population will carry a given gene may be either greater or smaller than it would be for an individual from another population. [...] By and large, the more traits examined in an individual, [...] the more precisely can be inferred the part of the world from which these individuals come (116-7).

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<sup>4</sup> Instead, we need to reject the social-biological dichotomy in its metaphysical and epistemological guises alike, not just for race but group concepts in human genetics generally. Social identities and social institutions influence who mates with whom and therefore how bits of DNA come to be distributed across space and time, that is, “biological reality.” Phenotypic traits and genealogical relations, as they become imbued with cultural meanings, contribute to the construction of social identities and therefore “social reality.” Populations become constituted as objects of genetics research in ways that satisfy the aims of particular research contexts—there is no authoritative taxonomy of groups that fulfills all biological or biomedical purposes, theoretical or practical. For arguments defending these claims, see Gannett (2003, 2004, forthcoming), and Gannett and Griesemer (2004).