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Blackness and Philosophy

Reply to Gannett, Outlaw, Taylor, and Velazco y Trianosky

Lionel K. McPherson

Department of Philosophy
Tufts University
Medford, USA
lionel.mcpherson@tufts.edu

Tommie Shelby

Department of African and African American Studies
Harvard University
Cambridge, USA
tshelby@fas.harvard.edu

We want to thank the editors of SGRP for starting this excellent forum and for selecting our article “Blackness and Blood” for its first instalment. We also would like to thank the commentators for their thoughtful and provocative discussion of our article. Our primary aim there is to refute Kwame Anthony Appiah’s claim (made in his 2002 Tanner Lectures and repeated in his more recent *The Ethics of Identity*, Chapter 5) that African American social identity is incoherent—that its norms for racial classification and racial solidarity are, when taken together, self-undermining. We are gratified that at least three of our commentators accept

our main conclusion, even if they have criticisms of how we go about establishing it.

Lisa Gannett agrees with us that African American social identity does not, *contra* Appiah, depend on an underlying commitment to biological essentialism about race. But she claims that we share with Appiah the view that race is not a biologically real category but a “socially constructed” one. This is not our view (nor do we believe it is Appiah’s). We would disavow the contrast, for we cannot quite make sense of it. That African Americans characteristically share certain heritable, physical features has of course a biological explanation; acknowledging this is compatible with recognizing that the concept of race as a biological natural kind is a pseudo-scientific, social artifact (178-9).

In any case, nothing in our argument about African American social identity turns on a contrast between race as socially constructed and race as biologically real. Gannett introduces the contrast in order to call attention to recent claims by population geneticists that racial self-identification usefully correlates with “biologically significant group differences.” This supports, she believes, non-essentialist thinking in terms of “racially” distinct populations, where genetic differences across them are “relative, dynamic, and statistically distributed.” Gannett suggests that hence we do not need a social constructionist conception of race that is opposed to the population thinking of many biologists and philosophers of biology. But this ontological point, while interesting, is orthogonal to our argument. We make no attempt to ground our interpretation of blackness in ontology, that is, in philosophical views about what entities should be regarded as real. To adapt a familiar phrase from Rawls, our defense of the coherence of African American identity is political, not metaphysical.

However, we would question how the idea of race is being used in population genetics. “Race” is commonly thought to refer to a distinct, biological group whose members satisfy certain necessary and sufficient conditions for membership. If instead “race” is used to designate a distinct, genetic population whose members might not all share distinguishing properties, there must be some other basis for determining who belongs to that population. Simply

looking to “ancestral ties and geographical origins” might not be enough. What population do black Americans belong to? Most have some non-African ancestry, and some have ancestry that is mostly non-African. If black Americans as a group are nonetheless assigned to the sub-Saharan African population, then the one-drop rule is in fact being presupposed. Gannett emphasizes that she is not drawing the conclusion from population genetics that common-sense conceptions of race have essentialist, biological validity after all. Yet if she thinks population genetics can help to ground commonly accepted beliefs about who is African American, then this conclusion becomes hard to avoid.

The concept of race, whether on an essentialist or a non-essentialist understanding, has typically been deployed to sort individual persons. Gannett claims that this is not how it is used in population genetics, even though the concept of “biological populations” purportedly is equivalent to that of “biological races.” Why, then, do population thinkers speak of human “races,” given this fundamental difference in the two uses of the term? A possible response is that since many people self-identify by race and this tracks ancestry fairly well, race talk continues to be a practical albeit imprecise way of communicating useful information to the broader public about the geographical origins of individuals. Yet we have serious doubts. As Appiah points out, there are many persons of African descent who do not self-identify as black, either because they are unaware of their African ancestry or because they are “passing” as white; self-identified blacks know that they have African ancestors, though some do not know that they also have European and/or Native American ancestors. A growing number of persons self-identify as mixed race or as members of multiple races, if they take themselves to belong to any race. Thus we submit that population thinkers should stop using the terms “race” and “population” interchangeably (Appiah makes a similar claim in *Color Conscious*, 73). If population geneticists want to communicate unambiguous information to the broader public about biological differences between individual persons in relation to their geographical origins, it would be better to do so without relying on racial self-identification, which in this context is likely to lead only to

confusion and misunderstanding. The social schemes of classification by which individuals sort themselves and each other into racial groups on the basis of patterns of reproduction and descent can be maddeningly odd.

We see merit in Gannett’s idea of a social-group ontology of race. Yet we do not see how the version of black nationalism that we defend “pays the price of fostering racialism.” Indeed, we suggest that in a post-racial utopia, the racial mode of blackness would give way to other modes (for example, ethnic or cultural). We believe that, presently, racialism in the United States is fostered fundamentally by anti-black racism.

Gregory Velazco y Trianosky insists that the one-drop rule is not simply a criterion for racially classifying blacks but an idea that suggests that “blackness,” any amount of it, pollutes both the persons who possess it and the politics that include black citizens. He also claims that the criteria we propose for classifying individuals as racially black in the United States—viz., that “blacks” include (1) those persons with relatively recent, sub-Saharan African ancestry who manifest the physical features associated with persons of that region of the world, and (2) those persons who lack the relevant physical features but are known to have African ancestors who fit the somatic profile—is “logically compatible” with essentialist conceptions of blackness. We don’t deny either claim. We maintain only that most blacks rely on a weak version of the one-drop rule—the second conjunct of the criteria—to disambiguate racial classification in cases where a person does not “look black” but has African ancestors who do (or did).

Black Americans can consistently use the rule to draw the boundaries of political allegiance without endorsing the idea of racial pollution or accepting their subordinate social status as justified. No doubt many racists believe that blackness taints and that blacks merit their inferior social status. Because blacks unify to resist anti-black racism, they draw the boundaries of political blackness in the same way that racists do. To draw these boundaries differently would frustrate the goal of African American political solidarity. But this hardly shows that most blacks are mired in self-defeating forms of racial essentialism.

At times Trianosky suggests that because the one-drop rule includes an ancestry or lineage component, it must imply that some type of racial essence is *transmitted*, through reproduction, from one generation to the next. We don't see why this implication holds. Prior to the invention of racialism, genealogical criteria were used to determine kinship in many traditional societies around the world. The racial mode of blackness can function analogously, invoking ancestry to mark the boundaries of group membership but without supposing that all members of the group share an underlying genetic make-up that explains both their common physical appearance and their behavioral dispositions.

It is not our position, however, that there are no essentialist tendencies among U.S. blacks. In fact, we say the opposite (186-7). Nor do we deny that some elements of African American identity may be distorted by romantic racialism. Rather, our point is that the prevailing criteria for assigning membership in the black race are not so burdened or distorted by residual essentialist notions as to impede blacks in their attempt to maintain political solidarity and thereby to resist racism (179). We also hold that black nationalism, in its broadest sense, is compatible with various understandings of black identity, from crude biologically based conceptions to sophisticated anti-essentialist ones (183). In our view it doesn't much matter how blacks conceptualize "racial difference," provided they share a way of determining who is black for purposes of political solidarity. African Americans do not need to agree on the precise biological significance of the inter-subjective criteria they employ in this determination; nor do they agree (a point we'll return to when we discuss Outlaw's commentary).

Trianosky invites us to explain just how we conceive the proper relationship between the racial mode of blackness and the political mode, and he worries that our treatment of this relation may unwittingly re-introduce essentialist notions into our social-political conception of African American identity. We've addressed the latter concern, so let us now take up the former. We maintain that the relationship between these two modes of blackness is that the racial mode specifies a necessary qualification (*viz.*, being black according to the prevailing social criteria) for receiving the benefits—the

group loyalty, trust, and special concern—that political solidarity generally entails; and the political mode determines what basic commitments a black person typically must accept and abide by in order to remain a member in good standing. Our view is that one such necessary commitment is that a black person must be willing to acknowledge publicly that he or she is black when the occasion calls for this. Failure to do so puts one outside the boundaries of political blackness.

This is not essentialism, and it would be a mistake to interpret it as such. All forms of group solidarity have corresponding tests for loyalty and trustworthiness. If you're a member of a union that has collectively decided to strike and you fail to stop working, you will be regarded by your fellow workers as no longer one of the collective "we," in the thick sense of the word. Collective action depends on group members being able to distinguish (potential) allies from those who can't be trusted to cover your back. Opportunistically "passing" is reasonably regarded as a sign of untrustworthiness among blacks, which is why those persons who are capable of passing as white are required to acknowledge publicly that they are black if they expect to be recognized as full-fledged members of the solidarity group. This has nothing to do with believing that blackness is somehow literally carried in the blood.

According to Trianosky, a fully adequate social-political conception of African American identity should include a historically informed, critical interrogation of black self-understanding, the function of which would be to filter out the remaining essentialism embedded within it. We don't disagree with this suggestion. We do want to make clear, though, that it was not our intention in "Blackness and Blood" to articulate a complete conception of black political solidarity. Our goal was more modest: to demonstrate that black adherence to the one-drop rule, when properly understood, does not undermine group solidarity.

Lucius Outlaw proposes to read us as "race men"—"men concerned with supporting and advancing efforts to defend the peoplehood of folks of African descent in the United States of America who identify themselves, and are identified by others, as such"—and wonders whether we would characterize ourselves as such. We are indeed "race

men,” at least in a suitably broad sense of the term: we, as black folk, support the efforts of African Americans to seek the full liberties and equality that justice requires, and we regard black political solidarity as a practical and legitimate way to advance this cause. Moreover, “Blackness and Blood” was motivated, at least in part, by our identification as politically black.

Yet our article also springs from the traditional philosopher’s impulse to seek a clear understanding of, and hopefully a solution to, a perplexing and longstanding mystery—in this case, the meaning of “blackness.” Outlaw interprets our pragmatic approach to understanding African American identity and its relation to the norms of black solidarity to entail that philosophers, *qua* philosophers, have no standing or authority to judge the rationality of such identities and norms. Thus he claims that we fail to follow through on our own injunction when we rely on a philosophical strategy—the thought experiment—to ground our interpretation of African American identity. But this is not how we understand our intervention. Our objection is not to philosophers weighing in on the coherence of social identities or even to suggesting possible reforms of them. Rather, our objection is to the *state* playing this soul-making role: state officials, even those acting in good faith, are likely to make serious mistakes in this domain, with far-reaching practical consequences for the lives of its citizens.

The philosophical lesson we want to emphasize is that permitting the state to engage in soul-making is perilous, for while it may be a relatively trivial task to determine whether a given set of propositions or norms fails to satisfy the “rules of reason,” this is not sufficient to demonstrate that a social identity is incoherent. The *content* of each relevant proposition or norm that constitutes the social identity must be fully and accurately interpreted. Such identities, particularly those of marginalized or oppressed groups, are often contested. Surely African American identity is contested, by the in-group, the out-group, and neutral observers. Our goal is not to establish that our interpretation is the “true” one—the one, say, that empirical evidence will (or could) vindicate as most accurate to the lived experience of African Americans. Rather, we take our two thought

experiments to reveal that a more charitable and plausible interpretation of African American identity than the one Appiah offers is available. On this interpretation, the identity is not incoherent and thus not in need of state reform.

Now Outlaw thinks that the only way to settle an interpretive dispute about a social identity is to ask those persons whose identity is in question. Only they can confirm that an interpretation is “an accurate account of their sense of themselves.” But this methodological principle is not sound. Members of a social group can disagree about the best interpretation of their own identity, and they often have a self-understanding that is distorted by entrenched illusions, stabilized by self-deception, bad faith, or false consciousness, based on half-truths and empirical falsehoods, or structured by social forces they do not fully grasp. Philosophers certainly don’t have the last word on the meaning of social identities, but neither do the social actors who purport to live in accordance with them. In this way, we do not deny that a social identity can be incoherent, that the agents who bear it might not recognize this fact, or that philosophical tools might aid in diagnosing such incoherence. The general problem that Appiah identifies is a real one, even if his prime example is flawed. We just don’t accept soul-making as an appropriate solution.

Paul Taylor agrees with our response to Appiah’s argument, but he regards this response as now too obvious to warrant being stated. Taylor takes it as well established that blacks are not irrational in embracing their racial identity, such that philosophers needn’t spend their time re-stating again the arguments for this conclusion. However, we regard Appiah as here raising a new challenge: Can African American identity be sustained without practical incoherence, and if not, is it legitimate for a liberal democratic state to intervene to correct the incoherence? This type of challenge does not come solely from philosophers. Many ordinary black citizens, particularly those who have biracial parentage, also have qualms about the one-drop rule and the norms of black solidarity. Some, like proponents of “colorblindness” and activists in the multiracial movement, are even inclined to use state power to reform blackness (for example, by altering the U.S. census categories or the official procedures

through which racial assignment is determined). For a lot of people, including some who are now generally regarded as black, the coherence of blackness as an identity is not so obvious. They need to be convinced of this. In “Blackness and Blood” we argue in an effort to persuade skeptics that they shouldn’t be skeptical about the rationality of embracing an African American identity. Thus, for practical reasons as well as philosophical ones, we don’t regard this kind of work as superfluous or worse.

For Taylor, Appiah’s focus on criticizing blackness rather than criticizing white supremacy and racial injustice is puzzling. We won’t presume to speak for Appiah, though we do believe that the two projects go hand in hand. If we are correct about the connections between black self-understanding and the ever-changing circumstances of racial politics in the United States, then progress or setbacks in the collective struggle for racial justice should be accompanied by a critical rethinking of the foundations of political blackness. Indeed, the black nation within a nation—if we may be permitted a black nationalist trope—could be faced with a critical mass of its members contemplating secession from blackness. Engaging arguments like Appiah’s could help blacks to formulate an appropriate response to such developments.

Taylor ends his discussion by raising several “meta-philosophical” questions. We don’t have the space to defend our views on all these questions, but we do want to close by briefly positioning ourselves with respect to them. Many philosophers working on Africana thought make use of methods of argument that are similar to those Appiah uses yet often arrive at quite different conclusions. We ourselves have tried to meet Appiah’s arguments within the rough parameters of analytic philosophy, and we take ourselves, with all due modesty, to have succeeded. We think we have shown that it is possible to work productively within this idiom without concluding that blacks are irrational in holding on to their racial identity or that black nationalism is an absurd doctrine. This effort did not force us into philosophical contortions, for the conceptual resources of mainstream Anglophone philosophy were more than adequate to the task. Hence we don’t share Taylor’s general

skepticism toward this approach to Africana thought, and in taking this stance we are not devaluing other philosophical approaches to these issues.

To be sure, some of the conclusions Appiah arrives at are congenial to the liberal sensibilities of many mainstream philosophers in the United States. And this might partially account for why Appiah’s arguments are taken more seriously and given a broader hearing than those of more nationalist-minded or radical philosophers. But part of the reason that Appiah is widely regarded as a leading philosopher on problems of race is that he is one of the most talented philosophers working on these questions. Although we sometimes disagree with him, we have always found his writings on race to be among the most sophisticated and challenging in the philosophical literature, and this largely explains why we chose to engage his arguments in our article.

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