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## Race, Family, and Obligation

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**RACE, FAMILY, AND  
OBLIGATION**

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# **Race, Family, and Obligation**

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**University of Wisconsin**

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## RACE, FAMILY, AND OBLIGATION

One version of black community self-help calls upon middle-class members of the black community, namely those who are better off financially, have better than average educations, etc., to help those members of the community who are less fortunate. And the reason that middle-class blacks ought to provide this assistance, so the claim goes, is because they have a moral obligation to do so.

This obligation on the part of middle-class blacks is a consequence of their having membership in the same racial family as other blacks who are less fortunate. So, much the same way we feel obligated to help members of our family who are less fortunate, middle-class blacks should feel obligated to help the less fortunate members of their racial family. And a feeling of obligation based on race-family membership has long been a part of the black community. Further, if this feeling of a race-family obligation helps to facilitate the betterment of the black community, this notion of a race-family obligation might turn out to be morally justified. It is not difficult to see, then,

that this notion of a race-family obligation has a certain appeal.

On the other hand, one might object to this version of a black self-help morality by claiming that the notion of a racial family is inconsistent with our intuitions about the kind of group we take to be a family. For example, races of people are much larger than the groups we normally like to think of as families, and, even if we were willing to grant a kind of family status to such a large group, we would not want to have a moral obligation like the one we associate with our families to apply to such a group. Hence, there appears to be a tension between the familial obligation model of black community self-help and our intuitions about families.

My aim in this paper is to ease the tension between the familial obligation model of black community self-help and our intuitions about families by sketching a plausible conception of family that can account for race-families, inclusive of a moral obligation between its members, and remain consistent with our intuitions about what families are.

I begin by examining two popular conceptions of family, both of which I argue seem problematic in light of the two criteria I bring to bear upon them; namely, the ability to sustain a moral obligation between family members within its conception of family, and the ability to account for race-families. While the criterion of being able to account for race-families is clearly controversial, I think the requirement of a moral obligation between family members is generally accepted as a necessary part of the family concept. In fact, it seems in no small part due to the general acceptance of the moral obligation criterion that the race-family conception remains so contentious. That is, since a race-family conception cannot sustain a moral obligation between its members, races of people therefore cannot be considered families.

## I

The first conception of family to be considered is centered around the notion of causality. There is a sense in which invoking causality with respect to families seems intuitively appealing. Since one way in which we define families includes the existence of offspring, it is

not uncommon for young couples to be asked: "When are you two going to start a family?" This question seems to imply that without the existence of children there is no family. If a young couple has not yet caused the existence of at least one other human being, there seems to be a sense in which the couple alone does not constitute a family. So, at least at first glance, invoking the notion of causality with respect to family appears reasonable.

A view of family that appeals to the notion of causality has been suggested by Anthony Appiah. Appiah thinks that a "rational defense of the family ought to appeal to the causal responsibility of the biological parent and the common life of the domestic unit".<sup>1</sup> Thus, on what I shall call the causal view, the family consists of what we commonly take to be the immediate or nuclear family: the parent, or parents, together with their biological offspring and this group's life together. Appiah thinks that since natural parents are causally responsible for their offspring, this causal relationship provides the basis for moral claims.<sup>2</sup> Thus, on the causal view, a family is defined by two criteria: (1) the existence of a biological



parent or parents and one or more children, and (2) this group's common life together as a domestic unit.

It seems clear, then, that the causal view does not allow for race-families and hence does not satisfy our second criterion, since such families would lack the necessary causal relation between parent and child, as well as the common life of a domestic unit. Further, there seems to be at least one problem with the causal view with respect to its ability to sustain a moral obligation between family members, and consequently with its ability to satisfy our first criterion.

One problem with the causal view is that it seems open to regress. For example, if one argues that due to my having caused the existence of my daughter, that it is therefore possible for moral claims to arise from this relationship, then can we not also say that moral claims might arise from the relationship between my mother and my daughter? After all, if it were not for my mother, my daughter certainly would not exist. Granted, the causal link is not a direct one, however, it is a necessary one. It is a necessary condition of my daughter's

existence for my mother to have first caused my existence. It might seem to follow, therefore, that if moral importance is based upon causation, then moral importance can be placed on the relationship between my mother and my daughter as well as on the relationship between my daughter and myself. Hence, if moral claims can arise from the parent/child relationship, it seems that they can also arise from the grandparent/grandchild relationship as well.

But then what of the great-grandparents? Certainly without the causal relationship between my grandmother and my mother the causal relationship between my daughter and I could never have taken place. Hence the causal view seems to take us far beyond the relatively small domestic unit consisting only of biological parents and their offspring, and forces us to recognize all prior causal relationships as having moral obligations attached to them. The causal view, then, appears to be open to regress.

Of course the defender of the causal view might object to the claim that her view is open to regress, saying that, since there exists only a

finite number of causal agents, the regress is not infinite, and therefore not vicious. However, even if we grant that the regress is not a vicious one, it still remains that by establishing moral obligations beyond those derived from the parent/child relationship, the family that results is extended beyond the limits set by the causal view's criteria, namely that we must include as members of the family individuals who may not be a part of the domestic unit. Thus, if the causal view is to meet the regress objection its conception of family must be reformulated.

So it seems that the causal view requires additional justification in order to satisfy even the first of the two criteria we are considering. As it stands, the causal view seems to have difficulty in sustaining a moral obligation between family members within its conception of the family.

Another objection to the causal view's conception of family is that current-day domestic situations like heterosexual or homosexual adults with adopted children, are excluded from the family concept. It is not surprising, therefore, that gay and feminist

factions have criticized the causal view and have instead offered as families groups that, according to Appiah, "could (and sometimes do) occupy the same sort of role"<sup>3</sup> as what we have described above as immediate or nuclear families. These critics of the nuclear family hold that once the broad outlines of the archaeology of the family concept have been revealed, we are forced to reconsider the nuclear family as the only legitimate conception of family. Appiah thinks that if these critics are correct, then their view of the family must be that of a group which provides "a mode of organization of life and feeling that subserves certain positive functions".<sup>4</sup> I take it that this mode of organization, in fulfilling the "same sort of role" as the nuclear family, can be viewed as a family based in part upon the second of the two criteria set forth in the causal view. That is, a group can be considered a family in part because it maintains the "common life of the domestic unit". Clearly, then, if we accept this notion of family based upon the idea that if a group shares a common life and certain feelings, presumably of an intimate nature, and this combination of cohabitation and feelings "subserves certain positive functions", then we

may be able to consider this group a family without the necessary condition of biological causality that is the basis of the causal view. Thus, under what I shall call the common life view, a family is defined by a single criterion, namely, that: (1) the group in question share a common life and feelings which together subserve certain positive functions.

The common life view, then, allows us to include groups, with or without children, that were formerly denied consideration as families on the causal view. But while the broadening of the family conception that results in moving from the causal view to the common life view may seem initially appealing, on this view any group, regardless of their biological relations or causal connectedness, can, given the appropriate lifestyle and feelings, be considered a family. Given the potential for fairly large family groups, the family as conceived under the common life view may allow for families that are inconsistent with our intuitions about family. Of course these groups would not be as large as an entire race of people. And since it hardly seems plausible to think that an entire race of people could share a common life together, even

if we could argue that as a group it subserves a positive function, the notion of race-families is excluded from the common life conception of family. Nevertheless, these large groups conceived as families under the common life view may have difficulty in sustaining a moral obligation between family members within its conception of the family.

Consider the crew of an aircraft carrier. Since there seems to be no temporal component to the common life view of a family, i.e. the group of people so construed need not have had a common life together for any particular length of time, and the feelings associated with the group need not necessarily be of a maternal, paternal or sexual nature, and further, that the functions which this group subserves need only be "positive",<sup>5</sup> it therefore seems conceivable that the crew of an aircraft carrier could be construed as a family under the common life conception. The crew might spend several years together enduring long periods of time at sea. Hence, these individuals are clearly sharing a common life; so they are in this sense a "domestic unit". Intimate feelings are likely to result since it is not unreasonable to expect that

such feelings would develop under arduous at-sea conditions. Also, these feelings, and the bonds which arise from them, can easily be seen as subserving a positive function in the lives of the crew-members - if nothing else these feelings aid the crew-members in enduring their sea-going existence. Therefore, it seems that under the common life view we might regard the crew of an aircraft carrier as a family.

But notice how broad our conception of family has become. Given the approximate size of an aircraft carrier crew, in the neighborhood of five thousand people including the air wing (i.e. the aircraft crew, pilots, maintenance personnel, etc.), we would end up with a very large family indeed. Further, and more importantly, how do we sustain moral obligations between the members of this family? Do we really want our familial obligations to be this far-reaching? What happens when people transfer to and from the ship, do our familial obligations to any given individual remain even after they have left the ship? If so, then any member of the aircraft carrier crew with whom we spent time onboard would have to be considered a family member,

and thus we would have some moral obligation to those individuals.

So it seems that more explanation is required from the common life view if we are to make sense of cases like the aircraft carrier example vis-a-vis the kind of group we take to be a family. I think that the family conception I outline below provides a description of the kind of group we take to be a family, and meets the criteria we set out to satisfy.

## II

I take it as a fact of human nature that people recognize resemblances between themselves and other people. It would seem ludicrous for someone to say of themselves that they stood unique in the world and had no resemblance to anyone else in any way. The fact that one considers oneself a person in itself implies some sort of resemblance between themselves and others. Thus, that a person recognizes resemblances between themselves and other people seems entirely reasonable.



In outlining our resemblances, I think we can divide them into three types: biological, psychological, and historical.<sup>6</sup> Under biological resemblances we might include such things as appearance and lineage. Appearance seems best illustrated in the case of identical twins. It could never be the case that either of the twins would not recognize a resemblance with respect to appearance between themselves and their sibling. Recognition of one's lineage seems a bit more complex. For example, recognition of a resemblance of lineage between myself and my biological mother is fairly straight forward, in fact it may be assisted in some cases by our resemblance in appearance as well. However, recognizing a resemblance of lineage with someone born two hundred years ago may not come quite so easily. Only after discovering the possibility of a resemblance between myself and this other person is bolstered, perhaps by research, discussion with other persons who I already recognize as resembling me with respect to lineage, and perhaps by viewing pictures of that person, thus invoking again the resemblance of appearance to supplement the notion of lineal resemblance, do I come to recognize this

resemblance of lineage between myself and my ancestor.

Under the second type of resemblance, psychological, we might consider such things as character and political ideology. When I recognize that some other person and myself are both very thrifty individuals, for example, I recognize that this other person is like me in this particular respect, we share a particular character trait. Likewise, someone may hold the same or similar political views that I do, and consequently I recognize that with respect to our political views, we resemble one another.

The third type of resemblance is historical. We might include as historical resemblances shared life experiences, whether shared by individuals together or separately. For example, another person and I may have grown up together through childhood and into adulthood; again this might best be illustrated by a sibling, but it could also be a next-door neighbor. Alternatively, it might be someone with whom I shared a particular life tragedy, say for example that myself and another person both lost a parent at a very early age. In any case, its

seems hard to imagine not recognizing these types of resemblances to other people with respect to a given shared life experience.

It might be objected at this point that, although the aforementioned resemblances are recognizable, we might have difficulty in accommodating an idea like culture which seems to transcend the boundaries of the particular resemblance categories we have mentioned. However, culture, I think, is simply a combination of resemblances. On the one hand there are the particular traits that are said to be associated with certain cultures, for example a psychological resemblance with respect to religious beliefs. On the other hand, there are certain historical resemblances such as common life experiences. For example, I may have gone through certain "rights of passage" from childhood to adulthood in a particular culture. Thus, it seems to be a combination of resemblances that make up a culture, and we recognize this particular combination of resemblances in ourselves vis-a-vis other people who we likewise recognize as having this particular combination of resemblances.

The types of resemblances discussed give us a broad sketch of how we view resemblances between ourselves and others. However, it should be noted that the degree to which we recognize these resemblances varies. For example, I may have a very high degree of recognition for the biological resemblances between myself and my father, but may recognize some psychological resemblance between myself and a stranger to only a very small degree. Thus when we speak of resemblances among people, we are talking about the recognition, in various respects and to differing degrees, of likenesses between them. Since it seems clear that we recognize resemblances between ourselves and others, even if to varying degrees, it is reasonable, I think, to suppose that we also recognize resemblances between ourselves and groups of others as well. Given that when we speak of families we are speaking of groups of people, it does not seem unreasonable to begin an account of families based upon the resemblances outlined above.

Consider the two conceptions of family that we have examined. Whether we view families from a causal or a common life perspective, we must

admit of some resemblance between the members of a family. If we look at families causally, then there is necessarily a biological resemblance. If we look at them as a group sharing a common life, then there is necessarily a historical resemblance. So, under either of these views we must admit of a sense in which families are groups of people who resemble one another. But once we begin to view families as groups of people who resemble one another, the question arises as to what types of resemblances obtain in a family such that we are able to distinguish between groups that are families and those that are not. Further, we need to explain what role, if any, these resemblances play in establishing familial obligation.

I should like to begin by suggesting that the language of family is fairly broad. By definition a family might be a collection or union of things which have a common source or similar features, e.g., a family of languages. Although this clearly seems inappropriate with respect to how we think of human families, this broad interpretation of family nevertheless confirms the notion that families are groups whose members share resemblances. Given this broad

interpretation we might be inclined, once we restrict our conception of family to human beings, to consider all of humankind as a family. But even though this sense of family is consistent with at least one way we think of families, i.e. the family of humankind, without any obligation between the members of this group, the notion of all of humankind as a family seems vacuous.

We can, I think, base our conception of the human family on two criteria, the fulfillment of which will establish membership in the family, namely: (1) the biological resemblances between members of the human species, and (2) the psychological resemblance of a sense of obligation between members of the human species. The first criterion should be accepted without much fear of objection. Surely the very basis for distinguishing one species from another is found by examining biological characteristics. The second criterion, however, leads us to an important point in our discussion, the point at which we must suggest a way in which obligations between members of groups might be established. If we can provide a plausible account of obligation in the case of the human

family, we might then be able to make use of this account in trying to suggest a conception of racial families.

Kurt Baier suggests what seems to be a highly plausible account of moral obligation. On Baier's view, obligations are ascribed to persons by way of directives, that is, "the content of speech acts capable of guiding those to whom it applies ... to action."<sup>7</sup> Moral directives are those directives which, "other things being equal, it would be (morally) wrong for the addressee not to follow", that is, "the person to whom they apply (morally) ought to follow."<sup>8</sup> For example:

[i]f it is morally wrong to pass by when an injured motorist calls out for help, then in such a situation one has a moral obligation to give such help. Putting it more generally, we can say that whenever a wrong-claim indicates a task to someone, then it constitutes a moral directive and being the addressee of such a moral directive amounts to having a moral obligation.<sup>9</sup>

On Baier's view, then

obligations arise when and only when a morally binding directive gives rise ... to a task, whether merely self-disciplinary or also productive ... [what transforms an

assignment into a task in the case of moral obligations] is either the temptation of the addressee to do what the directive forbids ... or the effort needed to perform the productive task which the directive enjoins (repair damage done).<sup>10</sup>

An obligation claim has moral binding force, and hence is morally binding, if

‘It is not solely the addressee’s business to decide whether or not to follow the directive’ ... [that is, such directives] concern themselves with issues and problems whose solution is not solely the agent’s business but also that of others who have a legitimate concern about whether or not the person to whom such a directive applies follows it or not.<sup>11</sup>

Thus the claim "‘Do x’ has moral binding force", is construed by Baier as implying that "Do x" "is a directive in regard to which there ought to be a person whose job it is to ensure that all those [who are] addressees of the directive .. follow it."<sup>12</sup>

Hence, if we take to be morally wrong the directive "All humans kill each other", which addresses all members of the species, then this constitutes a moral directive that establishes a



morally binding obligation between all members of the species to refrain from killing each other.

If we grant the plausibility of Baier's account of obligation, we can see how a moral obligation (in this case the obligation to refrain from killing) between all members of the human species might be established. This moral obligation, then, along with the aforementioned biological resemblances, satisfies the two criteria that we set forth for distinguishing the family of humankind from families as such. It would no doubt be objected, of course, that even if we grant this somewhat obvious distinction between families of "things" and families of persons, this broad conception of the family of humankind clearly does not capture the notion of family we seek. What is required, then, are some further distinguishing features that will enable us to characterize as families those groups that we take to be families, but which the causal and common life views failed to adequately account for. Let us call these groups intimate families.<sup>13</sup>

In order to distinguish our intimate family from the larger family of humans to which we all belong, let us consider two additional criteria.

Building on the criteria for the human family, we can state the further criterion for the intimate family as: (3) a set of resemblances, usually biological, and almost always psychological and historical, such that an individual represents a member of one or more of those groups which we take to be fundamental to the successful continuation of society, wherein there is a moral obligation between the individual and the other group members. This third criterion allows us to distinguish between the group/family of humans and smaller groups which seem consistent with how we commonly think of families, e.g., as a group consisting of a mother, a father, and one or more children. In effect, intimate families are subgroups, or subfamilies if you will, of the human family.

We can see at this point that, unlike the causal view, the intimate family concept as thus far described seems to easily allow for gay couples, adopted children, in-laws, etc. In contrast to the causal view, on what I call the resemblance view, a group of individuals need not have a causal biological link to be considered a legitimate family. Further, given the requirement that the group be fundamental to the

successful continuation of society, we seem to avoid having to allow as families groups larger than our intuitions will allow.

As to the moral obligation between members of the intimate family, we might again employ Baier's account of moral obligation. For example, if we hold that the directive "All members of those groups which we take to be fundamental to the successful continuation of society, that is, those groups which are paramount to the training and maturation of members of the human species, work against each other to the detriment of society" is morally wrong, then this constitutes a moral directive that establishes a morally binding obligation between the members of those groups to work with each other for the good of society.

The second criterion to be added is: (4) a family disposition (FD) between the members of the group. What I call a FD arises from the strong sense of emotional and moral identification that we have with our intimate families. This identification with our intimate families arises, I think, as a result of the resemblances which obtain between family

members. Though we share the requisite human family resemblances with some stranger, e.g., the resemblances which we have with our biological mother, who loved and nurtured us and who has been a part of our lives since birth, are such that a very intense emotional and moral identification obtains between my mother and I which is not even conceivable with respect to the stranger. Hence, I am likely to be disposed differently towards my mother than I would be towards a stranger.

When a FD is present, a moral prioritization occurs with respect to those individuals amongst whom the FD obtains. This moral prioritization makes our obligation towards our intimate family special in a very real, although perhaps not always morally justifiable, sense. Hence, a special obligation obtains between intimate family members which does not obtain in the case of others. Consequently, we give moral priority to members of our intimate family over others.<sup>14</sup> So if we suppose that, all other things being equal, I must choose between helping a stranger and helping my mother, I would, because of my FD towards her, choose to help my mother rather than the stranger.<sup>15</sup>

I would, however, like to address one concern with respect to priority which I think will help clarify my preference for the term "intimate" over the term "immediate" in characterizing what we intuitively take to be families. As was noted above, the causal view runs into difficulty once individuals who do not have a causal biological relation to each other are considered for membership in the immediate family. Similarly, on the common life account, individuals whom we do not live with are excluded from family membership, and hence from coming under any familial obligation. This difficulty is avoided, however, in the case of the intimate family on the resemblance account.

Suppose I live in New York and I have a cousin who lives in Brazil. Because we lack the requisite causal relation and we do not live together, she is excluded from my immediate family on both the causal and common life accounts. Despite having only spent a few summers together (perhaps on the beaches of Rio), my cousin and I consider ourselves quite close. In fact, we share a great deal of each other's lives by way of telephone conversations and written correspondence. It seems, then, that

I might consider my cousin part of my immediate family, even though she fails to be "immediate" either in the sense of a causal relation or in the sense of physical proximity. On the resemblance account, however, my cousin can easily be considered a member of my intimate family along with my biological mother, my stepfather, my half-brother, and my paternal uncle. My cousin comes under the weight of the familial obligation as outlined in the third criterion for intimate families, and further, I have the strong emotional and moral identification with her which gives rise to a feeling of a special obligation or FD towards her.

I should point out that not everyone, for whatever reason, will want to include such individuals as my cousin as part of my intimate family. They might argue that the FD can, or at least should, only arise with respect to certain individuals. This difficulty can be explained, I think, by drawing a distinction between what I call an internal family disposition (IFD) and an external family disposition (EFD). An IFD exists when two or more members of a family group acknowledge a mutual sense of moral

prioritization between themselves, and thus consider themselves members of an intimate family. Hence, my cousin and I each consider the other as part of our intimate family. In contrast, the objector lacks an EFD. That is, the objector fails to endorse the acknowledgement of a mutual sense of moral prioritization between my cousin and I. The objector, therefore, rejects the idea that a feeling of a special obligation or FD ought to exist in the case of my cousin and I. So, both the objector and I can consider my cousin in Brazil as somehow "family", perhaps in the sense that we are blood relations,<sup>16</sup> but the objector holds the view that my cousin and I are not intimate family, while my cousin and I feel and act as members of an intimate family.

Having thus sketched the resemblance view of family, we can summarize this account as follows. Intimate families are groups in which: (1) the members of the group share in the biological resemblances of the human species, (2) the members of the group share the psychological resemblance of a sense of moral obligation between members of the human species, (3) the members of the group share a

set of resemblances, usually biological, and almost always psychological and historical, such that each member is representative of one or more of those groups which we take to be fundamental to the successful continuation of society, wherein there is a moral obligation between the group members, and (4) the members of the group share a family disposition (FD).

The resemblance view of family, then, provides us with a conception of family that meets the first of the two criteria we set out to satisfy, that is, it gives us an account of family that is able to sustain a moral obligation between family members. Further, by using resemblance criteria in distinguishing families as particular kinds of social groups, and by suggesting an explanation of the way in which the feeling of moral prioritization between family members occurs, the resemblance account satisfies our intuitions about the kind of group that families are. What remains, therefore, is an attempt to satisfy the second criterion, that is, to show the resemblance account's ability to provide a plausible conception of race-families.



### III

As might be expected, the conception of a race-family on the resemblance view turns on the resemblances between family members. We begin, naturally, with the biological resemblance of species and the psychological resemblance of obligation to fellow members of the species that distinguishes the human family from families as such. In order to make the move from the human family conception to a race-family conception, we must add to these resemblances other resemblances which apply to the concept of racial commonality in order to distinguish race-families from the human family. Further, in order to suggest that race-families are analogous to intimate families, we must generate a moral obligation and a family disposition (FD) between the members in order to create the kind of moral prioritization between members of race-families that we saw in our discussion of intimate families.

Take any definition of race that you like, inevitably we find that there is some notion of resemblance underlying it. For example, take

W.E.B. DuBois' definition of race. DuBois defines race as

a vast family of human beings, generally of common blood and language, always of common history, traditions and impulses, who are both voluntarily and involuntarily striving together for the accomplishment of certain more or less vividly conceived ideals of life.<sup>17</sup>

Notice that in calling for a vast "family" of human beings, there seems to be a sense in which DuBois embraces the notion of race-families. Further, his characterization of this family seems to be a set of resemblances. First, DuBois calls for common blood between members of the race. If I take DuBois' use of the term "common blood" correctly, he means a biological resemblance of lineage. Second, DuBois calls for common language and impulses, and the striving for particular ideals; which all seem to be psychological resemblances. Lastly, DuBois holds that the members of a race share a common history and tradition, both of which are historical resemblances. Hence, on DuBois' view, we should think of groups of people who share in the resemblances he outlines as a race;

moreover, given his characterization of races as a "vast family", perhaps as a race-family.

A simpler, and I think more straight-forward, definition of race, of the black race in particular, has been proposed by Bernard Boxill. Boxill thinks that "insofar as black people are a race, they are people who either themselves look black - that is, have a certain kind of physical appearance - or are, at least in part, descended from such a group of people."<sup>18</sup> We can see that on Boxill's view, a race consists solely of the biological resemblances of appearance and lineage.

So, if the versions of race given by DuBois and Boxill are illustrative of how we conceive of particular groups of people that we call races, then however we decide to distinguish between racial groups, the distinguishing characteristics we invoke will be reducible to various kinds of resemblances. I do not think, however, that any moral obligation, apart from any which may apply to all members of the human family, can be derived from these resemblances alone. Consequently, we must provide some additional resemblance criteria in order to gain a sufficient

basis for establishing a moral obligation and FD between members of a race.

Given the history of slavery, lynching and disenfranchisement, i.e. oppression, associated with individuals taken to be members of the black race, it seems clear that blacks share certain resemblances which are of a particularly intense nature. Even in the present day, the oppression of blacks, which perpetuates their political and economic unempowerment, remains. As Justice Thurgood Marshall has noted

It is unnecessary in 20th century America to have individual Negroes demonstrate that they have been victims of racial discrimination; the racism of our society has been so pervasive that none, regardless of wealth or position, has managed to escape its impact. The experience of Negroes in America has been different in kind, not just in degree, from that of other ethnic groups. It is not merely the history of slavery alone but also that a whole people were marked as inferior by the law. And that mark has endured.<sup>19</sup>

If Mr. Justice Marshall is correct in his assessment of blacks, and I think that few would

deny that he is, and we take the oppression of groups in general to be morally wrong, then it follows that the oppression of blacks as a group is morally wrong. Drawing again on our discussion of moral obligation, we might suggest that, just as the moral directive "Help those in need" gives rise to an obligation to help an injured motorist who is stranded and asks for help, the moral directive "Stop the oppression of blacks" gives rise to an obligation to help in mitigating, if not eliminating, the tyranny which the black race continues to endure. Hence it would appear that blacks have moral justification for acting in concert with each other as a means of ending the oppression that they all share.

But it seems that blacks have recognized this obligation all along. According to William Van Deburg, this shared oppression amongst blacks has long been a catalyst for group action. On Van Deburg's account of black history

Before the Civil War, for example, black Americans worked to develop an empowering sense of group identity by distinguishing us from them - often to startling effect. As they adjusted to the reality of oppression, free blacks

determined that it would be wise to "combine and closely attend to their own particular interest". Conscious of their shared experiences and cultural traits [i.e. their shared resemblances], they formed fraternal, mutual aid, and cooperative organizations to promote black solidarity and aid in racial survival.<sup>20</sup>

Further, group action by blacks in response to oppression and the obligation felt by blacks towards each other, exists even today. David Wilkins, in his discussion of an obligation on the part of black professionals to the black community at large, tells us that

For those blacks whose membership in the black community is central to their identity, recognizing the existence of such an obligation promotes both a healthy self-love and a firm foundation for helping other blacks who are truly in need. In a country filled with negative images of black identity and millions of poor blacks, a theory that reinforces a positive sense of black self-worth and that encourages concrete action to help blacks in need carries real moral weight.<sup>21</sup>

We should note two things at this point. First, the moral directive to help blacks, and hence the

morally binding obligation which it entails, is not exclusive to blacks. The obligation to end the oppression of blacks falls on all those who are in a position to reduce or eliminate that oppression. If it is morally wrong to allow the oppression of blacks to continue, then the moral obligation to stop that oppression applies to all moral agents. Given that whites are moral agents, and further that as a group whites have historically been the oppressors of blacks, whites are clearly addressees of the moral directive, and hence the morally binding obligation, to help blacks. Hence, the task of helping blacks out of their oppressed state falls firmly upon whites as well as blacks.

Second, not only do the resemblances which obtain between members of the black race establish them as an oppressed group, and hence bring them under the moral directive to stop the oppression of groups, because of the strong emotional and moral identification that results from this shared oppression, these resemblances are of sufficient intensity to give rise to a family disposition (FD) between members of the black race as well.

If this is the case, then just as in the case of our intimate family, the resemblances which obtain between the members of the black race give rise to a feeling of moral prioritization between its members. Of course, this is not to say that this sense of prioritization, that is, the FD which arises between members of the black race, is equal in intensity, necessarily, to the FD that obtains between intimate family members. Clearly, the resemblances which obtain in the intimate family, if only by virtue of their very intimate nature, seem likely to prompt a higher level of concern for intimate family members than do the resemblances associated with the shared oppression that comes with membership in the black race. However, the FD generated between members of the black race is nevertheless analogous to that of the intimate family in that it yields a sense of moral priority with respect to the care of members of the race-family over nonmembers. Hence, on the resemblance view of family, we can, I think, see a sense in which the race-family conception becomes plausible. On the resemblance account we are able to explain both what families are and what race-families are in a way that is



consistent with our intuitions and which sustains a moral obligation between family members.

However, one might object to the moral prioritization between members of the black race by claiming that such a view would be self-defeating for blacks. Universalization of the notion of giving moral priority to members of one's own race would prove disadvantageous to the black community. Bill Lawson, e.g., while admitting that the notion of blacks as a family has "deep psychological roots",<sup>22</sup> nevertheless challenges the race-family concept because he thinks that

it is not a moral position that black Americans want to universalize. Blacks do not want whites to be totally committed to ... looking out for one's racial family first. Most blacks want to be treated as moral and social equals. The appeal to race-as-family morality would undermine the basic political and moral principles that have been used to get blacks what civil liberties they have .... Blacks lack sufficient political and economic power in America to push such a moral position as a universal moral principle. Races can still be considered families, but we do not want that concept to be the basis of moral obligation.<sup>23</sup>

Lawson appears to be making two distinct claims here. His first claim seems to be that embracing the race-family conception is self-defeating for black Americans since it "would undermine the basic political and moral principles that have been used to get blacks what civil liberties they have". His second claim seems to be that blacks do not have the political and economic power to universally implement a race-family morality. Since I have nothing to say in opposition to Lawson's second claim, as it seems clearly to be the case, I shall only take issue with his first claim.

Of course having no objection to the second of Lawson's claims is not to say that I do not find it of importance. In fact, I think that the second claim, given its consistency with the aforementioned oppression of blacks, adds to the force of my rejoinder to Lawson's first claim. It is precisely because blacks lack sufficient political and economic power in America that they ought to embrace the race-family conception. It is precisely because of the oppression of blacks that blacks need the help which the solidarity of the race-family provides.

As to the universalization of the race-family concept, we should first consider that in working together as a family, blacks are simply following the "example of Euro-American groups ([e.g.] the Irish) [by] promot[ing] their own organizational activity"; though blacks are not countenancing the notion that "their exclusive effort necessarily separate[s] them from the concerns of the 'whole human family'".<sup>24</sup> I think that the problem Lawson envisions is the result of his conception of moral prioritization with respect to race-family obligations. Lawson seems to think that the universalization of the race-family conception would have a negative effect on the accomplishments towards social equality that blacks have made thus far because whites, now invoking a race-family obligation of their own, would place each other morally first, and thereby relegate blacks to a situation perhaps worse than their current one. However, even though we tend to consider choosing an intimate family member over a stranger when circumstances are such that choosing the intimate family member may seem inappropriate, or even morally unjustified, we do not always choose the family member. Thus, the priority we place on family members is not absolute, and

therefore the moral prioritization among race-family members does not necessarily entail a total commitment to considering one's own race-family members first. So although blacks may feel a special obligation (FD) towards fellow members of the black race-family, the prioritization of race-family members over others is not necessarily absolute.

An almost trivial, although illustrative, example of the dynamic nature of familial moral prioritization might arise, again in the case of a choice between my mother and a stranger. Clearly, if my mother and the stranger have both been in an automobile accident, and after being the first to arrive on the scene I discover that my mother has broken her leg and the stranger is suffering from arterial bleeding, even though my tendency may be to help my mother first, I will no doubt stop the stranger's bleeding before I consider helping my mother. Thus, "family first" is not always the case.

Perhaps a more realistic example of the type of prioritization which I think is implicit in the resemblance account of race-families, and the kind of prioritization that I think has already

been demonstrated by other groups, might begin by supposing that an intimate family member is in dire financial need after just opening a new business. Everything else being equal, I may take it as an obligation to patronize my family member's new business over all other businesses (of the same type) as a means of helping my family member. Thus I have given the family member priority for no other reason than because of my feeling of obligation and FD towards him or her. Similarly, and as has been done historically by other groups, one may, for no other reason than that of a feeling of obligation and FD towards a member of the black community, show a sense of priority with respect to members of the black race-family by patronizing a black-owned business rather than a white-owned one in an effort to enhance the social and economic condition of the black race. Further, given our discussion above, I think that an argument could be made suggesting that this particular manifestation of the obligation and FD is at least morally acceptable. In addition, if we take seriously the obligation to stop the oppression of blacks, then in this case whites too should consider patronizing black owned businesses. Not that whites should patronize

black owned businesses out of a FD arising from the intense resemblances shared among blacks, but because of the moral directive, and hence the morally binding obligation, to help blacks out of their oppressed state that applies to all those who are in a position to provide such help.

Consider what is perhaps the classic statement of a universal morality, Kant's categorical imperative: "Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law."<sup>25</sup> Clearly, assistance to blacks (or for that matter to any oppressed group) whether by blacks themselves because of a race-family obligation, or by others to whom the moral directive which is the basis for that obligation applies, is sufficient grounds for a maxim which we can will as a universal law. The only question that remains, I think, is whether or not the black middle-class will opt to ignore its obligation to less fortunate members of the black race-family and segregate itself from those members of the black community who are in need of their assistance, or whether they will step forward and meet that obligation.

## NOTES

1. Appiah, p. 15. Although Appiah here uses the singular "parent", since both parents are causally responsible for any offspring, I take him to mean the causal responsibility of both parents, with the domestic unit consisting of either one parent and a child, or a man, a woman and a child.
2. Appiah, p. 16 n. 4.
3. Appiah, p. 15.
4. Appiah, p. 15.
5. Since Appiah does not specify what functions constitute positive functions, I shall assume that any function which does not appear to be negative qualifies as positive.
6. No claim of a resemblance ontology is being made herein.
7. Baier, p. 210.
8. Baier, p. 211, emphasis in the original.

- 9. Baier, p. 212, emphasis in the original.
- 10. Baier, p. 213, emphasis in the original.
- 11. Baier, p. 223, emphasis in the original.

Baier argues that: "since the behavior of a person who yields to the temptation to follow self-interest and to ignore moral directives will, ipso facto, detrimentally affect another person's interests, the question of whether or not he follows moral directives is ipso facto not solely his business but someone else's as well, namely, the business of the person whose interest would be adversely affected. And since such behavior, unless prevented, would adversely affect the climate of life, whether or not people follow moral directives, is everyone's business (225)."

- 12. Baier, p. 224, emphasis in the original.

13. I shall use the term "intimate" rather than "immediate" in discussing our intuitive understanding of family, since, as we shall see below, there are problems with regard to how we prioritize our obligations such that those who are "immediate" family may not have the same moral standing as others with whom we



are intimate.

14. There may be a concern here with respect to the is/ought problem. As Lawrence Becker points out, "[c]ommon sense morality gives more weight to the interests of intimates than to strangers, but moral theory has had difficulty justifying that priority" (Becker, p. 177; Becker addresses what he calls the priority problem at pp. 216-26, invoking the notion of reciprocity as a means of solving it). Although it seems that there might be many instances in which we could morally justify a priority to intimate family members, there will no doubt be instances where priority is given to our intimate family members even when it is not justified morally. I am here attempting only to suggest how it is that this prioritization comes about, not to take on the larger task of justifying the more contentious claim that there ought to be such a prioritization.

15. A fuller account of the resemblance view would go on to explain how a similar dilemma between my mother and my father, e.g., towards whom I have a similarly inspired FD, might be resolved, perhaps by appealing

to the intensity of specific resemblances and explaining how a stonger FD towards my mother might develop.

16. It should be noted that, in light of the first three criteria for families, the resemblance view clearly accounts for what we might call "extended" families, however, I am here trying to focus on what we take to be our immediate family, i.e. that group of individuals to whom we have a special familial obligation.

17. DuBois, p. 21.

18. Boxill, p. 178.

19. Marshall, pp. 132-133.

20. Van Deburg, p. 34.

21. Wilkins, p. 2001.

22. Lawson, p. 98.

23. Lawson, p. 107.

24. Van Deburg, p. 35. Note Van Deburg's use of the term "human family".

25. Kant, p. 88.

26. I would like to thank Marion Smiley, Daniel Hausman and Joseph Ellin for their comments on earlier versions of this paper; the Committee on Institutional Cooperation (CIC) for financial support during the early stages of the paper's development; the Graduate School of the University of Wisconsin-Madison for financial support during the completion of the current version; and Bill Lawson whose work inspired this paper. An earlier version of this paper was presented during the October 1994 CIC Fellows Conference held at the University of Minnesota.

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