

### **3 “But What Are You *Really*?”**

#### The Metaphysics of Race

Race has not traditionally been seen as an interesting or worthy subject of investigation for white Western philosophers, though it has, of course, been the central preoccupation of black intellectuals in the West.<sup>1</sup> Such sporadic discussions as have taken place in “white” Anglo-American philosophy have usually revolved around moral issues; for example, the debates from the 1970s onward about the rights and wrongs of affirmative action. But race raises interesting metaphysical issues as well, in terms of who and what we are, that can also properly be seen as philosophical and that deserve more analysis than they have usually received. The modern world has been profoundly affected by race for several centuries, not merely in the United States and the Americas, with their history of aboriginal expropriation and African slavery, but, more broadly, through the shaping of the planet as a whole by European colonialism. In a sense, then, this neglect by Western philosophy has been an evasion. That race *should* be irrelevant is certainly an attractive ideal, but when it has *not* been irrelevant, it is absurd to proceed as if it had been. There is a growing body of work — at this stage, largely by nonwhite philosophers — on such issues as slavery and colonialism, race and racism, culture and identity, bi- and no-racialism, Pan-Africanism and Afrocentrism,<sup>2</sup> and with the projected demographic shift in the United States over the next century to a majority nonwhite population, we can expect philosophical interest in these matters to increase. As a contribution to this emerging literature, I will try to elucidate what could be termed the “metaphysics of race” that underlie the question “But what are you *really*?”

## Quace versus Race

Before talking about race, let me describe a hypothetical, contrasting system that could be termed *quace*. Imagine a nation in which at birth, or at naturalization, all citizens are assigned a code — Q1, or Q2, or Q3 — that indicates their “quacial” membership. This code is entered on birth certificates, naturalization papers, passports, state I.D.s, driver’s licences, and the like. So all citizens have a quace. But the assignment is done randomly. There is no connection between quace and an individual’s morphology (skin, hair, facial features) or genealogy. In other words, we could not tell a person’s actual or likely quacial membership just by looking at him or her, and parents of a given quace would not automatically have children of the same quace. Nor is there any correlation between quace and historical patterns of exploitation and systemic discrimination. There are no Q1/Q2/Q3 ghettos; no prohibitions, juridical or moral, on intermarriage between Q1s/Q2s/Q3s; no domination of the state or the corporate sector by representatives of a particular Q group; no embedded structural differentials in property ownership between the various Qs; no quacial division of labor; no trumpeting of the superiority of Qx culture; no calls to maintain Q1 purity or heart-wrenching accounts of the existential trauma of being a Q2. The designation comes down from some long-forgotten practice and is maintained by cultural momentum.

In such a society, if someone were to ask us what our quace was, we would, if we were truthful (and it means so little that we would have no motive to lie), just report the information on our passport, let us say, “Q3.” But suppose the person persisted and asked, “No, but what are you *really*?” In such a society the question would barely be intelligible. “Really” contrasts with “apparently,” but here there is no ontological depth, so to speak, to separate one from the other. We might wonder whether that person thought our code had originally been filled in incorrectly (the randomizing device actually generated “Q1,” but the computer was on the blink, or the recording clerk was recovering from the previous night’s debaucheries, so that “Q3” was entered instead). But the question would have no deeper significance, precisely because quace has no significance to the lives of the people in that society beyond bureaucratic irritation. “I am a Q1!” would have no metaphysical ring, no broader historical resonance to it, any more than our declaration of our passport number has any metaphysical ring or broader historical resonance to it. And this is, of course, in sharp contrast with declarations of racial membership, which in the United States and many other countries have historically had deeper reverberations and significances.

To get at the root of these differences, we could imagine an ideal racial system, a system of race rather than quace.<sup>3</sup> We could distinguish horizontal and vertical racial systems as contrasting types. In a horizontal system, race has no present or historical link with political power, economic wealth, cultural influence: the races are randomly distributed in the social order. So though race here is not like quace in that it is morphologically/genealogically grounded, it is like quace in being completely disconnected from patterns of discrimination. Whether such a society has ever actually existed seems unlikely, but the question need not engage us, since this abstract possibility has been mentioned only for the sake of the contrast with our real focus of interest: a vertical system. Here the polity and the economic order are expressly structured on a hierarchical axis in which  $R_1 > R_2 > R_3$ . The functional goal of the system is to privilege the  $R_1$ s and to subordinate the  $R_2$ s and  $R_3$ s. To this end, the  $R_1$ s are designated as the superior race. Different criteria are possible, but usually the most important dimensions of this metric of assessment will be intellectual/cognitive and characterological/moral; that is, the  $R_1$ s will be seen as more intelligent and of better moral character than the other races.<sup>4</sup> We could speak of this as an  $R_1$ -supremacist system, since the  $R_1$ s are systemically privileged over the other races.

An ideal vertical racial system would then have rules to regulate its internal structure and guarantee as far as possible its reproduction. Such a system should be complete. That is, every person in the system should have a racial designation,  $R_1, R_2, R_3 \dots$ , and if there are people for whom that designation is  $R_0$ , this would be the outcome of the system's rules (rather than the result of confusion over where the person fits). The system should also be well formed; that is, clear-cut, unambiguous principles would determine to which race the products of intermarriage between  $R$ s would belong. (And this system would have to be recursive to take account of what happens when those offspring intermarry.) Unless the system is closed (no immigration), it should also have rules for allocating new arrivals to the appropriate racial slots. The extent of the  $R_1$  privileging (for example, in deciding public policy) should be determinate, whether through the stipulation of a strong "lexical" ordering of  $R_1$  interests vis-à-vis  $R_2$  and  $R_3$  interests ( $R_1$  interests as carrying infinite weight) or some weaker principle ( $R_1$  interests as finitely weightier). Finally, it should be nationally uniform, in the sense that there should be no local variations in the rules according to state or region.

Obviously, in such a system, by contrast with a system of quace or the horizontal racial system, one's racial designation will have immense significance, since it will indicate one's social standing and profoundly affect one's

life. And because the United States and many other nations have historically been vertical racial systems of this kind, race has significance. These systems have not been ideal because the rules have not usually been complete, well formed, determinate, or nationally uniform. Moreover, many of the privileged R1s have opposed the system (“race traitors”/“white renegades”), refused to abide by its prescriptions, and supported the efforts of R2s/R3s to change it. Nonetheless, the system has been sufficiently successful that, to take the United States as an example, more than two hundred years after its founding, people still think of themselves as raced; American cities are more segregated now than they were at the turn of the century; there is little intermarriage; blacks are still, by conventional economic measures, near the bottom of the ladder; and some leading black intellectuals are now speaking despairingly of “the permanence of racism.”<sup>5</sup> So this, I suggest—as against the system of quace or the horizontal racial system—is the background against which the metaphysics of race needs to be examined and from which the question “But what are you *really*?” gains its ontological import.

### **Metaphysical Positions**

The terms *social ontology* and *social metaphysics* (I will use them interchangeably) have a certain intuitive transparency, being obviously meant to refer to the basic struts and girders of social reality in a fashion analogous to the way “metaphysics” *simpliciter* refers to the deep structure of reality as a whole. So there are basic existents that constitute the social world, and that should be central to theorizing about it. Thus one readily understands what it means to say that the social ontology of the classic contractarians is an ontology of atomic individuals; that for Karl Marx, it was classes defined by their relation to the means of production; and that for radical feminists, it is the two sexes. In pre-postmodernist times, these categories would have been confidently put forward as part of foundationalist and theoretically exhaustive explanatory schemas—history as class or gender struggle. In the present, more cautious period, greater theoretical circumspection is wise. Note, then, that I am not claiming that race is the only principle of social hierarchy, or that racial struggle is the comprehensive key to understanding history, or that individuals’ racial ontology is in all circumstances the most important thing about them. But systemic racial privilege has been an undeniable (though often denied) fact in recent global history, and exploring an ontology of race will contribute to (though not exhaust) our understanding of social dynamics. Other systems of domination besides race (class, gender) overlap and intersect with it. But in the United States (and

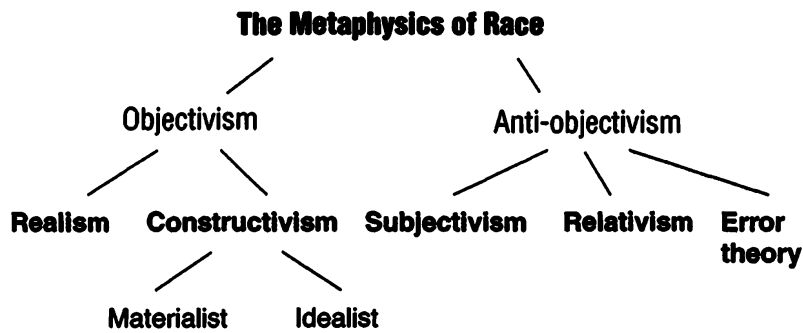


Figure 1. The metaphysics of race

elsewhere) race has correlated strongly with civic standing, culture, citizenship, privilege or subordination, and even designations of personhood. One’s racial category has been taken as saying a great deal about what and who one is, more fundamentally. To what extent and in what ways, then, is race “real,” and how deep is this reality?

Terminology developed elsewhere can illuminatingly be drawn upon to map representative positions on the ontology of race. As we know, philosophers of science and ethicists have an elaborate vocabulary for demarcating contrasting views on the reality of scientific entities and the metaphysics of moral value—realism, constructivism, conventionalism/relativism, instrumentalism, subjectivism, noncognitivism, nihilism/error theories, and so forth. Some of this vocabulary can usefully be appropriated to clarify debates on race. The correspondences are not exact and should not be pressed too far; moreover, some terms have no plausible “racial” equivalent at all. Too many qualifications and epicycles may so muddy the homology as to vitiate the whole exercise. Still, I expect the similarity that emerges to be sufficient to make the appropriation enlightening.

Let us distinguish, to begin with, between objectivism and anti-objectivism as umbrella categories of theories about the reality of race (see Figure 1). *Objectivism* is used in several ways, but usually it connotes the independence of what we choose, what we believe. There are two main objectivist positions: realist and constructivist.

In metaethics and the philosophy of science, the term *realism* usually denotes the view that acts have value or disvalue and that the entities postulated by natural science either exist or do not exist independently of human consensus or dissent. So, for example, killing the innocent is objectively wrong *prima facie* even if a certain community has no prohibitions against such actions, just as electrons objectively exist even if nobody knows about them.

What, by analogy, would be realism about race? A “racial realist” in the most minimal sense will be somebody who thinks it is objectively the case

—independent of human belief—that there are natural human races; in other words, that races are natural kinds. In the stronger, more interesting sense, a racial realist will also believe that the differences between races are not confined to the superficial morphological characteristics of skin color, hair type, and facial features, but extend to significant moral, intellectual, characterological, and spiritual characteristics also, that there are “racial essences.”<sup>6</sup> Anthony Appiah argues that such a view (which he designates as “racialism”) needs to be distinguished from racism proper, though racism presupposes it, since these traits may be thought to be distributed in such a way across the population that there is no clear-cut hierarchy among races.<sup>7</sup> Historically, however, not merely have all racists been realists but most realists have been racists. For the past few hundred years, realism has been the dominant position on race; that is, people have believed that there are natural biological differences among races and that these differences run deeper than mere phenotypical traits.

Such views of race are often hostilely characterized as *essentialist*, and this term coheres nicely with the “realist” categorization insofar as in the philosophy of science, realism is associated with a belief in natural kinds with defining essences. One way of making the theoretical commitments here vivid is to think of the issue in terms of transworld identity. For racial realists, people categorizable by their phenotype in our world, with its peculiar history, as belonging to a particular “race” will continue to have the same “racial” intellectual and characterological traits in another world with a radically different history. For racial realists who link culture to genotype, this view implies, for example, that black American culture would still be basically the same even if Africans had come here as voluntary immigrants and never been enslaved. And to the extent that relations between groups identified as races are also explained in these naturalistic terms, relations between white and black Americans would still be antagonistic.

Racial realism, whether in its racist or merely racialist versions, thus runs directly against the gathering consensus of anthropological and biological research. It is not merely that racism (the natural biological hierarchy of races) is false; it is not merely that culture, psychology, and intergroup relations are far more convincingly explained on the basis of contingent histories than of “natural” racial traits; it is that the very categories used to identify races are significantly transworld relative. Indeed, as commentators often point out, the U.S. one-drop rule for determining membership in the “black” race—that is, any “black” blood makes you black—is practically unique even in *this* world.<sup>8</sup> Many of those categorized as blacks in the United States would be categorized as browns/mulattoes or even whites in

the Caribbean and Latin America. And one could easily imagine a parallel universe of the type beloved of science fiction writers, where—as a result, say, of the overrunning of Dark Ages Europe by an Islamic army of Moors and black Africans—an inverted racial order is established in which the one-drop rule is applied in reverse, and any discernible “white” blood relegates a person to membership in the conquered and despised tribe of native European “savages.”

But from the fact that racial realism is false, it does not follow that race is not real in other senses; this is the point of developing objectivism as an umbrella category broader than realism. Many white liberals (and, indeed, historically many white Marxists also), aware of the verdict of science on race, are puzzled at black intellectuals’ retention of race as a significant social category: they wish to move from the falsity of racial realism to global claims about the unreality of race in general and the corollary political mistakenness of race-centered political discourse such as one finds in black nationalism, Pan-Africanism, and Afrocentrism. But part of the point of my taxonomy of metaphysical positions is to show that there is conceptual room for a view of race as both real and unreal, not “realist” but still objectivist. This position is *racial constructivism*.

In metaethics and the philosophy of science, constructivism is a kind of epistemically idealized intersubjectivism; for example, the hypothetical moral agreement behind Rawls’s veil of ignorance or in Habermas’s ideal speech situation, or scientific consensus on what theory best explains the phenomena. Values and scientific existents are objective in the qualified sense of being independent of particular agents’ *actual* judgments but not of their hypothetical *ideal* judgments. Thus constructivism contrasts with realism as a fellow objectivist view and with relativism and subjectivism as anti-objectivist views. For David Brink, nonrelativist constructivism “agrees with moral realism that there are moral facts and true moral propositions but disagrees with realism about the nature or status of these moral facts and truths. . . . [It] holds that there is a single set of moral facts that are constituted by some function of our beliefs, often by our moral beliefs in some favorable or idealized epistemic conditions.”<sup>9</sup>

Now radicals, whether the depleted class of Marxists or the thriving tribe of postmodernists, often speak of the “social construction” of race, so that the term is already in use; I see this as more than a serendipitous homonymy.<sup>10</sup> What they mean, to begin with, is that there are no “natural” racial divisions between human groups but rather a continuous spectrum of varying morphological traits. That the lines of demarcation, the categorical boundaries, are drawn here rather than there is a social decision, and one

that creates the (social) reality in question. So the resultingly racialized world is in part theory-dependent, constituted by these very beliefs. Under other circumstances, in other worlds, or even in our world at different times, different lines of demarcation could have been drawn. This view is not in itself particularly radical, since most anthropologists share it.<sup>11</sup> The additional claim that distinguishes the radical view is that the decision as to where to draw the line is politically motivated, to establish and maintain the privileges of particular groups. So, for example, the motivation for using the one-drop rule to determine black racial membership is to maintain the subordination of the products of “miscegenation.”

There are obvious differences, however, between *constructivism* in this sense and the standard use of the term. The intersubjectivist agreement in moral and scientific constructivism is a hypothetical agreement of all under *epistemically* idealized conditions. Racial constructivism, by contrast, involves an actual agreement of some under conditions where the constraints are not epistemic (getting at the truth) but *political* (establishing and maintaining privilege); the “idealization” is pragmatic, instrumental to the best way of achieving this end. Nevertheless, the semantic virtue of retaining the same term (apart from the fact that it is already in use) is to highlight the crucial similarity: that an objective ontological status is involved which arises out of *intersubjectivity*, and which, though it is not naturally based, is real for all that. Race is not foundational: in different systems, race could have been constructed differently or indeed never have come into existence in the first place. Race is not essentialist: the same individuals would be differently raced in different systems. Race is not “metaphysical” in the deep sense of being eternal, unchanging, necessary, part of the basic furniture of the universe. But race is a *contingently* deep reality that structures our particular social universe, having a social objectivity and causal significance that arise out of *our* particular history. For racial realism, the social metaphysics is simply an outgrowth of a natural metaphysics; for racial constructivism, there is no natural metaphysics, and the social metaphysics arises directly out of the social history. Because people come to think of themselves *as* “raced,” as black and white, for example, these categories, which correspond to no natural kinds, attain a social reality. Intersubjectivity creates a certain kind of objectivity.

Finally, it should be noted that constructivism comes in different varieties depending on the background theories of social dynamics presupposed. Materialist theories (“materialism” in the sense of patterns of social causality, not ontology), preeminently Marxism, will see this dynamic as economically driven, related to the structure of capitalism and the projects of the bour-



geoisie, and embedded in (though not reducible to) class.<sup>12</sup> Nonmaterialist theories will either deny any causal preeminence at all (pluricausality with no dominant sector) or attribute it to culture/ideas/“discourses.”<sup>13</sup>

Of the variety of anti-objectivist positions in metaethics and the philosophy of science, the ones relevant for our purposes are subjectivism, relativism, and nihilism/error theories. (Noncognitivism and instrumentalism have no plausible racial equivalents.)

Subjectivism in ethics is the view that what makes an action right or wrong is the agent’s opinion. Subjectivism about race would be the view that since racial designations are arbitrary (as constructivists would agree), one can choose one’s race. Subjectivism would therefore imply a kind of voluntarism about race, which is, of course, what makes it an anti-objectivist position. For constructivists, by contrast, the arbitrariness of racial designation is rooted in a particular social history and cannot be overturned by individual fiat.<sup>14</sup>

Ethical relativism and scientific conventionalism make the truth of moral and scientific claims dependent on actual (nonidealized) community agreement. An epicycle is required here, since racial constructivism does *itself* necessarily involve an element of relativism (the reality or objectivity of race is relative to the particular racial system concerned). So this would need to be distinguished from racial relativism proper. The latter would imply that within the (objective) constructed global racial system, which is, let us say, coextensive with the nation, it is possible to change race through the decisions of a subcommunity of like-minded people within the larger population.

Finally, error theories of ethics, such as, famously, John Mackie’s, deny that moral terms refer to anything.<sup>15</sup> A corresponding error theory about race would deny not merely that races have no biological reality (as racial constructivism does) but also that they have no reality as *social* entities. As I noted earlier, many liberals, and those Marxists committed to an explanatory class reductionism, can be said to have an error theory about race in this sense. Traditional Marxist debates about race and class, or race versus class, can then be seen from this perspective as often being debates over whether racial error theories or racial objectivist theories (realist or constructivist) are correct.

It should be obvious by now that I am most sympathetic to a constructivist position on the metaphysics of race, a position that is objectivist but also antirealist and antiessentialist. This position is most congruent with the actual historical record, where race has not been an arbitrary social category, such as “quace” or an innocent designation, as in a horizontal system,

but has functioned as a real marker, if imperfectly, of privilege and subordination in a *vertical* system. In such a system, racial subjectivism, racial relativism, and racial error theories seem to me to be mistaken; the metaphysics of race is an objectivist if antirealist metaphysics.

### **Criteria for Racial Identity**

I want to turn now to the question of the possible criteria for determining racial identity and what happens when these criteria conflict. These are puzzle cases, what could be regarded as cases of racial transgression. I assume throughout a nonideal vertical racial system, where  $R_1$ s are the privileged race.

Consider the more familiar philosophical debate on personal identity. In the literature on this subject, going back to Locke's classic discussion in *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*,<sup>16</sup> it has usually been assumed that there is an answer to the question "Who are you *really*?" that is not necessarily the same as the answer to the question who the person is *taken* to be. The whole point of the soul-transmigrating, brain-transplanting, and memory-loss examples is to get at this difference. The idea is that some kind of metaphysics is objectively there—who the person *is*—and that one may have intuitions that point at it, even if only fuzzily. Through problem cases one can draw on these intuitions, sometimes refining and reformulating them, sometimes giving them up altogether, in the attempt to capture the essence of personal identity, if not in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions, then perhaps in some looser formula that can at least cover most situations. Moreover, personal testimony, although it is given some weight, is not taken as indefeasible (e.g., cases of implanted memory); in some respects the individual has a privileged first-person perspective, but his or her self-identification may on occasion be mistaken. The question will be whether people's race, similarly, is an objective "metaphysical" fact about them, so that by considering puzzle cases in which the standard criteria conflict rather than agree, we can sharpen our intuitions as to what "race" really inheres in.

Seven possible candidates for racial self- and other-identification may be distinguished. They are not at all necessarily mutually exclusive, since they usually function in conjunction with one another. The interesting issue is what happens when this conjunction begins to disintegrate. The categories are bodily appearance, ancestry, self-awareness of ancestry, public awareness of ancestry, culture, experience, and self-identification.

When these categories all point to a specific racial designation,  $R_1/R_2/R_3$ , we do not hesitate to identify the person as a particular  $R$ , nor does the per-

son. But since the United States has a nonideal racial system, with rules that are occasionally less than clear-cut, we may experience difficulty when the criteria conflict. Moreover, the problems in any decision procedure are compounded by the fuzziness of some of the criteria, which are not subject to precise stipulation. There is also the question whether R<sub>1</sub>/R<sub>2</sub>/R<sub>3</sub>-ness is a discrete, on-off affair, or whether on occasion allowance is made for degrees of R<sub>1</sub>/R<sub>2</sub>/R<sub>3</sub>-ness. This is separate from the question whether there is an *intermediate* category; the idea rather is that one could be seen as an R<sub>1</sub> or an R<sub>2</sub> or an R<sub>3</sub> but in a somewhat qualified (sometimes grudging?) fashion, not wholeheartedly or full-bloodedly—to use biological metaphors, though the basis for the judgment need not be biological—an R<sub>1</sub> or an R<sub>2</sub> or an R<sub>3</sub>. It may also be that there is a partial gender asymmetry, so that what holds true for men in situations of criterial conflict does not always hold true for women. Finally, the fact of racial hierarchy (R<sub>1</sub>s being systemically privileged) may carry over into the criteria for racial identification; that is, in some circumstances the rules for adjudicating the racial identity of R<sub>1</sub>s may differ from the rules for R<sub>2</sub>s/R<sub>3</sub>s.

### **Bodily Appearance**

Bodily appearance, the so-called eyeball test, is the criterion we all use to make summary judgments about race, since information about the other criteria is not usually immediately known to us. Historically, this has been true not merely for lay but for “scientific” judgments about race also, since before the advent of genetics earnest attempts were made to ascertain racial membership on the basis of such characteristics as skin color, skull measurements, and hair texture. In some racial systems, however, the appearance of R-ness is neither sufficient nor necessary for actual R-ness—though it will generally be a good evidential indicator—for some people may be able to “pass.” Appearance is then the generally (but not always) reliable visible manifestation of a deeper essence that is taken to inhere in ancestry.

### **Ancestry**

In the U.S. racial system, at least for whites and blacks, ancestry is usually taken as both necessary and sufficient for racial membership. (Elsewhere—in some Latin American countries, for example—appearance is more important, so that siblings of different colors may be assigned to different races despite their identical genealogy.) The rules for ancestral adjudication will, of course, be system-relative. A bipolar system, consisting exclusively of R<sub>1</sub>s and R<sub>2</sub>s, has no social and conceptual space for a third category, R<sub>3</sub>s,

that would explode the binary opposition, so that the offspring of “miscegenation” are assimilated to either the R1s or the R2s. Where blacks and whites are concerned, U.S. policy has historically been to classify them with the R2s on the basis of the one-drop rule. This is what the anthropologist Marvin Harris calls the rule of “hypodescent,” normative descent from the “lower” race.<sup>17</sup> So entrenched has this view been until recently in national folkways and popular consciousness that it seems obvious, “natural,” when in fact it is simply the result of a conscious public policy decision.<sup>18</sup> The alternative policy of social *elevation* to R1 status not merely is an abstract possibility but was actually followed at certain times in the Dutch East Indies, where the children of Dutch men and Asian women were counted as Dutch.<sup>19</sup> Finally, in a tri- or multileveled racial system, such as obtains in the Caribbean and Latin America, there are formally recognized intermediate racial categories. (In the case of racial combinations, we may sometimes be satisfied with the less exact judgment “non-R1”; that is, even if the details of the racial mixture are not clear, we at least want to know whether the person counts as an R1, a member of the privileged race, or not.)

### Self-Awareness of Ancestry

I have separated self-awareness (and public awareness) from ancestry in order to provide a conceptual entrée for some of the puzzle cases I will consider later. It might be thought that this is an epistemological rather than an ontological issue, that whether or not we *know*, or others know, if we are an R1 or an R2 is not relevant to the substantive metaphysical question whether we actually *are* an R1 or an R2. But since this is one of the very claims I will examine, it seems better to leave it open rather than conceptually foreclose it.

### Public Awareness of Ancestry

“Public awareness” as a criterion is fuzzy because one may be officially classed as an R2 (e.g., on ancestral criteria) but, because of one’s appearance, seem to be an R1, so that—unless one remains in a small community where one’s genealogy is known to all—one’s ancestral R status may be on the record but not generally known.

### Culture

Traditional racial theory, committed to racial realism, sees culture as an emanation of biological race, so invoking it as an additional criterion would be otiose (except perhaps as confirmation in contested cases of “mixed” ancestry). If culture stems from genotype, then for R1s to adopt the cultural traits of R2s or vice versa either should be impossible (the strong version of

the thesis) or should at least involve considerable psychological strain (the weaker version), so that one's "real" biological self is always immanent within the borrowed clothes of the alien culture, waiting to assert itself. For nonrealist theories, on the other hand, whether constructivist, relativist, or subjectivist, culture is seen as adoptable with greater or lesser degrees of fluidity and is detachable from biological race, so that it may play a role in racial identification. Sometimes a tacit or overt normative premise of a moral and political kind is presupposed, that those identifiable by other means as R<sub>1</sub>s/R<sub>2</sub>s should exclusively or predominantly embrace the culture associated with R<sub>1</sub>s/R<sub>2</sub>s. Failure to do so then makes one racially inauthentic. Note, though, that the use of culture as a criterion presumes relatively clear demarcating traits that differentiate R<sub>1</sub> from R<sub>2</sub> culture. But even if a clear genealogy of origins can be traced (not always the case), the constant intermingling of peoples means that patterns originally associated with one group can be adopted by others and, over time, transformed so as to be recognizably "theirs." Many Euro-American cultural practices have unacknowledged Native American and African roots, whereas the syncretism resulting from slavery makes dubious the dream of some Afrocentrists of recovering an uncontaminated African essence.

### Experience

Like culture, "experience" has an unavoidable fuzziness, but it is important, for in the vertical racial systems we are considering it is part of the core of what it is to be (with all the metaphysical overtones of *be*) a member of a particular race. Thus in the United States, we naturally think of whiteness as being associated with the experience of racial privilege and of blackness as being associated with the experience of racial oppression. Since criterial divergence is possible, so that R<sub>2</sub>s who look like R<sub>1</sub>s and are not publicly identified as R<sub>2</sub>s will escape racism, it may then be alleged that these R<sub>2</sub>s are not "really" R<sub>2</sub>s, insofar as the essence of being an R<sub>2</sub> is the experience of oppression *as* an R<sub>2</sub>.

### Subjective Identification

Finally, subjective identification—what one *sees* oneself as—needs to be conceptually separated from self-awareness of ancestry, for one may refuse to recognize the validity of this criterion for racial membership; and from culture, for one could still identify oneself as an R<sub>1</sub>/R<sub>2</sub> while embracing R<sub>2</sub>/R<sub>1</sub> culture; and finally from experience, for one could have experiences characteristically taken to be definitive of the R<sub>1</sub>/R<sub>2</sub> experience while denying that these experiences should be seen as definitive of who one is. As

a further complication, self-awareness of ancestry is an either-or affair (either one knows or not), whereas subjective identification lends itself to degrees of variation, in that one can weakly or strongly identify oneself as an  $R_1/R_2$ , so that this identification is less or more significant to one's sense of oneself and one's life projects. Robert Gooding-Williams makes the useful distinction of "thin" and "thick" senses of "black" to differentiate these varying degrees of self-identification for African-Americans.

### **Racial Transgressives**

What happens when these criteria conflict with one another? That is, what happens when, through naturally occurring or artificially devised problem cases, individuals are produced whose racial ontology is not immediately or maybe not even indefinitely clear? As in the parallel case of personal identity, the strategy simultaneously involves drawing on some intuitions and overturning others. At this point I will drop the abstract  $R_1/R_2$  vocabulary and focus specifically on the U.S. situation, where  $R_1$ s and  $R_2$ s are whites (Ws) and blacks (Bs). The justification is that mobilizing our intuitions in any useful way requires us to contextualize them in a familiar situation.

Refer now to the "racial" criteria in Table 1. Standardly, we assume there is uniformity down the line: people who look respectively white/black are descended from ("pure") whites/(some) blacks, are aware of their descent, have public recognition of their descent, embrace the culture typically associated with whites/blacks, have experiences taken to be characteristic of the white/black experience, and identify themselves as white/black. These individuals are thus uncontroversially white/black. In Table 1, we alter some of the criteria to make them inconsistent with the others and then see what our intuitions say. We will consider both "natural" and "artificial" cases, where one expressly sets out to try to change one's race. (It may seem that this is an impossible dream, that race for an individual is permanent, but this is one of the intuitions I will try to undermine.)

Let us bracket the moral and political question whether one *should* try to change one's race, or at least one's apparent race. The motivation for such actions has often been seen as ignoble: the desire to enjoy the privileges of the dominant race while distancing oneself from the fate of the oppressed. But this is a separate issue, certainly of interest in its own right but distinct from the metaphysical one. So we should try to avoid the kind of cognitive interference that comes from thinking that because it is morally or politically *wrong* for black people to try to become white, they cannot succeed in doing so—that the (moral) "inauthenticity" of the decision somehow car-

**Table 1. Types of racial transgressives, U.S. racial system**

<b>“Racial” criteria-</b>	<b>I</b>	<b>II</b>	<b>III</b>	<b>IV</b>	<b>V</b>	<b>VI</b>	<b>VII</b>
Bodily appearance	W	W	W	B	W*	W	W
Ancestry	B	B	B	B	B	W	W
Self-awareness of ancestry	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Public awareness of ancestry	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes
Culture	B	W	W	W	W	B	B
Experience	W/B	W	W	W/B	W	B	W/B
Self-identification	B	W	W	W	W	B	B
Person is:	?	?	?	?	?	?	?

Case I: Conscious episodic passing (natural whiteness) for strategic reasons

Case II: Conscious passing (natural whiteness) for ultimate assimilation

Case III: Unconscious passing (natural whiteness)

Case IV: Mr. Oreo

Case V: Mr. Oreo and the Schuyler Machine (artificial whiteness)

Case VI: Unconscious “passing” as black

Case VII: White renegade

Case VIII: (“Black”) White renegade

Case IX: “Biracial” (self-identified)

Case X: “No-racial” (self-identified)

W = white; W\* = artificially white; B = black.

*Note:* Case VIII involves variations of case VII. Case IX is open to multiple possibilities in several of the criteria. And racial details are unnecessary in case X, because one can subjectively identify oneself as no-racial independently of the other criteria—arguing, for example, that really nobody has a race.

ries over to infect the metaphysical status. (One would then be not a white person who is inauthentic but an inauthentic white person.) Unless, of course, a case can be made for such a connection.

### **Problem Case I**

Consider first the case of someone whose body is naturally white because of the genetic lottery and who knows that he has at least one black ancestor but deliberately sets out to “pass.” This is one of the most famous themes of the African-American experience and has been the subject of numerous stories, novels, and movies.<sup>20</sup> Let us begin with what I call “conscious episodic passing.” This person leads a bifurcated life, passing for the purpose of taking advantage of differential economic opportunities in a segregated work-

place or a better residential area or for whatever reason but continuing to think of himself as black and maintaining contact (cautiously, if necessary) with the black community. (The head of the NAACP from 1931 to 1955, the ironically named Walter White, had what was judged to be only one-sixty-fourth black ancestry. Socially categorized as black but with blond hair and blue eyes, he describes in his autobiography, *A Man Called White*, how he often posed as a white man—i.e., a man called white—so that he could investigate lynchings in the South.)<sup>21</sup> The public will not generally know such people are black, so that they will not have many of the negative encounters characteristic of the black experience. Nonetheless, we would generally conclude that these individuals, identifying with and acculturated by the black community, are indeed “really” black. We would not regard them as sometimes white and sometimes black; rather, we would say that they are always black but sometimes pretend to be white.

### Problem Case II

Contrast this case with what I call “conscious permanent passing.” Here the goal is not conjunctural advantage but ultimate assimilation: the person wants to be taken for white. Maintaining contact with black relatives, childhood friends, and neighborhood acquaintances will obviously jeopardize this endeavor, so it will be necessary to move away from them, sever all relationships, and give one’s children a highly pruned version of the family tree. Similarly, to avoid betrayal by “black” cultural traits, such a person will consciously steep him- or herself in white culture. Suppose that this act of assimilation and acculturation is successful. (Historically, in fact, tens of thousands of U.S. blacks did take this step every year. One such person, exposed after his death, was the prominent New York literary critic Anatole Broyard.)<sup>22</sup> The person is accepted by his white neighbors as white, there is no public awareness in his social world of his black ancestry, he does not experience racism, and though he is naturally nervous for the first few years, he gradually comes to relax and feel confident that his deception will never be discovered.

Clearly, such an individual has changed his *apparent* race—that should not be controversial—so why shouldn’t one go a step further and say he has changed his *actual* race? Racial realists rule this step out, since they identify race with biological criteria (ancestry, in the U.S. system). Perhaps they also imagine that biological race will continue tendentially to manifest itself—one will be sitting tuxedoed in the symphony hall listening to Schubert and suddenly get an uncontrollable ancestral urge to start boogeying. But even without these biocultural claims, racial realists may feel that the person is still



*really* black. Once we accept a constructivist view of race, in what sense is this person still black? He looks white, is socially categorized as white, embraces white culture, has white experiences. Why can't we say that he has successfully changed his race and become white? (Acceptance of this description does not undermine commitment to an objectivist metaphysic. Constructivism about race implies that there are objective criteria to being a member of a race, and we have respected that objectivity by taking measures to meet those criteria. We cannot change our actual ancestry, but we can change awareness of it. And we can also change culture and experience. So a subjectivist view, according to which it would be a mere matter of will—one could just decide to be white without doing anything about it—is wrong, as is an error theory that denies the social reality of race.) The point of the example is to test the strength of our commitment to ancestry (“objective”) as a definitive criterion. If our intuitions are somewhat tugged the other way, this indicates that intersubjective criteria (awareness of ancestry) are more important.

Nevertheless, it may still be insisted that there is a basis other than ancestry for applying the label “black,” because the person (unless he has self-induced amnesia also) will be aware of his black ancestry and cannot avoid thinking of himself as a black person pretending, even if very successfully, to be white. Moreover, it may be argued, to describe the person's experience as “white” is question-begging, since by definition experience is a subjective, internal affair, not merely the third-person external description of events happening to an agent. Neither the average white person nor this particular individual will experience white racism, but the crucial difference, it will be argued, is that the average white person will never even think about this possibility (why should she?). The individual in question, however, will be ever watchful, always anticipating exposure as black, even if it never comes. Thus the phenomenological difference between the consciousness of the “real” white person and the “apparent” white person is alone sufficient to show that the person cannot *really* be white but is still black.

There is some merit to this argument. It could, of course, be replied that although this nervous consciousness is admittedly likely to be present at the beginning, it would quickly dissipate if, by hypothesis, the charade is successful, so that appearance would then become reality.<sup>23</sup> But let us grant this point of differentiation and move on to a case where it is no longer present.

### **Problem Case III**

In both case I and case II, the person was aware of his nonwhite ancestry. Consider now a person who thinks her ancestry is white. If the first two cases come under the heading of conscious passing, this is a case of uncon-

scious passing. This theme, too, has been treated often in American fiction. One classic treatment is Mark Twain's *Pudd'nhead Wilson* (1894), in which a slave mother switches her own light-skinned baby for the master's child at birth, so that her son grows up as her white master while the master's child is taken to be her slave son.<sup>24</sup> A real-life example is Gregory Williams's *Life on the Color Line*, subtitled *The True Story of a White Boy Who Discovered He Was Black*.<sup>25</sup> In case II, part of our hesitation to classify the person as white, even apart from realist sympathies, may be because we imagine a kind of psychic tension, an awareness that the presented persona is not the same as the internal one. The person is playing a role, performing an act, pretending to be something he is "really" not. But eliminating the condition of awareness of ancestry removes this feature of the situation: this person thinks of herself as white. So if this obstacle is no longer present, what is the objection to saying that the person is "really" white? Note, by the way, that demographers estimate that millions of officially "white" Americans actually fall into this category; that is, they have black ancestry unknown to them, so that by their nation's rules they are "really" black.

One way to think of the issue is as follows. In the determination of racial identity, an interesting combination of objective, subjective, and intersubjective factors is at work. For a constructivist as against a realist theory, ancestry is crucial not because it necessarily manifests itself in biological racial traits but simply, tautologously, because it is *taken* to be crucial, because there *is* an intersubjective agreement (originally in the dominant R1 population, later embraced by the R2s) to classify individuals in a certain way on the basis of known ancestry. As a result of this classification, one will typically think of oneself in a certain way, identify with a certain culture, and have certain kinds of experiences. But if the intersubjective classification is mistaken, then one will *not* think of oneself in that way, *not* identify with that culture, *not* have these experiences. The tendency is to see this as a case of mistaken racial attribution; thus Gregory Williams "discovers" he is black. His blackness is supposed to be a fact about him that continues to obtain even in the absence of the other features with which it is usually linked. But why not the alternative description: he was white, and then became black? (Indeed, one chapter title is "Learning to be Niggers.") If others say that he was really black all along, are they doing anything other than repeating the uncontested assertion that his ancestry was black? What other ontological freight does this judgment "really" carry?

Here's another way to think about it. The point of starting off with the story about the quace society was to create a foil for our actual society. In

the quace society, there is never any difference in the answer to the questions “What are you?” (how are you classified?) and “What are you *really*?” because how you are classified, whether as a Q1/Q2/Q3, makes no difference to your life. The adverb “really” introduces a notion of ontological import, metaphysical depth, signifying something that *makes a difference* in some fairly profound way. But quace makes no difference, so there is no room for the added emphasis. It can be put in the sentence, but nothing answers to it. If one did find that one had been misclassified, one would barely give it a moment’s thought. Race, however, can overturn a life, as it did for people in apartheid South Africa who found themselves reclassified to “Coloured,” and as it did for Gregory Williams. Making the ancestral criterion the sole arbiter fails to capture this metaphysical dimension, because we are then reduced to saying that race is just how an individual is classified. Whereas the reality is that it is the *import* of this classification that, through subjective internalization and intersubjective recognition, is doing the metaphysical work. So once an example is set up in which this classification is made wrongly, it is possible for us to see what our intuitions are really responding to. People focus on ancestry because in this world ancestry and the other attributes usually go together, but separating them shows that ancestry is not really the important thing. What is important is the intersubjective/subjective criterion of what ancestry is *thought* to be.

But an objection may then arise. I began by distinguishing objectivist and anti-objectivist “metaphysical” positions on race and endorsing constructivism as an objective but nonrealist view of race. But it seems to be turning out that my view is not really that sharply distinguished from anti-objectivist positions. Realists about race may assert that race will continue to manifest itself in the same way through different possible histories, that it has an enduring transworld quality. But my position seems to be that race is just what one thinks it is. And how can this be a variety of objectivism? How is this different from the subjectivist and relativist positions on what is supposed to be the other side of the metaphysical fence?

The answer is complicated by the nonepistemic character of this “constructivism” and the relativist element it contains. But it *is* distinguished by the fact that the construction is intersubjectivist (not individual), state-backed, and usually crystallized both in law and custom. Subjectivism about race seems to imply a kind of voluntarism, that merely by being determined to deny race, or to think of oneself as raced differently than one is classified, one can change one’s race.

### Problem Case IV

Consider the case of someone I will call Mr. Oreo. Mr. Oreo cannot even think of passing, being quite dark with clearly black African features and with known black ancestry. But he is unhappy with his racial designation, so he fills in “white” on bureaucratic forms, identifies himself as white, and rejects black culture. Will these gestures make him white? The black community has a standard negative moral judgment of such people, which is of course signified by the name. Some notion of racial authenticity is presupposed, along with a normative judgment that this kind of repudiation is morally contemptible. It would be interesting to explore the values that underlie this judgment—after all, if race is constructed, what gives it moral significance?—but as I said at the start, my focus is on the metaphysics rather than the ethics. And the designation Oreo clearly has a metaphysical as well as a moral dimension, since it implies that the person is divided, black on the outside but white on the inside. Does this mean that for lay consciousness, the person *has* succeeded in changing his race, insofar as the spatial metaphors of inside and outside standardly correspond to essence and appearance? In some contexts, after all, it would critically be said of Mr. Oreo that “he’s really white.” But this is really a statement about values and identification; if pressed, people would deny that Mr. Oreo has actually become white. The sense would be that he is a black man pretending, or trying and failing, to be white, so that the moral opprobrium arises from the attempt, not the success or failure of the attempt.

Now, why do we not think the person has succeeded? For lay consciousness, which is typically realist, the simple answer is that race inheres in ancestry, appearance, and so on, so that it cannot be changed. But racial constructivists would also deny that race-changing in this fashion is possible, seeing this position as an untenable racial subjectivism or voluntarism. And a central reason for their claim will be that Mr. Oreo is still socially *categorized* as black, especially by the crucial population, the white one; he will still experience racism and so will still be black insofar as the experience of white racism is definitive of the black experience. When followed around in a department store, stopped by the police in a white neighborhood, or mistaken for the waiter in a restaurant, Mr. Oreo may protest, with a reassuring laugh, “No, no, you don’t understand, I’m not one of *them*,” but his protest is not likely to be effective. (Note, though, that this scenario opens the possibility of a more liberal, “cultural” racism, whereby people could be *prima facie* black but gain at least a virtual, courtesy whiteness by passing the appropriate cultural tests and thereby be distinguished from unreconstructed blacks.) So if racial subjectivism is a mistaken position on the metaphysics of race, Mr. Oreo will still be black.

### Problem Case V

But suppose Mr. Oreo comes to understand this and is a sufficiently determined fellow. Let's give him the option of a technological fix, introducing to that end the Schuyler Machine. The well-publicized cosmetic transformation of Michael Jackson raises the possibility that advances in plastic surgery techniques or even genetic engineering may make it possible one day to transform one's skin, hair, and facial features so that one looks completely white. In George Schuyler's neglected satirical classic, *Black No More*, a black scientist invents a machine that can do just that, with the result that within a few months all the blacks in the United States vanish, having seized the opportunity to transform themselves into apparent whites.<sup>26</sup> Let us call this device the Schuyler Machine. (In the book it has no name.)

Suppose individuals such as Mr. Oreo whose bodies are *not* (as in the first three examples) naturally white make use of this device and then go on to assimilate as above. In these cases, does their artificially rather than naturally white bodily appearance support the doubts of those who question whether one can really change one's race? Why? What would the basis of this skepticism be? Compare another kind of physical transformation, that of bodily physique and strength. If a machine were invented (call this the Schwarzenegger Machine) that could transform 98-pound weaklings into massively muscled supermen capable of pressing hundreds of pounds without the tedium of years of special diets and weight training, would we say that the person only *looked* strong but had not really *become* strong? Obviously not: his new body, new physique, new strength are real. So what is the difference? (The question here is not the deep ontological one whether an apparently white body makes a person really racially white, since we have already seen that—at least by itself—it doesn't necessarily do so. Rather, the question is the shallow ontological one whether an apparently white body is any the less apparently white because the whiteness is artificially engineered rather than natural. So we are dealing here precisely with an ontology of appearance, of surfaces.)

Is the difference that we think of the first three persons' surface whiteness as real (because genetic), whereas Mr. Oreo's is unreal (because artificial)? In the first place, of course, the Schuyler Machine may work through genetic manipulation, so the etiology would still be genetic, though not hereditary. If we insist that the whiteness comes from parental genes, is this not just a repetition of the ancestral criterion, whereas we began by agreeing to consider them separately? In the second place, even if the whiteness is artificial, why is it any the less real? "Artificial" does not necessarily contrast with "real"; it just contrasts with "natural." An artificial heart is real

enough and can sometimes do the job as well as (or better than) a real heart. Moreover, technological advances and the general mediation of the natural by the social make the distinction increasingly problematic.

Or is the objection of another kind, that the “whiteness” is thought of as somehow merely surface, a kind of full-bodied “whiteface” that corresponds to the blackface of nineteenth-century minstrelsy, and underneath it is the original black-skinned person? By hypothesis, the pertinent bodily parts really are transformed; it is not that the skin acquires a white sheen that will come off if Mr. Oreo goes out in the rain, for example, or scrapes himself by accident. Rather, the change is in the skin (and hair texture, facial features, etc.). Or do we unconsciously think of physiological “whiteness” as something that permeates the whole body, inhering not merely in skin color, facial features, and hair texture but also sparking in the synapses of the brain, pumping through the bloodstream, dripping through the pancreas? If so, it is a revealing indication of how, despite ourselves, lay conceptions of race affect us. Research has shown that the morphological differences between people classed as white and those classed as black are minor, quite apart from the reality that many “blacks” in the United States have largely white ancestry.

My suggestion is, then, that whether the apparent whiteness is natural or artificial should make no difference to its reality; in both cases, the person is apparently white. So the point of this exercise is to undermine conventional intuitions about the “natural” basis of whiteness and the location of its ontological depth in the biological. Race is ontologically deep, but its depth lies in intersubjectivity; a body that appears to intersubjective judgment to be white is all, I am arguing, that is necessary here. (The alternative would be to introduce another level and speak of bodies that “appear white,” whereas other bodies “appear to appear white.”) A case can be made, then, that Mr. Oreo succeeds in changing his race, especially if he moves to a part of the country where nobody knows about his black past, though admittedly if he marries a white woman, having children will be a challenge.

### **Problem Case VI**

Consider the case of unconscious passing from the other direction: the white child in the Twain story raised as black. This is someone with a genetically white body and all-white ancestry who, unaware of his actual parentage, grows up as black, thinks of himself as black, is culturally black, and is categorized by the community as black. If the ancestral criterion is the overriding one, then we have to say that this person is really white. But what does the “really” mean other than the repetition of the point that his

ancestry is white? At the novel's end, the deception is discovered and the biologically white young man resumes his place as rightful heir (though never to feel at home except in the kitchen), whereas the unconscious impostor, who has been a miscreant in various ways, is sold down the river as partial payment for estate debts. But suppose the switch had never been discovered. Would it still be true that in some deep sense, the biologically white boy was really white? Or can we say that he became black, that his race was changed?

### Problem Case VII

In a vertical racial system, members of the subordinate race who assume the privileges of the dominant race are, as I have noted, usually morally condemned. Correspondingly, members of the racially privileged group who support and identify with the racially oppressed usually gain our moral approbation, if not that of their peers. Can this identification extend to race-changing? The hostile term "nigger-lover" often carried with it the threat that to persist in subversive behavior would lead one to be treated in the same way as blacks, but does this actually amount to an ontological shift? Various terms from the American and colonial experience seem to register such a possibility: the "white Injun" of the frontier period, the European explorer who "goes native," the general notion of the "white renegade" or "race traitor" who is seen as not merely betraying his race but in some sense as *changing* his race. A U.S. journal, *Race Traitor*, calls on white Americans to self-consciously repudiate their whiteness. (In the 1950s Norman Mailer wrote a famous essay on the hipsters as "White Negroes";<sup>27</sup> their contemporary descendants are "whiggers," or "white niggers," suburban white kids who affect the clothing, language, and musical styles of black inner-city youth.)

Imagine such a contemporary white renegade who sets out to support and identify with black struggles, steeped himself in black culture, joins non-separatist black political organizations, and is therefore on occasion targeted for differential treatment by hostile authorities. Sometimes, of course, whites who take this course are working out personal problems, indulging in some kind of "exoticism," or "slumming." But perhaps this individual's sincerity so impresses the black community that he is even regarded as an "honorary" black. In this case, unlike that of Mr. Oreo, one's moral judgment is likely to be favorable, but is this relevant to the metaphysical issue? It could perhaps be argued that since the metaphysics depends in part on some kind of subjective decision, the moral authenticity of giving up racial privilege translates into or becomes a kind of metaphysical authenticity. But

we would tend to feel, I think, that the person is at most politically or maybe culturally but not *really* black. After all, in many situations his assumed identity will not be known, and he will just be treated like any other white guy. And in any case, he can always have a change of heart and jettison his assumed identity, which in a world without a Schuyler Machine blacks in general cannot do. (But suppose that the community is small, and the authorities have an official policy to penalize racial transgressors by publicizing their identities and formally and permanently changing their racial standing. Consider the real-life case of the white author John Howard Griffin, who, in a reversal of the Schuyler Machine process, had his skin treated to darken it and on the basis of his experience wrote the bestselling *Black Like Me* in 1959.<sup>28</sup> If Griffin had carried out his project in a society so small that everyone subsequently was informed about his “crime” and treated him accordingly forever after, we might want to say that he really *would* have become black.)

### **Problem Case VIII**

But let us say that he would not have become black. Consider four variations on this theme: (1) unknown to the white renegade, he actually does have black ancestry, but neither he nor anybody else ever finds this out; (2) he discovers his black ancestry, makes it public, and is officially recategorized as black; (3) he discovers it but chooses to keep it secret, wanting to “earn” his blackness through his own efforts, so that his official categorization remains white; (4) he makes the same discovery and announces it publicly, thereby being recategorized, but in fact the “discovery” is erroneous, and the supposed black ancestor is really white, though this is never found out. In all cases, assume that he identifies with black culture and supports black struggles to the same extent, so that whether public or secret, real or mythical, his ancestral blackness makes no difference to his actions. What do we judge the metaphysics of race to be in each case?

### **Problem Case IX**

Consider now the case of biracialism. The U.S. racial system has been polarized mainly between white and black, with blackness being demarcated through the one-drop rule. An intermediate mulatto category has sometimes or in particular locales been officially recognized, and within the black community there are traditional shade hierarchies,<sup>29</sup> but this has been the basic division. In the Caribbean and Latin America the spectrum of statuses is more variegated. In part because of the growth in intermarriage and resulting “mixed” children, a movement is afoot in the United States to in-



introduce a multiracial category on census forms to accommodate the experience of people who reject the bifurcation into black and white.<sup>30</sup> The young golfing star Tiger Woods, for example, identifies himself as “Cablinasian” —Caucasian, black, Indian, and Asian. Some blacks protest that this is merely another way for people with visible European ancestry to differentiate themselves from the “pure” black population. Historically, browns/ mulattoes/mestizos have been seen as superior to “unmixed” blacks, if not as good as whites, and as such have been privileged in various ways in mainstream white society. (This situation is recognized in black American popular discourse in the old rhyme “If you’re white, / You’re all right. / If you’re brown, / Stick around. / If you’re black, / Stand back.” Moreover, within the black American population in some cities there were somatically exclusive clubs—for example, the blue-vein or brown paper bag clubs—from which dark-skinned blacks were excluded.)

As before, however, the focus is on the metaphysical question. The question is not whether such a tri- or multipolar racial system is possible, because the Latin experience shows it is, and one could imagine a United States with an alternative history that had evolved with such a system. If racial constructivism is correct, then by definition the same human population can be demarcated and constructed into different “races” in many ways. The question is whether, in the face of majority white resistance to such a revision, subgroups within the existing bipolar system can successfully construct themselves as biracial. My endorsement of constructivism has been predicated on a uniform national system. But it might be argued that certain circumstances could promote a racial relativism in which particular subcommunities could reject official categorizations and construct their own identities.

In his book *Who Is Black?* for example, F. James Davis discusses the history of “American Mestizos”: Brass Ankles, Red Legs, Yellow-hammers, Red Bones, Guineas, Jackson Whites, Moors, Creoles, and other groups with black ancestry who have historically refused the status of blackness. “These so-called American Mestizo groups have protected themselves from the one-drop rule by remaining as isolated as possible, which has become more and more difficult. Within their own communities they are presumably all equal, whatever their racial composition, and they are very cautious in their dealings with the outside. . . . [They] continue to try to avoid being defined as blacks by remaining isolated and wary.”<sup>31</sup>

We are talking, then, not of individual voluntarism (racial subjectivism) but of a group decision to challenge dominant conceptions. But as Davis’s account makes clear, to the extent that their deviant self-definition has been

possible, it has required social exile, which is not a desirable option for contemporary bi- and multiracial individuals. So the question is whether such a self-chosen hybrid identity can be sustained on the basis of group endorsement in the face of the majority's adherence to the traditional principle by which any black blood makes one black. Would such people really become another race, or, because of their interactions with the larger society, would they really just stay black?

### **Problem Case X**

Finally, an interesting challenge has been posed by the philosopher Naomi Zack—the argument that the admitted absurdity of racial classifications should push us to endorse neither race 1 nor race 2 nor even bi- or multiracialism but no race at all: we should simply repudiate racial categorization. “The concept of race is an oppressive cultural invention and convention, and I refuse to have anything to do with it. . . . Therefore, I have no racial affiliation and will accept no racial designations.”<sup>32</sup> Whereas bi- or multiracialism has some objectivist base, though a local rather than global one, this position seems to be a nonstarter, for it ignores the fact that in a racialized society people will continue to have racialized experiences, whether they acknowledge themselves as raced or not.

We have seen, then, that there are issues pertaining to race and racial identity that are well worth the time of philosophers to address. Doubtless they will become more pressing as the nation's racial composition shifts. Most Western philosophers have been white and have taken their racial standing for granted, not seeing how it enters into their identity and affects their relationship with the universe. Race may not be real in the sense that racial realists think or would even like, but it is real enough in other senses. The metaphysics of racial identity is thus a metaphysics well worth investigating.