

On Racial Kinship

Does it make sense for members of a racial group, in particular African-Americans, to have feelings of racial kinship with other members of the same race and to act on those feelings? That is, is it coherent and morally defensible for, say, American blacks to feel a special sense of solidarity with or solicitude for other blacks, to feel pride or shame in their successes and failures? Such solidarity, once widely accepted as natural and beneficial, has come under some suspicion. In an article entitled "My Race Problem—and Ours," Randall Kennedy, a Harvard Law School professor, argues provocatively yet thoughtfully that racial kinship is, by and large, irrational, inappropriate, and sometimes even immoral. The purpose of this essay is to defend racial kinship by showing that it is often—though certainly not always—coherent, ethically legitimate, and politically prudent. Kennedy's principal argument is that race is inherited, not accomplished, and therefore is not a sensible basis for feelings of solidarity. Other thinkers argue against racial solidarity on the grounds that race itself is a fiction, construct, or myth, and thus hardly good cause for affection, pride, or shame. We believe that both arguments are mistaken. The first misunderstands the nature and scope of feelings of pride and solidarity. Both misunderstand the nature and persistence of racial group identity.

Our paper has four parts. In section 1 we point out the important flaws in Kennedy's argument. In section 2 we discuss the idea that race is a construct and show that even if true, this does not entail that racial kinship and solidarity are unjustifiable. Section 3 deals with some further aspects of racial and group solidarity, namely, its potential benefits and dangers and whether it is morally obligatory. Section 4 contains a brief conclusion.

1.

Let us begin by summarizing Kennedy's argument. His question is whether he, as a black American, ought to "sense and express racial pride, racial kinship, racial patriotism, racial loyalty, racial solidarity—synonyms for that amalgam of belief, intuition and commitment that manifests itself when

blacks treat blacks with more solicitude than they do those who are not black."¹ As examples of racial kinship, Kennedy includes gestures of recognition, greeting among blacks unknown to each other, and events such as the Million Man March in Washington, D.C. Kennedy's answer to the question is unequivocal: "Neither racial pride nor racial kinship offers guidance that is intellectually, morally or politically satisfactory."²

The fundamental idea here is the liberal one that human beings can and should act as "unencumbered selves," that is, as bound only to what they choose for themselves rather than to the traditions and expectations into which they were born and raised.³ And since skin color is unchosen, we need not, and indeed should not, let it shape our actions or affections. So Kennedy seems to be working from a solid liberal foundation. However, we should note that it is one thing to adopt a veil of ignorance and subsequent unencumbered self as a theoretical tool for deriving, in a Rawlsian fashion, principles of justice. It is quite another to say that we ought to live our lives in this way, unmoved by whatever is inherited rather than chosen.

Kennedy rejects racial pride on the grounds that "the [proper] object of pride for an individual [is] something that he or she has accomplished" and racial characteristics are not accomplishments, but givens, neither chosen nor earned.⁴ As Kennedy reminds us, there is precedent for this view in no less a figure than Frederick Douglass, who proclaimed in a speech in 1889 that "the only excuse for pride in individuals ... is in the fact of their own achievement."⁵ Kennedy rejects racial kinship for similar reasons. To his mind, it does not make good sense to feel kinship with others on the grounds that one shares with them attributes and attachments that one did not choose for oneself. Kennedy reasons that likening racial solidarity to familial solidarity will not do, because familial solidarity is, properly understood, a

¹Randall Kennedy, "My Race Problem—And Ours," *The Atlantic Monthly*, May 1997, pp. 55-66, here p. 55. The title of Kennedy's article recalls the title of Norman Podhoretz's classic essay, "My Negro Problem—And Ours," which appeared originally in *Commentary* (1963) and is reprinted in Norman Podhoretz (ed.), *The Commentary Reader* (New York: Atheneum, 1966), pp. 376-87. While both articles deal with race and show insight and courage, their arguments and ends are quite different.

²Kennedy, "Race Problem," p. 55.

³The idea of the "unencumbered self" was introduced and criticized by Michael Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

⁴Kennedy, "Race Problem," p. 56.

⁵See "The Nation's Problem," in Frederick Douglass, *Selected Speeches and Writings* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1999), pp. 725-40, here p. 730. Douglass's motivation for saying this was somewhat different from Kennedy's. For important criticisms of Douglass's rejection of racial pride, see Bernard Boxill, *Blacks and Social Justice* (Towota, N.J.: Rowman and Allanheld, 1984), pp. 176-78; and Howard McGary, "Douglass on Racial Assimilation and Racial Institutions," in Bill E. Lawson and Frank M. Kirkland (eds.), *Frederick Douglass: A Critical Reader* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 1999), pp. 50-63.

matter of will and action (“I love [my mother] ... because of ... deeds, not blood—doing, not being”), whereas racial solidarity, Kennedy seems to assume, is largely a matter of blood—that is, genetic endowment concerning skin color, hair texture, facial features, and so on.

Without going into further details and illustrations of Kennedy’s essay, we can already point to the two principal flaws in his arguments. First, Kennedy assumes that pride and similar affective bonds should be directed solely at what is chosen or accomplished, and at what is chosen or accomplished by oneself, not by others. Second, Kennedy’s argument assumes that race is essentially a matter of blood rather than of will, life-experience, and situation. We will argue that each of these assumptions is mistaken.

First, on the nature and scope of pride and similar affective bonds, consider the following diagram:

	accomplished/chosen	not chosen, but given
individual	1	2
others	3	4

We have broken into four categories human characteristics on the basis of which one might feel pride or shame. In box 1 are characteristics accomplished and chosen by the individual him- or herself such as the attribute of winning an award or reaching a worthy goal. In box 2 are characteristics of oneself that are not chosen but simply given by nature or circumstance such as one’s skin color, height, place of birth or nationality. In box 3 are chosen and accomplished characteristics of other persons of a group to which one belongs, as when other blacks (or other Jews or other Americans) attain a hard-earned goal. In box 4 are characteristics of others of a group to which one belongs that are simply given by nature or circumstance such as skin color, height, inborn skills, and so on.

Now, which of these human characteristics can or should a person sensibly take pride in or feel solidarity about? Kennedy’s position is perfectly clear: One should take pride only in “something that he or she has accomplished.” In terms of our diagram, for Kennedy, the only legitimate objects of pride (and, by extension, shame) are characteristics in box 1. There is no question that box 1 characteristics often merit pride and shame. But what about those in the other boxes? Is it sensible to think, as Kennedy does, that, from a rational point of view, we ought to withhold or eventually train ourselves to not feel pride and shame in our unachieved characteristics and in the characteristics, either achieved or given, of others?

The first point to make here is that feelings of pride and shame about characteristics in the other three boxes are quite widespread. Of course, Kennedy knows and acknowledges this fact. But it is worth mentioning just how widespread they are. Such feelings of pride and shame are not unique to black pride or to a defensive and defiant "identity politics." On the contrary, they're very nearly ubiquitous. With regard to box 2, clearly lots of people take pride in characteristics of themselves that are *given, not accomplished*, such as their beauty, intelligence, dexterity, even their place of birth or nationality. These characteristics, though initially perhaps a matter of luck, evoke pride because people come to identify with their unchosen characteristics and integrate them into their sense of self.⁶ More material to Kennedy's argument are boxes 3 and 4. Should one feel pride or shame about the characteristics of other members of one's group? Kennedy's very starting point seems to rule this out: "[W]hat should properly be the object of pride for an individual [is] something that he or she has accomplished."⁷ Yet once again, notice how common it is for individuals to take pride in the characteristics of other group members. Many Jews, for example, take pride in Jews personally unknown to them, in the achievements of Albert Einstein, Louis Brandeis, and Sandy Koufax. And they report feeling shame in response to the involvement of Jews such as Ivan Boesky and Michael Milken in the scandals of financial corruption of the 1980s. Similarly, many African-Americans take pride in the achievements of W.E.B. Du Bois, James Baldwin, Thurgood Marshall, and countless others. Other groups, no less, whether based on race, religion, ethnicity, nationality, gender, or sexual orientation, have their heroes. To some extent, the same point can be made about the commonness of pride or shame in the characteristics of box 4, that is, the natural (or circumstantial) characteristics of one's fellow group members.

Such feelings of pride and shame are thus very widespread, but are they rational? One might think that once we leave the sphere of cognitive processes and enter into the sphere of emotions (such as are pride and shame), it is difficult to assess rationality. Difficult it may be, but we'll agree with Kennedy (and others) that it is not impossible or fruitless.⁸ Here one *might*

⁶For a good discussion of pride in natural characteristics, see Arnold Isenberg, "Natural Pride and Natural Shame," in Amélie Oksenberg Rorty (ed.), *Explaining Emotions* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), pp. 355-83.

⁷Kennedy, "Race Problem," p. 56.

⁸Indeed, there has been considerable research lately on the rationality of our emotional lives and the prospects for evaluating specific instances of emotion in terms of their rationality or irrationality. See, for example, Ronald de Sousa, *The Rationality of Emotion* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1987), esp. chap. 7; and Patricia S. Greenspan, *Emotions and Reasons: An Inquiry into Emotional Justification* (New York: Routledge, 1988); as well as John Deigh, "Cognitivism in the Theory of the Emotions," *Ethics* 104 (1994): 824-54, esp.

contend that whenever an emotion is widely directed at certain types of objects or characteristics in very many different cultures, such emotional investments belong to human nature and thus cannot be deemed irrational. But we won't take this route either. After all, certain phobias or envy of one's wealthier neighbors may be very widespread, even ubiquitous, emotions in the most far-flung civilizations, but this could hardly mean that such phobias or envy are therefore rational and immune to criticism.

So let us ask whether common feelings of pride and envy in the accomplishments of others of one's race (religion, etc.) are rationally defensible. (We'll now focus on box 3, setting aside boxes 2 and 4, which are less relevant to Kennedy's argument.) Of course, Kennedy would certainly not want to claim that it is irrational for human beings to have any emotional attachments (e.g., love) to other human beings or for human beings to feel stronger attachments to certain people than to others. So the questions must be this: i) Is it rational to feel for others *pride* and *shame*? and ii) Is it rational for the selection of those others in whom we feel pride and shame to be determined on the basis that they belong to the same (racial) group as we do?

First, let us suggest an account of the internal logic of pride and shame in others. We feel pride or shame in others because i) we believe that they have achieved (or inherited) something pridetworthy or shameworthy, and ii) either a) we have some personal (acquaintance-based) knowledge and affection for these others (friends and family), or b) we feel that we share something with these others—a heritage, a situation, etc.—such that the others in question are in some sense like us. (b) explains why we feel pride in others who we do not personally know but to whom we are connected by membership in some group. So, it is either our likings or our likenesses that give rise to and underlie our taking pride in the accomplishments of other individuals.⁹ What is so widespread turns out to be rooted in a solid logic of attachment and appraisal.¹⁰ Pride and shame in other group members may also have a self-interested aspect; others' achievements and failures shape

pp. 846-52.

⁹What about feeling pride in others without any acquaintance or commonality, as when someone feels proud of, say, a Burmese political dissident for her intelligence, integrity and courage? Two answers seem possible. First, such feeling should not be deemed pride, but admiration. Second, it is pride and it is rooted in our commonality as fellow human beings. We are inclined to give the second answer.

¹⁰See also David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L.A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Clarendon, 1965), Book II, Part I, Section II, "Of pride and humility; their objects and causes," p. 279: "A man may be proud of his beauty, strength, agility, good mein, address in dancing, riding, fencing, and of his dexterity in any manual business or manufacture. But this is not all. The passion looking farther, comprehend whatever objects are in the least ally'd or related to us. Our country, family, children, relations, riches, houses, gardens, horses, dogs, cloaths; any of these may become a cause either of pride or of humility."

the public image of one's group and thus one's own standing in the eyes of non-group members.

But this can't be all. After all, one might say that irrational phobias or an all-consuming envy have a certain logic of their own. A phobia is based on a belief in the danger of a certain object, and envy on a belief that one's neighbor's has more and the desire to have as much. But to say that they have an internal logic is not yet to say that they are rational. We might say that whether a certain instance of an emotion is rational depends on its relation to accompanying beliefs, desires, and behavior. More specifically, an emotion is irrational if it is either based on a false belief, supportive of a self-defeating desire, or generative of counter-adaptive behavior. A phobia of harmless spiders *is* irrational because it implies a false belief in their danger. Excessive envy may well be irrational if it involves a self-defeating desire. What about pride in others? We have not yet seen any reason for thinking that it involves flawed beliefs, desires, or actions. Of course, one might try to show that it typically leads to counter-adaptive behavior, but Kennedy has not done this at all. Rather, he treats pride in others as irrational on the grounds that it is a kind of category mistake. By pointing to its internal logic, we have tried to show that it is not a category mistake, and our brief discussion of its rationality shows what an irrational emotion would be and why pride in others does not seem immediately vulnerable to the charge of irrationality. The idea, then, that pride is legitimately directed only at one's own accomplishments is entirely unsupported.

This leads to the second question. Kennedy might respond by conceding the rationality of pride in others as long as the others are selected on the basis of acquaintance, accomplishment, or interest, and not on the basis of some unchosen trait such as skin color. In other words, he might argue that if a person identifies with others because they are also lawyers or Rotarians, it makes sense to feel pride about their accomplishments, but not if the others are selected by skin color (or nationality, gender, etc.). This would mean that Kennedy's complaint is not so much with who or what characteristics are affectively responded to, but the basis on which the others in whom one feels pride are selected.

This is not an incoherent position, but it is a misguided one. The fact is that sometimes an inherited trait, being male or female, black or white, American or German, disabled or not, is a salient fact about oneself and others. In our society, skin color is not like eye color; it makes a difference to who one is, what one is up against, and what one's possibilities are. That is why individuals with such common traits are similarly positioned in the world, and it is because of this similar position that they are and feel themselves to be members of one group. As members of a racial group, individuals have and feel themselves to have something in common with one an-

other.¹¹ And it is this commonality that gives rise to and accounts for the rationality of sometimes feeling pride and shame in these others. If it makes sense to manifest such affective responses to others in the chosen community of lawyers, it makes no less sense to respond affectively to others in the non-chosen community rooted in one's race, nationality, or physical (or social) condition. The logic, though by no means universal, is as follows: They are up against what I am up against and *I* feel pride when *they* manage (in *their* way) to overcome *our* obstacles. This is not to say that such pride in other group members is justified *only* in the face of obstacles and oppression (see section 3 below on kinship among non-oppressed groups), but shared oppressive circumstances are an important impetus for pride and solidarity in many groups, for example, women, gays, Jews, or African-Americans.

This brings us to the notion of race. For Kennedy, race is not something anyone accomplishes. But what is this thing that I have not accomplished? Kennedy's essay strongly suggests that it is a matter of "the color of my skin, the width of my nose, the texture of my hair, and the various other signs that prompt people to label me black ..."¹² This is only confirmed by his contrast of loyalties of blood versus loyalties of will that is made in order to argue that race is not a proper basis for feelings of kinship.¹³ But, as we will see in the next section, race is not correctly understood simply or even primarily in terms of blood or genes. Racial belonging is also a matter of circumstance or situation—that is, in this case, an inherited social history of discrimination and a foreclosed range of options, among other things. It is because race is precisely something different from blood that Kennedy's rejection of it as a basis for solidarity and kinship is so wrong. There is nothing irrational about feeling a special bond with those who share with oneself a social position, even if that position did not result from a voluntary choice.

But is it ethical to feel such solidarity with other members of one's (non-voluntary) group and to act on those feelings? Kennedy goes on to discuss the ethical dimension of racial solidarity. He asks us to consider the example of a black Yale Law School professor who shows a special interest in and affection for black law students by, for example, inviting them to annual holiday get-togethers. Kennedy raises the question whether this professor also favors black students in his "official duties" in the classroom, in consultations and grading. Kennedy reasons that as much as a fair-minded person might try to separate the two, it is "inconceivable that there would be

¹¹Feeling a commonality with others is already sufficient for there being some such commonality. Here perception is, in part, constitutive of reality.

¹²Kennedy, "Race Problem," p. 55. In his well-received *Race, Crime, and the Law* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1997), Kennedy, to his credit, treats race more as a social phenomenon than as a physical one.

¹³Kennedy, "Race Problem," p. 58.

no seepage from the personal sphere into the professional sphere.”¹⁴ This is a legitimate worry. But reflection on the matter should put this worry in its proper perspective. Such seepage from the level of friendship and personal affection to the level of professional power relations (e.g., “the old boys club”) exists and has long existed (usually working not to the benefit but to the detriment of blacks). It is not a problem unique to racial solidarity. But to the extent that racial solidarity could contribute to unfair treatment, we should oppose the latter not the former, just as we should oppose cronyism in professional life but not friendship itself. Besides, Kennedy probably underestimates his colleagues’ ability to separate the personal from the professional, especially where the personal relations are a matter not of intimate friendships but of occasional holiday invitations and casual expressions of support and encouragement. To bar or discourage such activities would lead to an infelicitous judicialization of our schools and universities. No one is saying here that racial solidarity ought to mean unequal evaluation or unfair advancement and promotion.¹⁵

At first blush, Kennedy’s position might seem to be a reasonable one. It is predicated on the belief that each of us is a human being whose bonds to other human beings are not and should not be determined by contingent and unchosen personal characteristics, such as skin color, but on behavior—on what people have made of themselves absent any reference to skin color. The universalist and character-based ideal is a good one, but it suffers from a sorry abstraction. Human beings do have bonds to particular others. They always will. And they have them in virtue not merely of their life stories, but of their starting conditions as well. The crucial point is that life stories and starting conditions are not separate affairs; they are interwoven, inextricably so. In a society such as ours, beset with racial injustice, skin color is a large part of a person’s starting condition and his or her life story.

2.

We want to consider now the case whether racial solidarity makes no sense because there are no races. It is widely said and widely (though not quite universally) recognized that the idea of race as used here has little or no basis on scientific, that is, biological or anthropological, grounds. In various writings, Anthony Appiah has done perhaps more than anyone else to drive

¹⁴Ibid., p. 64.

¹⁵In a different context, Stephen Nathanson offers a persuasive defense of the morality of racial kinship or, as he calls it, “moderate racial loyalty.” See his “Is Patriotism Like Racism?” in the *American Philosophical Association Newsletter on Philosophy and the Black Experience*, 91:2 (Fall 1992), pp. 9-11.

this all-important point home.¹⁶ We agree with the point and want only to briefly rehearse the evidence here.¹⁷ First, basing racial or subspecies classification on skin color rather than any number of other genetically heritable traits has no special scientific justification.¹⁸ Second, there is as much variation within populations or supposed "races" as there is between them (genetic variation between "races" accounts for about .012% of genetic material.)¹⁹ Third, because of the continuous exchange over the years of genes among supposed races, individuals do not fall into clearly delineated, discrete racial groups.²⁰ Fourth, and perhaps most importantly, there is no known evidence and it is "highly unlikely that these differences in skin color have anything to do with intelligence, personality or ability," a correlation typically assumed by biological race theories.²¹ The upshot is that, as Appiah puts it, "there are no races" at least in the biological sense,²² or as Amy Gutmann says, we can reject "race as an essential, natural division among human beings ..."²³

Now, if there are no races in the usual sense, it might seem to follow that racial kinship, pride, and solidarity are incoherent, because they are based on a big misconception, and thus best abandoned. However, this inference would be premature and not easily justified. After all, it might be said that races exist not as natural but as social (or socio-historical) phenomena. That is, it might be held, as it often is, that race is a "social construction." Talk of "social constructions" can be confusing. The first thing to notice is that some social constructions are well-entrenched, both behaviorally and institutionally. This is what gives special ontological weight to social constructions that include such entities as the Supreme Court, the state of New Jersey, the French nation, Mormons, and shares in the stock market. Few people would want to deny the reality of these social constructions and their causal relevance to the world we live in. Few would want to suggest that we stop believing in them or start behaving as if they did not exist. There are, however, other social constructions that one might want to stop basing one's

¹⁶See especially "Race, Culture, Identity: Misunderstood Connections," in K. Anthony Appiah and Amy Gutmann, *Color Conscious* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

¹⁷The following research is borrowed from Appiah and from articles by specialists appearing in the special issue on race of the magazine *Discover* (November 1994).

¹⁸See Jared Diamond, "Race Without Color," *Discover*, November 1994, pp. 83-89.

¹⁹See Paul Hoffman, "The Science of Race," p. 4, and James Shreve, "Terms of Estrangement," pp., 57-63, both in *Discover*, November 1994.

²⁰See Shreve, "Terms of Estrangement."

²¹See Christopher Wills, "The Skin We're In," *Discover*, November 1994, pp. 77-81, here p. 78.

²²Appiah, "Race, Culture, Identity," p. 71.

²³Gutmann, in *Color Conscious*, p. 163. For a dissenting view according to which biological races are real, see Michael Levin, *Why Race Matters* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1997), chaps. 2-5.

beliefs and behavior on. Examples of these might include Santa Claus, occult forces, phlogiston, or races in the biological sense. Call the first type of social constructions durable social realities. Call the second type expendable social illusions.²⁴

The question is whether race, in some nonbiological sense, belongs to the first group or the second. That is, are American blacks taken as a group more like Mormons and stock market shares or more like Santa Claus and phlogiston? If there is no biological or social coherence at all to racial groups, nothing that holds them together as the groups they are, then race would be not so different from phlogiston. If there is some coherence, then race would seem more undeniably socially real like the Mormons, the French, and so on. What might bind together a racial population such as African-Americans in America today?

One candidate is a common and unique culture. There is good reason for skepticism about the claim that black Americans have a unique culture of their own. As Appiah argues, given the wide diversity among them, "African-Americans do not have a single culture, in the sense of shared language, values, practices, and meaning."²⁵ He precedes this claim by opposing the "unanimist" view that there is a single culture common to all Africans. He follows it up with the contention that "there is no common culture of the United States," because, while "there are large-scale tendencies within American life ... [that make it] individualist, litigious, racially obsessed," these tendencies are not derived from "beliefs and values and practices (almost) universally shared and known to be so."²⁶ In a sense, then, talk of an African culture, an American culture, and an African-American culture can only be a kind of discursive shorthand. Within each of these "cultures," enormous differences exist in the absence of any universally shared essence (whether that essence be conceived as timeless or not)—hence, no *common* culture. (For example, jazz or hip-hop are hardly enjoyed by all African-Americans.²⁷) And many of their features are present in other cultures—hence, no *unique* culture. As a result, there are no properties that would serve to distinguish all or nearly all instances of black American culture from other cultures. This point is significant because it helps us avoid thinking of

²⁴Of course, it may seem question-begging to assume that the first type are real while the second type are not. But our point cannot be one of proving the reality or mythical status of any of those entities. Rather, we are simply assuming that there is such a distinction and that the reader will also see that even if race is a social construction, it is not necessarily nonexistent or illusory.

²⁵Appiah, "Race, Culture, Identity," p. 90.

²⁶Ibid., p. 87.

²⁷See *ibid.*, p. 90, where Appiah criticizes the view that understands "black people as sharing black culture *by definition*: jazz or hip-hop belongs to an African-American, whether she likes it or knows anything about it, because it is culturally marked as black."

these cultures as monolithic (or even unchanging). It is also significant because in the absence of a common cultural core, as Appiah points out, we often end up unwittingly falling back on the idea of blood in order to identify group members.²⁸

Yet the absence of a common culture does not mean that culture has no role to play in our understanding of racial groups. There may be and usually are "large scale tendencies" that distinguish one culture from another. These tendencies, taken together in a loose, family-resemblance fashion, may constitute what we can call, for lack of a better term, a *common, overlapping cultural background*—a background that does not assume any single set of beliefs, practices, and so on as a necessary condition for belonging to that culture. For example, Americans who meet other Americans abroad feel that they share something of a common background not shared with other English speakers such as those from Britain or New Zealand. To be sure, the differences among Americans can be vast, but there is a common background in the form of television shows, national media, political institutions, an educational system, a family of dialects, perhaps even a certain way of perceiving things. (This is becoming even more true in a culture in which the same stores—Blockbuster, Toys "R" Us, Staples, Starbucks—offer the nation's consumers the same things everywhere.) Once this much is granted, we can ask whether African-Americans have a common background of their own. American blacks do not share a unique governmental and educational system or main media source.²⁹ Is it still plausible to believe in some sort of coherence? This is an empirical question and a loose one at that, for just how much commonality and uniqueness is necessary is anyone's guess. Still, we believe that there is something of the sort we are looking for.

Consider the question whether American Jews have a common cultural background. So long as they subscribe to the same religious beliefs and participate in the same religious practices, it might be said that there is an essential core that underwrites a common culture, despite the obvious differences among them. But now what about non-observant, secular Jews? Because Jews now intermarry with non-Jews at a rate of over 50%, often live in non-majority Jewish neighborhoods, and are only infrequently the object of discriminatory behavior, it is an open question whether there still exists an overlapping set of cultural tendencies that sets them apart. Even here, however, the case is not open-and-shut. Many secular Jews will testify that insofar as Jewish self-identification continues, there continues to be a feeling

²⁸See Appiah's critique of the later Du Bois in *My Father's House* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), chap. 2.

²⁹As Appiah says, "African-American identity ... is centrally shaped by American society and institutions: it cannot be seen as constructed solely within African-American communities." See "Race, Culture, Identity," p. 95.

that they have more in common with other Jews because of a shared background and outlook, however difficult it may be to pin down. The case for something like a common cultural background among African-Americans is certainly no less plausible. What we have in mind here is not jazz or hip-hop or Langston Hughes, that is, culture with a capital C, but rather culture in the wider sense of "socially transmitted belief and behavior patterns."³⁰ Unlike many ethnic groups in the United States, due to "slavery and racial caste" African-Americans have, in the words of Glenn Loury, constituted a "distinct, insular, subgroup of our society."³¹ Most African-Americans still live in black neighborhoods. Most attend black churches. Their rate of intermarriage is much lower than that of other ethnic groups. And this means that there is an undeniable separation that exists (and has existed for decades) among blacks and whites. This separation is part of what has given rise to a different and widely shared cultural background with a different set of concerns, a different use of language, and a different set of rules and assumptions.

But there is more that unites African-Americans than a common, overlapping cultural background. First, there is the existence of racism—from slavery to Jim Crow to racial profiling—and, more generally, racialism (thinking in categories of race). Blackness is, in large part, a matter of others ascribing to a group of individuals a certain label and behaving toward them in light of that label. In the case of African-Americans, such behavior has most often taken the form of abuse, separation, oppression, and the limiting of life-chances. Victimization destroys communities but it cannot help but create them at the same time. This is the ascriptive or third-person component. Further, there is the fact that African-Americans self-identify as African-Americans, and this means, as Appiah has shown us, that they shape their lives, "make themselves up" by drawing on a specific "tool kit of options made available by our culture and society."³² This is the first-person component of race. The upshot is that while there may be no biological races, African-Americans constitute a distinct and genuine group in light of three basic constitutive aspects: i) third-person ascription; ii) a common cultural background, and iii) self-identification.³³ In this sense, "races,"

³⁰Quoted in Appiah, "Race, Culture, Identity," p. 83, and used as his point of departure. The definition is from the *American Heritage Dictionary*.

³¹Glenn C. Loury, *One by One from the Inside Out* (New York: Free Press, 1995), p. 102.

³²Appiah, "Race, Culture, Identity," p. 96.

³³For a similar argument on the importance of both first- and third-person aspects of race, see Robert Gooding-Williams, "Race, Multiculturalism and Democracy," *Constellations* 5 (1998): 18-41. We should point out that these three constitutive aspects of race (here: blackness) are intended to explain what makes the group a genuine and more or less cohesive group. They do not aim to provide the necessary conditions for counting as a member of that

understood not biologically but socially, are not like phlogiston, but like the Mormons and the French and other socially and causally real entities, not necessarily in perpetuity (for massive assimilation could change all this), but certainly in the present context. And if races are real in this sense, then racial solidarity, kinship, and pride are not simply based on an illusion.

3.

In the remainder of the paper, we would like to round out our discussion by addressing three further questions. First, what implications does our justification of black solidarity have for the solidarity of other racial and nonracial groups? Second, is racial solidarity a moral obligation? Third, is racial solidarity generally a good and beneficial thing, and if not, what can be said about when it is so and when it is not?

On the question of other racial and nonracial groups: While our discussion has focused on the case of African-Americans, our argument would seem to suggest that group kinship might be defended on many of the same grounds for other groups as well. Consider the obvious parallel, namely, white solidarity.³⁴ Is it reasonable and ethically defensible for whites to feel or show special pride, kinship, and solidarity among one another on the grounds that they are white? Some might be inclined to respond in a "what is good for the goose is good for the gander" manner: If black solidarity is defensible, then white solidarity must be no less and no differently defensible. Yet there are important differences between racial groups that bear on the present argument. That is, black and white, here, are not exactly symmetrical terms. While this claim may seem surprising, it follows from the earlier argument that races are not biological categories, but socio-historical constructions. As such, the meanings of black and white may well demonstrate all sorts of asymmetries. So, the question must be addressed not formally but contextually, by attending to the genesis, nature, and goals of the constructed racial identities.

First, is there really such a thing as whiteness or white identity? While there is a kind of shared cultural background among African-Americans due

group, since an individual who does not self-identify as black is not uncontroversially thereby no longer black. Furthermore, we do not mean to suggest that skin color plays no role in our socio-historical conception of race. Skin color typically figures into the process of first- and third-person identification. However, whether skin color and other morphological features are either necessary or sufficient for racial belonging turns out to be a very complex question in light of the "one-drop rule" and the possibility of "passing."

³⁴One prominent example is the ideology espoused by the former Louisiana Congressional candidate, David Duke, who speaks out as a self-described defender of the rights and interests of "European-Americans."

to their being a minority of the population typically living among themselves, it seems rather implausible to claim that white (Americans) share a culture separate from the surrounding mainstream one.³⁵ This is in part because many whites belong to groups more narrowly defined (such as Irish or Italian or Jewish). Whiteness is not, to borrow a term from linguistics, "marked," that is, noticeable and salient, as blackness is.³⁶ For this reason, many whites are inclined to think, though perhaps not explicitly, of non-whites as having a race and of themselves as being raceless.³⁷ Yet racelessness or the absence of white identity does not follow from there being no distinctly white culture. Insofar as racial classification exists, in people's thought and behavior, even institutionally and legally,³⁸ whiteness must exist. But as what? In the present and throughout American history, whiteness has meant not "an inherent unifying characteristic, but ... the exclusion of others deemed to be 'non-white',"³⁹ and as such, an identity that involves certain privileges withheld from non-whites. If this is right, then, whiteness is a socially constructed racial identity constituted by exclusion and privilege. And white pride, kinship, and solidarity have typically been directed at asserting and defending exclusion and privilege. To anyone opposed to racism, this is manifestly indefensible on moral grounds. Notice, however, that we said only that white solidarity is *typically* about exclusion and privilege. It is not necessarily so. Perhaps, in a different day and age, it will be about something else. But such a shift would only come after a sea change in the meaning of white identity.⁴⁰

What this shows is that whether a group is or has been the victim of oppression will often be central to understanding the motivation for manifestations of pride and kinship and for evaluating their reasonableness and morality. Among oppressed groups, solidarity aims at recognition, mutual support in the face of obstacles, and equal standing; among non-oppressed groups and oppressing groups, the aim is not parity, but, in some cases (though not all, for reasons discussed below), superior strength and domination. In fact, oppression is clearly what underlies many other groups, such as gays and women, in which pride and solidarity are at a premium.

Yet we do not want to say that being oppressed is a necessary condition

³⁵See David Wilkins's introduction in *Color Conscious*, p. 22: "to speak of whites as sharing a common culture based on race makes little sense."

³⁶Thanks to an anonymous referee for this analogy.

³⁷Thus, what we now call rhythm and blues was once widely known as "race music."

³⁸On the issue of whiteness in U.S. law, specifically whiteness as formative of property rights, see Cheryl I. Harris, "Whiteness as Property," *Harvard Law Review* 106 (1993): 1709-91.

³⁹See Harris, "Whiteness as Property," p. 1736, also p. 1789.

⁴⁰Perhaps, even today, certain instances of white pride and solidarity may be morally defensible, as when whites feel pride in their efforts at overcoming their racist past.

for the reasonableness and morality of group solidarity. In some groups—for example, alcoholics, war veterans, and the disabled—it is hardship that takes the place of oppression. Furthermore, it seems that groups not united by being victims of either oppression or hardship have a legitimate claim to special group bonds. Consider, for example, the case of Swedish-Americans. Swedish-Americans, as such (not as white), belong neither to the oppressors nor the oppressed. Yet they form clubs and sometimes feel special bonds to one another tantamount to feelings of pride and kinship. Their basis and aim is neither parity nor superiority. Rather, there is a shared background, a shared set of interests (in the language, the literature, the food, and the history), and the point of their organizations is to enjoy, preserve and cultivate their heritage, just as part of the aim and basis of blacks' solidarity is to preserve and cultivate much of their heritage and their special cultural practices. This shows that part of group identity is a benign, though not necessarily superficial, interest in preserving a difference—not so much because it is different, but rather because it is theirs.⁴¹ Of course, each case of group identity needs to be assessed on the basis of its distinctive composition and aims, but the lesson here is that oppression, hardship and cultivating heritage will usually be the primary motivation behind defensible instances of group solidarity.

Let us turn now to the question of moral obligation. Our argument has been that at least some instances of manifesting special pride in, affection for, and solidarity with other members of one's (racial) group are reasonable and not unethical. This is not to say that one has a moral obligation to one's fellow group members that one does not have to non-group members. A distinction should be made between actions that are morally obligatory or required on the one hand and actions that are morally permissible on the other hand. Our argument has been that actions that embody racial kinship and solidarity are, sometimes or often, reasonable (i.e., not grounded on a false notion or confusion) and morally permissible. In fact, we might go one step further and say that they are not only permissible but commendable as well. In other words, they belong to those actions that philosophers call supererogatory, that is, while not required, they lead to good results and deserve our praise and encouragement.⁴²

Why not go yet one more step? Why not say that racial solidarity is, at times, not only permissible and commendable but morally required? This is a difficult and important question. Our inclination is to think that racial or

⁴¹On the deep needs for group identity and recognition, see Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism and "the Politics of Recognition"* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

⁴²On the importance of supererogation, see the now-classic paper by J.O. Urmson, "Saints and Heroes," in A.I. Melden (ed.), *Essays in Moral Philosophy* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1958), pp. 198-216.

other kinds of group solidarity are not morally obligatory. First, it seems that the duty to perform those kinds of actions that are already morally required—for example, keeping promises, repaying debts, respecting others' rights, saving drowning persons, and so on—applies with equal force regardless of race. Thus, a black person would have the same obligation to throw a rope to a drowning white person as he would to a drowning black person. But do blacks have other, special obligations that only kick in when the beneficiaries are black? We are not so sure. Parents and children or close friends have special (noncontractual) obligations to each other that they do not have to others. But these are rather unique acquaintance-based relationships. To regard racial solidarity as a moral requirement may well be taking too much away from our conception that individuals are fundamentally free to choose for themselves to whom they owe their time and affection.⁴³ So, failure to show such solidarity would not be morally prohibited as such.

Yet, while failure to show racial solidarity may not constitute a moral breach or violation, consistent lack of solidarity, among oppressed groups in particular, may nevertheless be a legitimate target of moral criticism and even reproof. In other words, consistent lack of solidarity may belong to that category of behavior that philosophers have recently come to call "suberogatory."⁴⁴ Suberogatory actions are those actions that while not prohibited, are still bad to do because they lead to bad consequences and/or reflect badly on the character of the agent in question. Examples of suberogatory behavior include not reciprocating favors, not showing gratitude, or being fantastically wealthy without engaging in the slightest bit of philanthropy. Such behavior may not violate anyone's rights but may still come in for criticism. Why is a consistent failure to show racial solidarity suberogatory? What exactly is wrong with such behavior or the person who exhibits it? One might look at either its consequences or its motives. Its consequences could be a weakening of bonds among similarly situated individuals and lost momentum in the fight against oppression and disadvantage. As for motivation, lack of solidarity may be rooted in a denial of one's own roots and situation. In other words, lack of solidarity may be a species of what Sartre calls "bad faith."⁴⁵

⁴³For more on the topic of special obligations, see Amy Gutmann, *Color Conscious*, pp. 169-74, Michael O. Hardimon, "Role Obligations," *Journal of Philosophy* 91 (1994): 333-63; and Charles W. Mills, "Do Black Men Have a Moral Duty to Marry Black Women?," *Journal of Social Philosophy* 25 (1994): 131-53.

⁴⁴On the suberogatory, see Julia Driver, "The Suberogatory," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 70 (1992): 286-95; and Christopher Heath Wellman, "Gratitude as a Virtue," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 80 (1999): 284-300. We are indebted to discussion with Wellman for prompting this discussion of the suberogatory.

⁴⁵See Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1992), chap. 2, as well as his discussion of the "inauthentic Jew" in *Anti-Semite and Jew* (New York: Schocken, 1965).

Still, we should be careful not to impute questionable motives before examining the case at hand.

Finally, we come to the last question concerning the benefits and possible dangers of group solidarity. As we have seen, the dangers are all too obvious when the group in question has occupied a dominant position. But what about oppressed groups that have a strong presumptive justification for group solidarity? The dangers might be said to fall into two types: internal and external.

The internal dangers are those that might affect the self-understanding among members of the group in question. Pride, in general, has its risks. It can lead to complacency, especially when it is directed at other members in a way that makes more acceptable one's own lack of accomplishment. Clearly, however, this should not impel us to avoid pride altogether. Perhaps more troublesome is the danger of "essentializing" or "tight scripting." Here the worry is that, in the case of black Americans, solidarity and kinship presupposes a sense of black identity, the characteristics of which might be taken to be a kind of essence, with normative force, or a set of scripts about how blacks should behave and lead their lives. This is exactly what anti-racist groups have fought against. Yet, as Appiah has forcefully demonstrated, the danger of essentializing and scripting can also grow out of endogenous efforts at identity-construction.⁴⁶ The answer here is to realize that self-identification and solidarity need to and indeed should function not as a limit, but to enlarge the range of acceptable possibilities for group members. Shared heritage and tradition can be recognized as relevant and worthwhile without turning into constraints on self-realization.

The external dangers consist mainly in alienating others, thus leading to what opponents of "identity politics" call "balkanization."⁴⁷ Sometimes ethnic groups are much admired for their cohesiveness and solidarity, for "sticking together when it counts." Still, where solidarity takes on features of one-sidedness, self-righteousness, chauvinism, and rigid exclusionism, sticking together can be counterproductive. The answer here, simple in words if not in practice, involves recognizing that non-group members deserve respect, recognition, and, most important, status as equal members of the human race to which we all belong.

The potential and actual benefits of group solidarity are perhaps more obvious. It provides a means for overcoming victimization by allowing for a network of support among group members and making more visible the

⁴⁶See Appiah, "Race, Culture, Identity," pp. 97-99.

⁴⁷An answer to the charge that a "politics of difference" naturally leads only to confrontation and balkanization can be found in Iris Marion Young, "Difference as a Resource for Democratic Communication," in James Bohman and William Rehg (eds.), *Deliberative Democracy* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1997).

needs of the group to outsiders. Such solidarity also encourages a celebration and cultivation of a group's distinctness, which for many is a source of meaningfulness and orientation in life.⁴⁸

4.

Our defense of racial pride, kinship, and solidarity might be fruitfully compared with the defense of affirmative action and preferential treatment. Proponents of affirmative action argue that it would be wrong in the midst of racial injustice to demand that society endeavor to transcend race by instituting color-blind policies across the board. Similarly, we contend that transcending race by giving up racial identities and racial solidarity is not always preferable (if it is at all possible in the first place). There is a difference, however, between the two arguments. While in the sphere of policy, we may say that racial or color blindness and transcendence is an ideal, one that we still hope will be realized at some point in the future. It is less clear that in the sphere of personal affection, we should even strive for the total abolition of group identities and solidarities. As our discussion suggests, it seems that special affection for particular others is a deep-seated human predilection and one that gives meaning and texture to the lives of many. In other words, thoroughgoing cosmopolitanism may not be a suitable or realistic ideal for life as we know it. Yet to accord particularism in the form of group solidarity an esteemed place in social life is not to say that universalism—a bond with the human race to which we all belong—should be or need be in retreat. Each has its place, and each deserves its due.⁴⁹

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⁴⁸See, again, Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism and "the Politics of Recognition."*

⁴⁹We learned from audiences that heard earlier versions of this paper at Georgia State University (at the Jean Beer Blumenfeld Center of Ethics), the Georgia Philosophical Society (at Emory University), and the American Philosophical Association Central Division meeting in Chicago, May 2000. For helpful comments and discussion, we would also like to thank Linda Bell, Sandy Dwyer, Barbara Hall, Robert Ladenson, James Rosen, Kit Wellman, Iris Marion Young, and an anonymous referee for *Social Theory and Practice*.

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