

Ethnicity, Race, and a Possible Humanity

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A CERTAIN delight of recognition forces me to smile every time I am reminded of the mother whom I saw on television not so long ago. She was recounting how her daughter—one of her several adopted children of various colors and complexions—had expressed her bewilderment at the sight before her. “Mum, look at that weird family,” she had exclaimed. “Their kids all look the same!” The child’s puzzlement is delightful because it punctures the taken-for-granted facade of naturalness that many of us, relying on experiences vastly different from hers, have built around our culturally particular ways of organizing family and kinship. The world she inhabited was a world without race—though no doubt she has since been confronted with, and perhaps even forced to join, our “raced” social world.

Of course, ours is a world from whose taken-for-granted, commonsensical perspective the nonexistence of race seems patently *nonsensical*. After all, to deny the existence of race is, it seems, to deny the existence of a biological fact. We could imagine a world—like the girl’s—in which we were *unaware* of the biological realities, but the biological realities would not thereby dis-

appear. It would be a world somewhat analogous to one in which humans had not discovered that there are fish in the ocean. The fish would still be there.

Or would they? Is this bit of our world’s common sense right? Is race something like a fish, something that *exists* out there for the discovering? Precisely this bit of our world’s common sense is what the girl helps us to call into question. Perhaps race is not a fish. It is worth subjecting to critical scrutiny the two related notions of “ethnicity” and “race” and asking whether a world beyond race is possible.

Ethnic Ambiguities

LET US begin with the facts. I am six feet tall, have dark olive skin, round brown eyes, and wavy black hair and facial hair to match. But the facts of my appearance have never been enough to ensure uniform guesses about my “ethnicity.” I have been asked by a friend’s Indian parents from which part of India I come. In Morocco, walking around with a blonde friend, I was asked how long ago my family had emigrated. But when I walked through the Moroccan *‘súq’* with my Andalusian friend, with her olive skin and black hair, pedlars barraged me, trying to make a sale to “Juan! Juan! Juan!” in Spanish. In Nice, near France’s border with Italy, my efforts to speak to the locals in my accented French were greeted with obliging

responses in a language of which I knew only enough to be able to tell that I was being taken for a visitor from across the border. In Berlin I would not infrequently be accosted by lost but overly optimistic old ladies hoping that I could give them directions in Turkish. My own inquiries for directions in Israel I prefaced with the hopeful “Do you speak English?”; the usually puzzled look I would receive was best put into words by the fellow who responded, “Yes, and congratulations, apparently you do too!” The others, too surprised to make a joke, simply queried, “But are you not Israeli?” In Vienna my German proved to be so fumbling at the cash register that the hurried cashier risked the potentially helpful “*Shumā Írání hastín?*” [“Are you Iranian?”]. In Bolivia the locals’ guesses about the fellow who stood head and shoulders above the five-foot crowd coalesced around Brazil.

But what are the facts? You want to know, presumably, not what ethnicity people guess when they *see* me but the genealogical facts. From whom am I descended? After all, like race, the concept of ethnicity is wrapped up with the notion of descent or genealogy. Whereas the guesses people might hazard based on physical appearance may be colored by my clothing, gait, accent, companions, location, or other contextual circumstances and filtered by the sociocultural categories through which the observer sees the world, the fact of genealogy can be, at least in principle, objectively established.

Or can it? If people are of the same ethnicity, if and only if they are descended from common ancestors—that is, have a common genealogy—humanity must be a single ethnic group. That, of course, is not how the term “ethnicity” is used. Presumably the ancestors in question must be ones who lived sometime later than the first Homo sapiens. The question is, How much

later? The answer to this question is, in part, arbitrary.

Let us return to the facts. One is that I live in the United States. Surely this fact does not help the inquirer after my ethnicity. Another fact is that I am from Canada. If I were ever to become a United States citizen, I would become an American of Canadian background. But presumably this still does not answer the ethnicity question. Canadians are descended from common ancestors only in the sense in which all humans are descended from the first Homo sapiens. Yet another fact is that I am born of Iranian parents. Surely this is the relevant fact. I am descended from Iranians, and so we might confidently conclude that my ethnic background is Iranian. The problem with this answer is that Iranians themselves do not seem to think that they all share common ancestors. My parents are Iranian, to be sure; but they are of Jewish descent—not Kurdish, not Baluchi, not Qashqai, not Persian, not Turkmen, not Armenian. Is, then, my ethnic background Jewish-Iranian? Perhaps we should simply say that my ethnicity is Jewish, or Hebrew, a descendant of the twelve tribes of Israel? But if we have gone back that far, why not push a little further? Is my ethnic background simply Semitic, in common with Jews but also with Arabs? Why not push even further, to the first Homo sapiens? The choice of “how far back” begins to verge on the arbitrary.

It is not just the “how-far-back” question that introduces arbitrariness. One could also ask questions about which genealogical line is to be considered decisive. One generation back, we have two choices—mother and father. Two generations back, we have four. Three generations back, we have eight, and soon the numbers become unimaginable. Perhaps I do, indeed, have an ancestor among the twelve tribes. But of the thousands of my ancestors who lived that far

back, many of them also are, in fact, through some genealogical line or another, ancestors of thousands, if not millions, of humans alive today who do not think of themselves as being of my “blood.” But why *this* line rather than *that*?

It is in part for these reasons that many scholars have begun to define ethnicity as constituted by *myths* of common descent. A people share a common ethnicity insofar as they share a myth of common descent—that is, insofar as they *believe* themselves to be descended from common ancestors.¹ Ethnicity is based on mythical beliefs about the genealogical facts, not the genealogical facts themselves. It is the myths that answer the “how-far-back” and the “which-line” questions—but the myths themselves

1. See Donald L. Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict* (Berkeley, CA: U of California P, 1985) and Anthony D. Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1986).

2. The term “socially constructed” refers to phenomena the existence and character of which depend on there being certain ways of doing and thinking about things that are specific to certain societies or historical periods. Usually the contrast is with things that have a purely “natural,” “innate,” or “biological” basis. For example, for most scholars sex is a biological category that distinguishes “males” and “females” purely in terms of X and Y chromosomes, while gender is a socially constructed category that distinguishes “men” from “women” in terms of the roles, characteristics, and identities that they take on in particular societies. In other words, the defining characteristics of a “man” and “woman” vary according to the particular society. A simplification illustrates the point. In one society a woman is a person who is a mother who rears children in a domestic sphere, who is obedient to men, who speaks only when spoken to, who is deemed to be irrational and emotional, and so on, while in another society the pursuit of a career, assertiveness, political office, and so on are perfectly compatible with womanhood. (The Bábí heroine Táhírih, for example, challenged the very idea of what it meant to be a woman in nineteenth-century Persia.) Both the defining features *and* the very existence of a socially constructed category depend on the context.

can often be based on historically inaccurate beliefs. This, of course, does not mean that ethnicity itself does not exist. Rather, it simply means that when it exists, it exists as a socially constructed category contingent on beliefs.² The “facts” of genealogy are themselves an insufficient basis for dividing humanity up ethnically. Unlike a fish, ethnicity’s very existence is dependent on beliefs about its existence.

Racy Looks

PERHAPS the concept of “race” enjoys an advantage over ethnicity. For “race” can be thought of as a concept that combines two ideas. It supplements the notion of genealogy with the notion of some innate traits that are genealogically transmitted. Thus, for example, members of the same race could be defined as humans who share common ancestors from whom they have inherited some innate traits, such as phenotype (physical appearance). The “how-far-back” question can then be answered “objectively” by referring to the relevant traits—for example, the point in time when a certain set of phenotypic traits, such as pale skin, straight hair, and so on, came to distinguish one group of humans physically from others groups. The “which-line” question can also be similarly answered. One traces race along the line that determines the inheritance of the relevant innate racially marked qualities. By supplementing the ethnic criterion of genealogy, the second criterion—the inherited innate traits—is supposed to provide “race” with an objective (and in the case of phenotype, a biological) ground. Race, like a fish, could then be said to exist independently of any beliefs about it.

The assumption embedded in such a conception of race is, of course, that its two constitutive criteria—genealogy and inherited innate traits such as phenotype—are compatible. In other words, the assump-

tion is that, when attempting to determine someone's race, examining his or her phenotype provides answers that *supplement* rather than undermine answers to questions about genealogy.³ The ostensible advantage of "race" over ethnicity is that the additional question about distinctive innate traits passed on through descent would serve to wrestle the concept away from myth and deliver it to the objectivity of sciences such as biology.

The problem is that, in fact, the two questions about genealogy and innate traits such as phenotype often provide contradictory answers. The commonly accepted advantage turns out to be a liability. Consider the American context. In the United States a person of "black" race is understood to be someone of sub-Saharan African ancestry who, as a result of that ancestry, has inherited certain phenotypic traits (dark skin, kinky hair, and so on). Hence there are two ways to determine if someone is "black": to ask about the person's ancestry and to see what he or she "looks" like. (Both questions are supposed to yield the same answer.) With respect to the "which-line" question, the United States answers with its infamous "one-drop" rule. If one has but a single black African ancestor, in the American context one has traditionally been deemed to be of "black" race. But consider

the case of Susie Phipps. Along with her siblings, some of whom were blue-eyed blondes, she had lived socially as "white" in Louisiana by virtue of her phenotype. When she checked white on her application, however, Phipps was denied a passport because the state considered her "colored" by virtue of her genealogy. She then sued to be officially classified as white.⁴ She lost, but the lawsuit was made possible by the fact that the two categories—phenotype and genealogy—of race need not coincide.

But, perhaps, it will be objected, the problem is not with the category of race per se but with the peculiar way that Americans answer the "which-line" question. Instead of monolithic racial categories that are preserved by always tracing race along the "black" line, one might argue for allowing for "racial mixture." Having ostensibly established the existence of different races by reference to genealogy and phenotype, one could then speak of people of "mixed race." But here again the two questions can pull in different directions. Consider Phipps again. The genealogical answer is that she is of "mixed race," while the phenotypic answer is that she is "white." The discrepancy has not been erased by this refinement.

What happens if one allows the phenotypic answer to trump the genealogical one? ("For all intents and purposes," it might be said, "the woman is biologically white.") This would mean that phenotype is also decisively answering the genealogy questions, such as "which line" or "how far back." But then phenotype seems to be doing all the work, whereas the discussion of ethnicity attempted to show why phenotype could not be sufficient grounds for an objective "biological" distinction.

How does the insufficiency problem work in the context of race? The attempt to determine race biologically by reference to some phenotypic qualities faces at least

3. Phenotype is one of the most typical inherited innate qualities associated with race, but other traits are also possible, such as genotype (that is, genetic makeup) and some supposed "essence" (compare, for example, the Afrocentric view of race) or natural dispositions of character. For simplicity, I will focus on phenotype, in accordance with everyday American social practice.

4. In *Jane Doe v. State of Louisiana*. See F. Janes Davis, *Who Is Black? One Nation's Definition* (University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 1980) 9–11.

two problems.⁵ First, phenotypic differences are matters of degree. Exactly where one should draw the racial boundary cannot be determined on purely biological grounds. As a result, a person deemed to be phenotypically “black” in the United States may be deemed phenotypically “white” in Jamaica. Second, humans vary in a multitude of ways—from hair color to hand size to nail shape. Which of these traits is deemed to be a relevant marker of distinction will be contingent upon the particular society in which the distinction is made.

For these reasons, among others, it has now become a commonplace among academic scholars that “race” is a social construct—that it is not determined by biology.⁶ The implication is that “race” in U.S. society may be entirely different from “race” in Brazilian or Moroccan society. Another implication is that “race” does not exist independent of social *beliefs* about race.

The no-nonsense commonsense response to the academy’s (majority) view would be, no doubt, to point to some obvious biological facts. I may have been variously taken for Indian, Italian, Latino, Arab, Israeli, and so on, but I have never been mistaken for Japanese. Surely race cannot be com-

pletely independent of the biological “facts”? Of course, there is a kernel of truth to this bit of common sense. Race may be socially constructed, but it is socially constructed by reference to biological facts that provide it with raw materials. The point is that race may be used to categorize people socially according to some phenotypic traits, but *which* traits are used as markers of difference and *how* those traits are perceived depends on the social context. Hence, on the one hand, race’s relation to biology is not wholly arbitrary. Its construction does make reference to some biological facts. That is why, for example, I have never been taken for Japanese. Race is not just “made up” independent of any reference to biological traits. On the other hand, race is not wholly determined by biology. Its social construction is dependent upon arbitrarily selecting some traits, rather than others, for special treatment. For example, while skin color is often thought of as a racial marker, different humans may have also inherited blonde, brown, red, or black hair, without their hair color being thought of as a racial marker. Humans vary not just in skin color but also in height, hirsuteness, left-handedness, finger-nail shape, foot size, and so on. These are all inherited biological traits. Whether they are socially thought of as relevant for categorizing human groups depends on the context. (A society that viewed its small-footed individuals as an inferior breed of some sort is no less absurd than South African apartheid.) A society in which phenotypic traits such as skin color were deemed to be just as irrelevant to grouping humans as left-handedness is in our world would be a society without “race” as we understand it. Race—like ethnicity—is rather unlike a fish.

The insight that race is socially constructed is what lies behind contemporary race theory’s reversal of the assumptions

5. So, too, for that matter, would an attempt to do so by reference to genotype.

6. For a discussion of some of the literature on the social construction of race, see “Race: Neither Biological Fact nor Social Fiction” by Algernon Austin in this issue of *World Order*, 33.1 (Fall 2001): 9–20. For a discussion of the lack of a genetic basis for the category of race, see K. Anthony Appiah, “The Uncompleted Argument: Du Bois and the Illusion of Race,” in *Race, Writing, and Difference*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1986) 21–37. Appiah also notes that, while not all contemporary biologists agree that there are no distinct human “races,” those biologists who believe that there is a genetic basis for race *mean* something quite different by “race” than its denotation in popular usage.

that were used to justify the American practice of slavery. Whereas for generations racial difference was cited in America as the basis and justification for slavery, contemporary theory suggests that it was rather the practice of slavery itself that created race in America as we know it. The result is this: Despite race's dependence upon beliefs, a person cannot simply "think" it away.⁷ The reason is that the existence of

race is not dependent upon *subjective* beliefs (that is, beliefs held by an individual). Rather, it depends on *intersubjective* beliefs and meanings embedded within social practices that continually reproduce race (that is, beliefs and meanings embodied and reflected in shared social practices, just as the belief in certain kinds of rights are embedded in American practices).⁸

The result is that race is a social fact. A de-racialized world would require not just a transformation of people's beliefs but also a transformation of the social practices that sustain those beliefs—practices implicated in a web of material and symbolic relations of power.

Reproducing Race

TO IMAGINE a world beyond racial oppression and injustice is not, *definitionally*, to imagine a world beyond race. But it is difficult to see how racial differentiation could *in practice* be sustained without the attending oppressions and injustices. This is in part because, for race to exist, it must be sustained by social practices that police—and enforce—its collective boundaries that distinguish "us" from "them." Since biology is itself an insufficient basis for racial categorization and identity, race and racial identity depend upon social practices that supplement biology by contingently choosing some traits, such as skin color or forehead size, as distinguishing marks of racial difference. As a result, we need to shift our focus from the conceptual realm of *defining* race to analyzing the social realm in which race is *institutionalized* in social practices. It then becomes evident that reproducing race as the basis for collective identities⁹ depends on the (often coercive) enforcement of racial boundaries that distinguish one group from another, along with the racialized modes of behavior associated with each group.¹⁰

It may be helpful to distinguish three

7. One of the most striking example of this comes from Nazi Germany. Before Hitler's rise, there were many fully assimilated Germans with Jewish ancestors who did not subjectively identify themselves as Jews at all; some were not even aware of their Jewish ancestry. But then the sociopolitical context changed, and the Nazis brutally imposed a Jewish identity on these individuals. Even though Jewishness had not been a part of their identity, after surviving the Holocaust, many of these individuals then saw Jewishness as a central component of their identity. The point is that even our *subjective* identifications are dependent on the social context.

8. As the political philosopher Charles Taylor has put it with respect to intersubjective meanings: "It is not just that people in our society all or mostly have a given set of ideas in their heads and subscribe to a given set of goals. The meanings and norms implicit in these practices are not just in the minds of the actors but are there in the practices themselves" ("Interpretation and the Sciences of Man," in *Philosophy and the Human Sciences: Philosophical Papers 2* [Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 1985] 36).

9. A person's individual identity answers to the question, "Who am I?" A collective identity answers to the question, "Who are we?" Whereas a person's individual identity distinguishes that person from others, a collective identity is an identity shared in common with other individuals.

10. Speaking of collective identity more generally, Appiah notes that "The large collective identities that call for recognition come with notions of how a proper person of that kind behaves. . . ." "Collective identities," he concludes, "provide what we might call scripts: narratives that people use in shaping their life plans" (K. Anthony Appiah, "Identity, Authenticity, Survival: Multicultural Societies and Social Reproduction," in *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, ed. Amy Gutmann [Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1994] 149–63, 159–60).

levels of analysis relevant to reproducing racial identity.¹¹ First, there is the *politico-legal sphere* of the *state*, which the sociologist Max Weber defined as the set of institutions “that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory.”¹² Second, there is the sphere of *society*, including (a) the *economic sphere* of the production, exchange, and distribution of goods and services, (b) the *public sphere*, in which individuals who do not personally know one another interact on a communicative basis, and (c) the intimate or *private sphere* of the *family* and *interpersonal relations*. Finally, there is the *subjective* sphere of the indi-

vidual (which encompasses the psychological processes of personality- and ego-formation). It should be emphasized that the public sphere operates through cultural and social structures—including secondary associations, such as professional associations, sports teams, religious communities, universities, and so on, that as a whole make up *civil society*. All three spheres help reproduce race, but in this exploration I focus on the first two—the state and society.¹³

One of the most obvious underpinnings of the social practices that help sustain and reproduce a “raced” world is the legal apparatus of the state. When race is institutionalized at the level of the state—as it overtly and oppressively was in apartheid and in the pre-civil rights era in the United States—the state itself becomes a key player in the (re)production of race and racial identities.¹⁴ In the face of overt state-sanctioned racial oppression, an obvious political strategy for achieving racial justice is to attempt to transform the political and legal system so that the state treats all individuals as equal before the law irrespective of racial categorization—in other words, to render it “color-blind.” The limit to this approach is, of course, that the state is not the only source of race and racial oppression. However color-blind the state may be, discriminatory and oppressive practices may continue to emanate from society.

Hence we must consider not just the state’s role in the production of race but also the oppressive structures within society itself. Here again there is a partial political remedy. The legal apparatus of the state may be deployed to sanction discriminatory social practices—for example, through the enforcement of a set of anti-discrimination rights. The limit to this approach stems from the fact that the overt racial discrimination that is susceptible to state action through the protection of individual rights is not the only social source

11. The categories are adapted in part from Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 2 (Boston: Beacon P, 1987) and Nancy Fraser, “What’s Critical about Critical Theory? The Case of Habermas and Gender,” in *Unruly Practices: Power, Discourse, and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1989), 113–43.

12. Max Weber, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, trans. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford UP, 1946) 78, emphasis removed. After noting that “There is a great deal of agreement amongst social scientists as to how the state should be defined,” John A. Hall and G. John Ikenberry (in *The State* [Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1989] 1–2) specify three defining elements: (1) “the state is a set of institutions . . . manned by the state’s own personnel” whose “most important institution is that of the means of violence and coercion,” (2) “these institutions are at the centre of a geographically-bounded territory,” and (3) “the state monopolizes rule making within its territory.”

13. For an analysis of the individual psychological dimension of the race question, see “Children and Racism: The Complexities of Culture and Cognition” by David Diehl and Elizabeth Ansel Kirsch in this issue of *World Order*, 33.1 (Fall 2001): 37–48.

14. Rogers Brubaker’s theoretical analysis of the role of the state in the production of ethnic and national identities is also germane for analyses of racial identity. See *Nationalism Reframed: Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 1996) ch. 1.

of racial oppression and inequality. For society also has a material economic aspect, and even if individual rights were protected, once class and race have become intertwined, unequal class structures may serve to perpetuate racial inequalities as well (and vice versa). The point is that class conflicts and inequalities are often an important source for the social (re)production of race, and state protection of classic liberal rights can often do little to alleviate them. There may be, for example, laws against racial discrimination in university admissions, but if some individuals cannot afford to pay high tuition rates, or if their impoverished background has interfered with academic excellence in secondary school, these individuals may still be effectively barred from the sort of higher education necessary to enter certain professions.

Again, there is a potential political remedy. The state may be called upon to undo the correlation between class and race, for example through affirmative-action policies and economic redistribution. But however effective or necessary such policies may be, they have their own inevitable pathology. In the state's attempt to undo the correlation between class and race—and thus to undercut the *economic* reproduction of race—the state paradoxically ends up reproducing race *politically*. For the state's

interventions in society are mediated through a bureaucracy that must make use of, and thus mobilize and institutionalize, the very category it seeks to undercut. The result is that once it has already been institutionalized in society, the problem of race calls for a more fundamental assessment than the solely political or economic. We must consider not just the oppressive political and material sources of the production of race but also the nature of the spiritual aspiration to human dignity that modern society itself cultivates among its members, even as its oppressive social structures continue to offend it.¹⁵

It might be objected that a distinction needs to be made between the oppressive reproduction of race and the reproduction of race as such. However, as noted earlier, the two may be inextricably linked in practice. We can see how the production of race is linked to oppression rather clearly when outsiders, whether the state or other social actors, impose a racial identity on their victims through racial discrimination and exclusion. But the link to oppression is no less important for racial identities sustained by practices of social control *within* the group itself. These two modes of reproducing identity—internal and external—often reinforce each other. Since our individual and collective identities are always shaped through our interactions with other human beings,¹⁶ and since societies have often denied equal dignity to some human beings on the basis of racially marked characteristics, it is no surprise that these human beings have found such characteristics central, even if negatively so, to their identities.¹⁷ With much compassion, the philosopher K. Anthony Appiah notes how this external imposition is often complemented by the second, internal mode of reproduction. One way to affirm one's equal dignity as a human being is to revalue socially enforced collective identities, not

15. This insight stems from one that lies at the heart of one of the foundational works of modern social theory, in the form of Hegel's analysis of how, under conditions of modernity, civil society systematically denies to the "rabble" the very bases for "personality" that modern society itself cultivates in human beings. See Shlomo Avineri, *Hegel's Theory of the Modern State* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 1972) 149–50.

16. See Charles Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition," in *Multiculturalism* 25–73 and Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action* vol. 2.

17. See Appiah, "Identity, Authenticity, Survival," in *Multiculturalism* 149–63, 161.

as sources of humiliation and insult, but as valuable sources central to one's identity—indeed, the very source of one's dignity:

In order to construct a life with dignity, it seems natural to take the collective identity and construct positive life-scripts instead. . . . In this context, . . . [it] will not even be enough to require being treated with equal dignity despite being Black, for that will require a concession

that being Black counts naturally or to some degree against one's dignity. And so one will end up asking to be respected *as a Black*.¹⁸

But now the victims of oppression themselves appear caught in a dilemma that parallels the state's attempts at intervention. The state's attempts to combat racial inequality paradoxically end up reifying the category of race—in other words, they end up treating a socially constructed category as if it were simply natural—and imposing upon individual human beings a bureaucratically defined racial identity.¹⁹ Similarly, the victims' attempt to take collective control of the racial identity and appropriate it for their own collective empowerment ends up having to reify the very category (that is, race) originally used as the tool of oppression. To reify race in this way—to treat it as natural or essential—is simply to fiddle with the straight-jacket, loosening it at best. As Appiah notes, on the one hand, it may be historically and strategically necessary for collective identities to develop in this manner; on the other hand, it is necessary to move on to the next step. The problem is that demanding respect for people “as blacks” requires that there be “scripts” that identify the proper ways of being black: “there will be expectations to be met, demands will be made. It is at this point that someone who takes autonomy seriously will ask whether we have not replaced one kind of tyranny with another.”²⁰ The dilemma is exacerbated by the circumstance that race links biology to social practices. The demand for dignity and recognition as a member of a particular race ends up requiring one to identify the “biological” object of recognition with a sociocultural “way of being.” This superimposition of a set of contingent sociocultural practices on an ostensibly biological category ends up reifying race and the sociocultural practices that reproduce and

18. Appiah, “Identity, Authenticity, Survival” in *Multiculturalism* 161. Bahá'ís may recall 'Abdu'l-Bahá's subversion of twentieth-century American racism through a revaluation of blackness as a source of pride rather than shame. Howard Colby Ives recounts the story of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's visit to the Bowery Mission area in New York in 1912. Among a number of poor boys who had come to see 'Abdu'l-Bahá was a single black boy, who was probably expecting to be unwelcome because of his race. “When 'Abdu'l-Bahá saw him,” Ives reports,

His face lighted up with a heavenly smile. He raised His hand with a gesture of princely welcome and exclaimed in a loud voice so that none could fail to hear; that here was a black rose.

The room fell into instant silence. The black face became illumined with a happiness and love hardly of this world. The other boys looked at him with new eyes. I venture to say that he had been called a black—many things, but never before a black rose (Howard Colby Ives, *Portals to Freedom*, rev. ed. [London: George Ronald, 1976] 65).

See also Richard W. Thomas's discussion of this incident and of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's approach in general in *Racial Unity: An Imperative for Social Progress* (Ottawa: Association for Bahá'í Studies, 1993) 123–24, Ch. 8.

19. The concept of reification finds its sources in Marx and Georg Lukács, an Hungarian Marxist philosopher. Reification refers to a process by which individuals think of and treat something as if it were natural, even though, in fact, it is socially constructed and thus a contingent feature of the individual's society. To return to the example in footnote 2: While the roles that define gender in various societies are socially constructed, most societies have thought of those roles as natural and grounded in biology. In other words, gender has usually been reified.

20. Appiah, “Identity, Authenticity, Survival,” in *Multiculturalism* 162.

depend on it. The reproduction of the social fact of race, lacking as it does biological foundations, depends upon social practices that police and enforce its constructed boundaries—boundaries that determine which individuals belong to which race.

The Race Beyond

I HAVE so far advanced three broad claims. First, race is a social construct, not a biological fact. Second, the social reproduction of race is effected by social practices dependent on relations of power sustained by economics and politics. Third, this reproduction is made possible only by oppressive social practices that are an offense to human dignity. To conclude, I would like to outline, in however preliminary a fashion, an approach I see as integral to the attempt to transcend the social reproduction of race.

The approach can be encapsulated in four theses. First, the transformation of the social practices that reproduce race requires a *positive* anticipatory–visionary undertaking that goes beyond simply fighting the evils of racial inequality and oppression in a reactive fashion. Second, such a visionary undertaking must tackle not only the political and economic aspects of the question but also the *spiritual* aspect. Third, attention to the spiritual dimension cannot be confined to the level of *individual* beliefs and action but must also address the intersubjective level of shared norms and principles embedded in *social* and state prac-

tices and institutions. Fourth, this positive, spiritually grounded undertaking requires the fostering of social practices and institutions the animating anticipatory vision of which is that of the *oneness of humanity*. I understand these four theses to represent a theoretical articulation of the premises underlying contemporary Bahá'í practice, inspired by principles found in the Bahá'í writings, in relation to the question of race.²¹ While I cannot fully defend these theses here, I hope at least to explain them and suggest their plausibility, in however preliminary a fashion.

The first thesis—about the necessity of a positive visionary undertaking—is in part supported by the predicament noted earlier: that is, the pathologies that accompany efforts to combat reactively the evils of racial inequality and oppression. By directly focusing on and using (and thus presupposing) the category of race, such efforts invariably end up reifying their object. This is not to deny that such efforts are necessary—they are. But they are also insufficient. Transcending the social reproduction of oppressive racial structures requires the social articulation of an alternative positive vision of human relations. To put the matter in this way is already to suggest why (as the second thesis claims) a focus on economics and politics must be supplemented by a focus on the spiritual aspect of the question: For the social articulation of an alternative vision of human relations presupposes a vision of human possibilities and the principles that might underlie them. The emphasis of the third thesis on collective *social* practices stems from the fact that race—like social phenomena in general—is not simply a matter of subjective beliefs but is itself reproduced by intersubjective social practices and institutions. Thus the alternative vision must be socially articulated as well—that is, it must be embodied in social practices and institutions.

21. My sensibilities about the question of social transformation continue to be influenced by a work I read a number of years ago. See Farzam Arbab, "The Process of Social Transformation," in *The Bahá'í Faith and Marxism*, ed. Association for Bahá'í Studies (Ottawa: Association for Bahá'í Studies, 1987) 9–20.

Several consequences follow from focusing on the oneness of humanity as a *positive, anticipatory, spiritual vision that must be articulated socially*. To say that the anticipatory vision must be *socially articulated* is to say that those committed to transcending a “raced” world must be prepared to cultivate alternative social practices that operate on the basis of “de-raced” categories. One cannot simply decide to think race away in one’s daily life when that life is conducted in a social context where race clearly does exist; falsely supposing that race is a subjective phenomenon, one might very well leave the racial status quo intact. Rather, one must develop and participate in new social practices that operate on an alternative “de-raced” basis. An ethic of the oneness of humanity must be put into practice structurally. This is not solely the realm of the individual but also the realm of society. The principle of the oneness of humanity must be institutionalized at this level. If organized religion is to be a positive force in society, at the very least it must provide a social setting in which alternative social possibilities can be practiced and institutionalized.

To say—as the fourth thesis does—that alternative social practices must be animated by an anticipatory vision of the oneness of *humanity* is, in part, to say that these social practices must recognize and respect the dignity owed to each individual by virtue of his or her humanity as such. But the principle of the oneness of humanity is not solely a matter of the recognition of the dignity of the *individual* as a human being. It is also a matter of situating that dignity

within the context of what unites each human being with his or her fellows. A *spiritual* understanding of the oneness of humanity does not stop, for example, with the formal recognition of human rights due to each individual (backed by the exercise of force by the institutionalized apparatus of the state); it supplements the defense of rights with a commitment to cultivating virtues such as detachment, love, and sacrifice that must also find a place in human relations. Such virtues are not susceptible to formal codification and institutionalization (as a set of laws, for example); they must find their way into social practices in a different way, more dependent upon the conscious exercise of individual choice and will. In this respect, the actors of civil society, such as religious communities, universities, community groups, and so on, are supremely relevant. But the state itself may play a positive role as well. For other than its *direct* use of its legal apparatus and its regulatory economic functions, the state typically also regulates the public education system, which is, together with the family structure, one of the most important settings for the formative processes of socialization. Thus the state can indirectly play an important role in the cultivation of the individual virtues necessary to sustain social practices expressive of the principle of the oneness of humanity.²²

On the one hand, the fact that the vision of the oneness of humanity must be socially articulated and institutionalized means that the concept of “humanity,” which serves to organize our thoughts and actions, may require being mediated by the more particularistic identities that are current within our social world as it is. One might find oneself committed to “humanity” *as an African-American*, or *as an American*, or *as a Bahá’í*. This was the argument of philosopher Alaine Locke for whom the oneness of humanity does not imply same-

22. For an argument about the importance of higher education in this respect, see Martha C. Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1997).

ness.²³ On the other hand, as Locke himself acknowledged, the appeal to particularistic identities must always remain partial. While struggles to establish a world beyond race in the United States can make strategic use of, for example, a common *American* identity and *American* traditions that provide alternatives to racist structures, ultimately such struggles must reach beyond American identity and tradition. For American traditions include not just the civil-rights movement and the declaration that “all men are created equal” but also the KKK and the Japanese internment. To pick some elements but not others as representing the tradition at its best requires implicitly referring to some criterion beyond the tradition itself, since mining the tradition itself for such a criterion begs the question.

The *anticipatory* aspect of the oneness of humanity suggests that the concept of “humanity” points to a forever-unattainable critical universal principle that guides our actions. Any particular social articulation of the universal principle remains partial, limited, and contingent and, thus, subject to critique and revision. What the universal *is* can never be fully articulated or realized. Rather, like an unattainable

horizon that is always within sight but that recedes with each advancing step, it is simultaneously a standard that is articulated, applied, and embodied (and so limited) by our current social practices and moral imagination *and* that serves to expose the limitations of these practices and our imagination. As philosopher and literary theorist Judith Butler has put it:

To claim that the universal has not yet been articulated is to insist that the “not yet” is proper to an understanding of the universal itself: that which remains “unrealized” by the universal constitutes it essentially. The universal begins to become articulated precisely through challenges to its existing formulations and this challenge emerges from those who are not covered by it. . . . the universal, far from being commensurate with its conventional formulation, emerges as a postulated and open-ended *ideal* that has not been adequately encoded by any given set of legal conventions. . . . A universality that is yet to be articulated might well defy or confound the existing conventions that govern our anticipatory imaginings.²⁴

The universalist aspirations of the principle of the oneness of humanity imply that such a vision can never be defined and socially articulated once and for all. Its universalist aspirations also point to its own moral limitations as an approximation of the universal, prompting us to see the oneness of humanity as but one more finite step along a moral journey whose uncharted road ahead is built and rebuilt with each attempt to go forward.

23. See Alain Locke, “Unity through Diversity: A Bahá’í Principle,” in *The Philosophy of Alain Locke: Harlem Renaissance and Beyond*, ed. Leonard Harris (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1989) 134–38.

24. Judith Butler, “Universality in Culture,” in *For Love of Country: Debating the Limits of Patriotism*, ed. Joshua Cohen (Boston: Beacon P, 1996) 44–52, 48–49.