

Appiah's Uncompleted Argument: W.E.B. Du Bois and the Reality of Race

1.

For people concerned by philosophy's reputation for ivory-tower isolation, K. Anthony Appiah's work on race is one of the more encouraging developments to come along in some time. Appiah has contributed greatly to making one of the messier and more contentious public issues of our time into an acceptable subject of English-language philosophical inquiry. And having launched his project by taking W.E.B. Du Bois as one of his principal interlocutors, he has also helped rescue an important American social theorist from the shadows of philosophical neglect.

As it happens, Appiah ushers Du Bois into the light mainly to make visible what appear to him to be blemishes. We can see this, and we can see why, from the title of one of the essays that mark Appiah's inception of the project: "The Uncompleted Argument: Du Bois and the Illusion of Race."¹ Du Bois was a racialist: he believed that races are real entities, that racial identities are real and valuable properties of human individuals, and that racial solidarity can help realize such human goods as equality and self-actualization. He accepted, of course, the testimony of the physical sciences, building even in his day toward the conclusion that races are not useful posits for the physical sciences; but he nevertheless insisted that race exists, as a phenomenon that is "clearly defined to the eye of the Historian and Sociologist."² Appiah, by contrast, is what we might call a racial eliminativist. He believes that races do not exist, that acting as if they do is metaphysically indefensible and morally dangerous, and, as a result, that eliminating "race" from our metaphysical vocabularies is an important step toward the right, or a better—that is to

¹Henry Louis Gates (ed.), *"Race," Writing, and Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), pp. 21-37.

²W.E.B. Du Bois, "The Conservation of Races," *The Oxford W.E.B. Du Bois Reader*, ed. Eric Sundquist (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 38-47, 40.

say, a rational and just—world-view.

A number of commentators have taken issue with Appiah's treatment of Du Bois's, or of Du Boisian, sociohistorical racialism.³ Unfortunately, neither Appiah nor his critics seem to have noticed a fairly straightforward way of reading Du Bois's argument, a way that leads to a similarly straightforward refutation of the metaphysical underpinnings for Appiah's eliminativism—a way that it is one of the burdens of this essay to make clear. I'm interested in the metaphysics of Appiah's eliminativism because he *says* often enough that we should stop talking about race on pain of various sorts of moral error, but he *argues* mainly that we should stop talking about race *because there's no such thing*. He makes his way to his eliminativist conclusion as Peirce suggests: by weaving different strands of argument into, as it were, "a cable whose fibres . . . are . . . numerous and intimately connected," rather than by producing a single chain of reasoning "which is no stronger than its weakest link."⁴ But the metaphysical "strand" does most of the work, does it badly, and gets away with it because of its entanglement with broadly plausible ethical claims that are too poorly developed to stand on their own.

In this essay I will construct the alternative readings of Du Bois and Appiah that I have in mind. I am concerned to do so not, or not principally, because of some abstract interest in clearing the ontological ground. My concern derives from the concrete worry that Appiah's metaphysical sleight-of-hand obscures the need for a real debate about the merits of racialized and race-based practices and institutions. My sense is that once we quit kicking up the dust with arguments about the alleged non-existence of race, we'll be able to see how much work remains to be done on the ethics of racial identification. That is: Once we recognize that there are eminently sensible routes to the claim that races *do* exist, perhaps we'll recognize also that worries about the prudence and permissibility of appealing to race ought to be explicated and addressed in those terms. It is not enough simply to gesture at moral

³Cf. Frank M. Kirkland, "Modernity and Intellectual Life in Black," in John Pittman (ed.), *African-American Perspectives and Philosophical Traditions*, special issue of *Philosophical Forum* 24 (1992-93): 136-65, fn. 66; Linda Alcoff, "Philosophy and Racial Identity," *Radical Philosophy* 75 (1996): 5-14; Lucius Outlaw, *On Race and Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 1996), pp. 152-55, and "Conserve Races?" in Bernard Bell, Emily Grosholz, and James Stewart (eds.), *W.E.B. Du Bois on Race and Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1996), pp. 15-38; David Theo Goldberg, *Racist Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1993), pp. 71-74; Robert Gooding-Williams, "Outlaw, Appiah, and Du Bois's 'The Conservation of Races'," in Bell, Grosholz, and Stewart, pp. 39-56.

⁴Charles Sanders Peirce, "Some Consequences of Four Incapacities," in Justus Buchler (ed.), *Philosophical Writings of Peirce* (New York: Dover, 1955), p. 229.

concerns while using metaphysics to avoid moral argument.

I will begin in sections 2 and 3 by examining the argument that Appiah develops in the second chapter of his important book, *In My Father's House*.⁵ His claim there is that Du Bois's allegedly socio-historical racialism ultimately relies on a more or less garden-variety biological notion of race. My counterclaim on Du Bois's behalf is that Appiah manages this reading only by seizing upon perhaps the least plausible ways of rendering a few rather crucial details and by manufacturing perplexity in the face of a patently non-vicious circularity.

In section 4, I take a moment to sketch the kind of account that I take Du Bois to have been groping for. Then in sections 5 and 6, I consider the argument that Appiah develops in his contribution to the prize-winning book, *Color-Conscious*.⁶ In "Race, Culture, Identity: Misunderstood Connections," he uses conceptual analysis to argue that race-talk necessarily involves an untoward commitment to biological racialism. Unfortunately for the eliminativist cause, this argument pre-supposes the success of the earlier attempt to unmask Du Bois as a biological racist, and eventually gets mired in metaphysical vacillation. Appiah does go on to gesture at the ethical concerns that motivate his inquiry, but, as we'll see, without their metaphysical accompaniment these gestures don't get him very far.

2.

It is only a little misleading to say that Du Bois begins and ends his career with attempts to define the concept of race. He offers one approach in an important 1897 essay, then revisits it in an autobiographical work forty-three years later, in both places explicitly addressing challenges from those who would "deprecate and minimize race distinctions."⁷ Appiah makes his way through these definitions well enough for me to use the summary from *In My Father's House* as my own. So what follows is a transcript of Appiah's view, which, as it happens, includes a tolerably adequate rendering of Du Bois. I'll deal with the inadequacies of Appiah's summary in the next section.

In the 1897 essay, "The Conservation of Races," Du Bois says that a

⁵K. Anthony Appiah, *In My Father's House* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

⁶K. Anthony Appiah, "Race, Culture, Identity: Misunderstood Connections," in K. Anthony Appiah and Amy Gutmann, *Color Conscious* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), pp. 30-105.

⁷Du Bois, "Conservation," p. 38.

race is

a vast family of human beings, generally of common blood and language, always of common history, traditions and impulses, who are both voluntarily and involuntarily striving together for the accomplishment of certain more or less vividly conceived ideals of life.⁸

The talk here of common blood and language holds only, in Du Bois's own words, "generally," and so is inessential. And since the talk of impulses and strivings is too vague to be of much definitional help at the outset, we can set it aside and return to it if necessary. So it appears that on this definition a race is a human group that satisfies two conditions: first, it is a family; second, it is united by "common history and traditions."

But the family criterion seems to reintroduce the inessential, and anyway unworkable, notion of "common blood." People are either born into families or conventionally joined to them; and since Du Bois and his contemporaries took race as "a matter of birth,"⁹ they would not have been thinking of families by, say, adoption. But common blood—that is, shared ancestry—alone is obviously of little help in demarcating the limits of race families. After all, all of humanity can be linked biologically. So we have to invoke the second condition, common history and traditions, to find the additional feature that divides the human family into narrower, distinct, racial families. It appears, then, that the talk of family establishes the necessary but nowhere near sufficient condition of common ancestry, and that races consist of those people who have a common ancestry *and* are linked by traditions and history. (Appiah goes on to treat tradition and history together, though without comment. For him the issue becomes one simply of common history.)

Unfortunately, there's a problem with using history to subdivide the human family: there's no non-question-begging way to define a group in terms of its own history. In Appiah's words, "sharing a common group history cannot be a *criterion* for being members of the same group, for we would have to be able to identify the group in order to identify *its* history."¹⁰ In the same way that John Locke tries to use memory—the self's reflective history—as a criterion for diachronic personal identity, Du Bois tries to use history as a criterion for group identity. And both strategies fail for the same reason: one has to identify an agent in history in order to tell what happened to it. So while Du Bois wants history to do

⁸Du Bois, "Conservation," p. 40.

⁹Appiah, *Father's House*, p. 31.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 32.

the bulk of the work in his account, it seems that history alone can't do much work at all.

Only the heretofore set aside notion of common impulses and strivings remains from Du Bois's allegedly non-biological account. But standard *fin-de-siècle* racialism tended to imagine talk like that as a way of pointing not to criteria for race membership but to historically discerned properties of racial groups that are already defined by descent and biology. And even if Du Bois meant to break with the standard approach, appealing to common impulses just reproduces the circularity problem: it's hard to say what counts as an authentically "Negro impulse" until we know who Negroes are. And if we already know that, then the appeal to common impulses does no criterial work. Appiah infers from this that "Du Bois's claim can only be that biologically defined races happen to share, for whatever reason, common impulses."

In the later work, Du Bois revisits the task of defining race in the face of eliminativist challenges. After rehearsing some reasons to worry over the viability and possibility of linking himself to African ancestors in any thick way, he concludes that

one thing is sure and that is the fact that since the fifteenth century these ancestors of mine and their descendants have had a common history; have suffered a common disaster and have one long memory. . . . [T]he physical bond is least and the badge of color relatively unimportant save as a badge; the real essence of this kinship is its social heritage of slavery; the discrimination and insult; and this heritage binds together not simply the children of Africa, but extends through yellow Asia and into the South Seas. It is this unity that draws me to Africa.¹¹

We've already seen that the basic strategy of defining race socio-historically can't succeed; it simply slips the biological definition in the back door. All that's new in this definition is rhetoric about the heritage of slavery, discrimination, and insult, which adds some detail to the talk of common history. But there are two respects in which even this addition brings us no closer to a criterion of racial individuation. First, Du Bois himself recognizes that it is insufficiently fine-grained to distinguish Africans from South Sea Islanders. And second, the discrimination and insult experienced by blacks all over the world varies considerably with factors like location, gender, and social status. It's difficult to see how we can on that basis alone identify Du Bois, Naomi Campbell, Zora Neale Hurston, and LL Cool J as members of the same race. Once again, the attempt to "conserve" race in the face of the eliminativist challenge fails.

¹¹W.E.B. Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn* [1940] (New Brunswick: Transaction, 1984), p. 117.

3.

There are a number of worries worth raising about Appiah's argument, especially regarding his interpretation of the talk of races as families, his conflation of tradition and history, and his quick dismissal of the talk of discrimination and insult. But I want to focus here on the major objection that cuts across both definitions: the complaint about circularity. A little scrutiny shows that this objection is misplaced, principally because Appiah misunderstands what Du Bois means by race history.

I'll restate the alleged circularity problem, just for the sake of clarity: On Du Bois's account, we are supposed to identify both, say, Paul Robeson and Puff Daddy as black because they share in something called black history. But according to Appiah, we don't yet know what history the predicate "black" picks out, and there seems to be no non-question-begging way to specify it. Du Bois seems to be saying that the black race consists of those people who've had authentically black experiences. But we don't know what those experiences are until we know what's happened to black people, and we don't know *that* until we know which people count as black—which leaves us precisely where we started.

The difficulty with this circularity argument is that it goes through only if the history to be shared can be identified only as the history of black people *simpliciter*—if, in short, there is nothing to be said about this history except that it is The History of The Race. But there is more to be said, as Du Bois knew. Appiah assumes that Du Bois's historical criterion points to a global feature of the group, a feature that the group has as a whole, that depends on the group's prior existence, and that members of the group possess on account of their membership in the group. But it's much more likely that Du Bois is arguing that certain persons comprise the group we know as the black race because, and to the extent that, they have parallel individual histories—that is, relevantly similar individual experiences of dealing with certain social and historical conditions. It's much more likely, in short, that Du Bois is interested not in some abstract group history but in the biographies of concrete individuals, biographies which, when relevantly similar enough, justify putting those who've lived them into the same category.

I'm encouraged to read the historical criterion in terms of a focus on parallel individual experiences of certain social conditions, because Du Bois foregrounds this kind of perspective elsewhere in his work. It appears, for example, in the famously terse "definition" of the black race that he offers to an imagined interlocutor in *Dusk of Dawn*. The passage begins with Du Bois accepting that "[r]ace is a cultural, sometimes an historical fact," and that "the physical bond is least and the badge of

color relatively unimportant.” The interlocutor responds: “But what is this group [the black race]; and how do you differentiate it; and how can you call it ‘black’ when you admit it is not black?” Du Bois replies: “I recognize it quite easily and with full legal sanction: the black man is a person who must ride Jim Crow in Georgia.”¹² To be black on this account is to have the experience of being seen and treated in certain ways. And the notion of relevantly similar experiences derives its content from this experience and treatment—as well as from the forms of common life and political solidarity that have developed within the boundaries laid down by social institutions like Jim Crow.

Appiah anticipates something like this move and responds that talk of relevant similarity avoids one problem of circularity by inviting another, viz.: How are we to specify what counts as relevant similarity? When are biographies ever parallel? Mixed-race persons like Du Bois present the difficulty in perhaps its starkest form. Du Bois had Dutch ancestors as well as black ones, in light of which it seems that he can identify with Africa instead of with his Teutonic heritage only on racial grounds that are not yet available to him—on the grounds that “the Dutch were not Negroes, [and] Du Bois is.”¹³

But this reply misses the subtlety of Du Bois’s account. The point is not quite that the Dutch were not Negroes while Du Bois is. It is, rather, that Du Bois was *seen as* a Negro while the Dutch were not, and that as a result Du Bois was likely to have experiences that his Dutch ancestors would not—and that his West African ancestors, if similarly situated, would. To say that a black person is one who has to ride Jim Crow in Georgia is to say that the property of race membership is a response-dependent property that depends on the theory-laden perception of people who’ve learned folk racialism at their parent’s knees. Appiah says himself that “what blacks in the West . . . have mostly in common is the fact that they are perceived—both by themselves and by others—as belonging together in the same race, and this common race is used by others as the basis for discriminating against them.”¹⁴ This efficacious perception—perception that mediates social processes that impact the life chances of individuals—is what distinguishes Du Bois from his Dutch forebears. Being seen as a Negro extrudes him from certain of the social locations available to the Dutch in the modern West, while the commonality of experience that follows from being seen as a Negro aligns him with Africans, both among his ancestors and his contemporaries.

¹²Du Bois, *Dusk*, p. 153.

¹³Appiah, *Father’s House*, p. 32.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 17.

And the common need to deal with those parallel experiences encourages him to embrace being so aligned.

One may worry at this point, as Appiah does somewhat earlier, that “the choice of a slice of the past in a period before your birth as your own history is always exactly that: a choice.”¹⁵ Appiah declines to elaborate on the point, but presumably he means to highlight the extent to which Du Bois has inserted himself into the process of metaphysical individuation. The point, he might say, is that the debate about racial eliminativism is a debate over what exists, and it’s a trifle unseemly to go around choosing what exists and what properties—black, white, other—one has. Of course, Du Bois’s “choice” wasn’t just a choice. Especially during the heyday of institutions like Jim Crow, people had racial identities ascribed to them. But that just pushes the problem back a step: on what grounds can someone else decide what properties you have?

As before, this worry indicates a failure to note some of Du Bois’s subtlety, in this case, his philosophical and metaphilosophical subtlety. On the philosophical level, Du Bois realized that, as John Searle puts it, collective intentionality can bring certain facts into being.¹⁶ Searle speaks of these facts as institutional facts, facts that, like money and marriages and governments, “require human institutions for their existence.”¹⁷ One might use the same language of choice that we encountered above to speak of the practice of treating certain pieces of paper as dollar bills. We have chosen, one might say, to give a meaning, and with it some properties, to a physical object that would not otherwise have them. We have assigned some paper the function of legal tender, and we treat it accordingly. One might then disregard the ongoing structure of convention that undergirds the paper’s status as legal tender, perhaps on the grounds that the choice to treat it as money is just that: a choice. But then one is likely to find excursions into the social world needlessly complicated. As counterfeiters usually discover, unilaterally opting out of the structure of convention has rather little effect on the other people and the networks of practices that continue to affect one’s prospects.

Similarly, Du Bois argues that a variety of practices in the modern West have brought races and racial identities into being, and that the institutions and practices remain in force even though we’ve thoroughly undermined and criticized their original foundations in the theories of biological racialism. One might object that it isn’t *really* the case that

¹⁵ Appiah, *Father’s House*, p. 32.

¹⁶ John Searle, *The Social Construction of Reality* (New York: The Free Press, 1995). See also “How to Derive ‘Ought’ from ‘Is,’” *Philosophical Review* 73 (1964): 43-58.

¹⁷ Searle, *Construction*, p. 1.

people have racial identities and that races exist, that we've just chosen to act as if they do; and one might on those grounds disregard the requisite conventions and declare oneself raceless. But, again, this unilateral decision leaves the network of disputed practices in place, poised to circumscribe the life chances and shape the experiences of millions of people—including, often enough, those of the decision-maker.

Identifying race as an institutional fact of some concrete importance in the lives of many people highlights the importance of Du Bois's metaphilosophical subtlety. Du Bois was a pragmatist, which means in part that we should interpret his argument in light of at least certain Deweyan convictions: that judgments, even metaphysical judgments, are hypotheses offered in the context of specific situations; that such hypotheses are to be assessed for the extent to which they facilitate human efforts to cope with these situations; and that judgment hypotheses are motivated by and laden with the same values and interests that distinguish situations, values that are sometimes political.

I don't have time or space to defend these pragmatic convictions. As before, I want only to note that there is some reason to think that Du Bois would have subscribed to them, and that reading "Conservation" and *Dawn* in light of them makes the sociohistorical account of race more reasonable than Appiah allows. Recalling Du Bois's pragmatism suggests that we should approach Appiah's worry about choice as a worry over the fruitfulness of a hypothesis. We might state the hypothesis like this: Race-related oppression exists and we have a need to identify its mechanisms and resist it; that need may be better served by maintaining and using some of the institutions made available by modern racialism than by rejecting those institutions wholesale and searching for a new set of social theoretic, existential, and political tools.

Appiah does raise the question of whether it is a fruitful choice to accept a sociologically defined, politically motivated racialist ontology—as when he asks "[w]hat use is a motherland with which even your mother's connection is tenuous?"¹⁸ But he does so disingenuously, by attaching the question as a footnote to what seem to be dispassionate philosophical arguments divorced from questions of political practice. I hope to have shown so far that the philosophical arguments are not as decisive as Appiah believes, that the alleged circularity of Du Bois's sociohistorical racialism disappears once we understand race history in terms of parallel individual experiences rather than in terms of participation in some global Race Experience. If Appiah wants to refute Du

¹⁸Appiah, *Father's House*, p. 41.

Bois, he'll have to address the pragmatic question directly.

4.

In "Race, Culture, Identity: Misunderstood Connections," Appiah does take up the pragmatic question of the value of a racist ontology. But he does so only after marshalling more putatively dispassionate philosophical arguments, this time from the arena of the philosophy of language. I'll address those arguments in the next section. In this section I want to say a bit more about what it means to adopt the kind of pragmatic racism I claim to find in the work of Du Bois. I don't intend to defend the Du Boisian position; there isn't space for that. I mean only to indicate the general shape of the conceptual space that eliminativism tends to ignore, for the sake of making clear that repudiating race-talk isn't the only strategy that reasonable people might adopt.

I suggested above that Appiah's circularity worry dissolves once we recognize that Du Bois's appeal to common history is an appeal to parallel individual histories, not to a single group history. From that point on, I developed the account that I take Du Bois to be giving by responding to a handful of Appiah's other worries. We might summarize the Du Boisian approach in this way, with the addition of some resources and language from Searle and others, and focusing, as Du Bois does, on the black race.

Individual experiences are made parallel by the efficacious theory-laden gaze that blacks—that is to say, people of a certain physiognomic profile—endure under Western racist culture. To be seen as a Negro is, on this account, to have, or to be susceptible of having, one's social status downwardly constituted in regular and specifiable ways.¹⁹ The regularity of this downward social constitution is such that the experience is widely shared, and its severity is such that those subject to it recognize a shared need to resist. The resistance is unified by its orientation toward the specific modality of oppression—that is, those who are oppressed as black folk unify as black folk: the common need calls into being a community of interest. The community of interest is a community also in a richer sense, to the extent that ties of sentiment and overlapping culture develop within the boundaries laid down by the racist culture and appropriated by the anti-racist resistance. The creation of this community is an act of collective intentionality, bringing into

¹⁹I borrow the language of downward social constitution from Laurence Thomas, "Moral Deference," *Philosophical Forum* 24 (1992-93): 233-50.

being new modes of institutional practice and new social facts.

By pointing to a distinctive range of practices, facts, institutions, and events, racial discourse thus provides the vocabulary and theoretical framework for identifying phenomena and social forces that would otherwise escape scrutiny. Analyses of social life based on such categories as class, nationality, and ethnicity, for example, are little help in understanding how a dark-skinned Jamaican immigrant and a dark-skinned American can be equivalent in the eyes of a midtown Manhattan cab driver, or how a populist movement to unite poor citizens and newly freed slaves in the post-bellum American South could be doomed to failure from the start. Race, on this account, doesn't abolish or override the dynamics named by these other categories, or by such categories as gender or age; nor does it supersede these categories as a resource for identification or social analysis. It merely operates at a different level of abstraction, and comes into play in a manner that can be specified only by reference to the specific context.

It is logically possible for someone to opt out of the network of conventions that maintains such social facts as that dollar bills are legal tender or that Jesse Jackson and Kofi Annan are both black men (in the right racialized context, of course; following Du Bois and Appiah, I focus on the American concept of race). But it may be sociologically impossible or simply politically unwise, as the Freeman discover every time they are caught trying to opt out of the conventions that define the American monetary system. Attempting to opt out of or eliminate the conventions that define race in America is unwise, if Du Bois is right, because those conventions provide a peculiarly useful means of identifying the victims of certain oppressive modern practices, of organizing to resist the operations of those practices, and, for black folk at least, of preserving certain forms of life that are intrinsically valuable.

This Du Boisian approach is a far cry from the conception of race that troubles Appiah, a worrisome conception that is at the heart of the eighteenth and nineteenth century approach to human variation that we might call *classical racialism*. (A bit later on, Appiah will give us good reason to disaggregate the eighteenth and nineteenth century versions of this view, but for now there's no need.) Classical racialists like, say, David Hume hold that races are biological populations, groups of people whose character, customs, worth, and potential are all determined by some essence that they all share, an essence that is inherited and that happens also to determine specific physiological similarities as well. Du Bois, by contrast, holds that races are sociological populations—remember: phenomena that are “clearly defined to the eye of the

Historian and Sociologist”—and that they were brought into being by the institutions and practices of classical racialism.

On Du Bois's view, the populations that Hume called races clearly do not exist, but groups more or less coterminous with those populations do exist: they were created by people acting in accordance with and in opposition to classical racist myths. What people of the same race share is not a common inherited essence but a common experience of certain created conditions (whether created by the mechanisms of oppression or in response to them). And where classical racialism took a certain complement of physical features as a sign of an inherited essence that shaped such non-physical traits as intelligence, Du Boisian socio-historical racialism takes physiognomy only as a condition of entry into the institutions of racist culture. The physical features that would have led to differential treatment under classical racialism tend to covary still with differential life chances today, as lingering disparities in wealth and in infant mortality rates demonstrate.²⁰ As a consequence, these features may be useful in identifying and predicting the operations of certain social forces.

Once again, I do not claim to have provided a decisive argument in favor of sociohistorical racialism. My aim in this section has simply been to show that eliminativism is not necessarily the only philosophically respectable approach to the ontology of race. Eliminativism exhausts the field only if certain assumptions are built in, assumptions that are rarely made explicit. If one thinks, for example, that social facts in general are facts only in some honorific sense of the term, and that only the entities postulated by, say, physics are real, then of course races do not exist. But this kind of physicalism is profoundly counterintuitive, and seems to function more as a way of inflating the notion of reality than as a tool for guiding our interactions with the world. We can see this inflationary tendency when we try on physicalism vis-à-vis World Cup soccer (“There’s no such thing as a goal!”) or property relations (“I didn’t steal that—there’s no such thing as ownership . . .”). More to the point, eliminativists tend to be physicalists only about race, refusing, wisely, even to attempt a general argument against the reality of social facts. Appiah is no exception.

Then again, one might accept that races are social facts, but hold also that they are problematic social facts. On this approach, eliminativism is a matter of making a metaphysical proposal, of urging that we abolish an institution that exists, with all its component facts and relations, but that

²⁰Cf. Melvin Oliver and Thomas Shapiro (eds.), *Black Wealth/White Wealth* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

we'd be better off without. Appiah ignores this approach most of the time and argues for eliminativism explicitly as a matter of purely descriptive metaphysics: he's telling his readers what there is, not what should be done about what is. As I mentioned above, he eventually makes his way to some prudential and moral considerations that in his view weigh against the practices of racial identification, but only after attempting the descriptive work. In order to get to his pragmatic arguments, we have to work through a final version of his descriptive eliminativism. That is the task of the next section.

5.

In the initial section of "Race, Culture, Identity," entitled "Analysis," Appiah attempts to establish the first principle of eliminativism, the metaphysical point that "the only human race . . . is *the* human race." Then, in a section entitled "Synthesis," he takes a gradualist approach to the second principle, the moral imperative. Instead of arguing that we should place a moratorium on all practices of racial identification, he suggests that we retire the concept of race and "use instead the notion of a racial identity" until we can "move beyond" it. Inspired, he says, by the criticisms of his early attack on Du Bois, he aims to accept and account for the undeniable reality of certain racialized phenomena while still insisting that race is not real. As we'll see, the result is an account that is riven by an internal tension and that presupposes the success of the failed argument against Du Bois.²¹

a. Analysis

Appiah approaches the question of whether there are any races from the standpoint of language, by attempting to figure out what we mean when we use racial discourse. In this way he converts the metaphysical question of whether races exist into a linguistic question of whether race-talk is or can be meaningful, a conversion that brings the discussion under the purview of his main philosophical specialty, the philosophy of language.

Appiah begins by distinguishing between two broad approaches to meaning, the ideational and the referential. The ideational approach links meanings with ideas, so that "[u]nderstanding the idea of race involves grasping how people think about races: . . . under what sorts of circum-

²¹Appiah, "Race," p. 32.

stances they will apply the idea of race.”²² Appiah suggests thinking of this approach in terms of criterial beliefs, the beliefs that, taken together, define the concept of race and that define the conditions that must obtain in order for there to be races. Adopting a Wittgensteinian understanding of criteria, Appiah suggests that “a race is something that satisfies a good number of the criterial beliefs.”²³ He then points out that taking the criterial approach suggests that one way to understand the concept of race is

to explore the sorts of things people believe about what they call “races” and to see what races would have to be like for these things to be true of them. We can then inquire as to whether current science suggests that there is anything in the world at all like *that*.²⁴

The examination of beliefs called for by the ideational approach is best conducted, Appiah argues, as an historical examination, because exploring contemporary ideas about race would likely be more confusing than illuminating. As Appiah puts it, “current ways of talking about race are the residue, the detritus, so to speak, of earlier ways of thinking about race.” So we should look in history for the complete system of criterial beliefs about race, and “understand contemporary talk about ‘race’ as the pale reflection of a more full-blooded race discourse that flourished in the last century.”²⁵ Once we’ve found the criterial beliefs in history, then we can see what race-talk commits us to and determine whether these ontological commitments are philosophically respectable.

The second approach to meaning, the referential approach, suggests, as Appiah says, that “to explain what the word ‘race’ means is, in effect, to identify the things to which it applies, the things we refer to when we speak of races.”²⁶ He proposes treating racial discourse the way some philosophers of science treat scientific theories. He explains:

[S]ome previous theories—early nineteenth century chemistry, say—look as though they classified some things—acids and bases, say—by and large correctly, even if a lot of what they said about those things was pretty badly wrong. From the point of view of current theory, you might argue, an acid is, roughly, a proton donor. And our recognition of the fact that the classification of acids and bases was in itself an intellectual achievement is recorded in the fact that we are inclined to say that when Sir Humphrey Davy—who, not having any idea of the proton, could hardly be expected to have understood the notion of a proton donor—used the word “acid,” he was nevertheless talking about what we call acids.²⁷

²²Appiah, “Race,” p. 33.

²³Ibid., p. 36.

²⁴Ibid., p. 37.

²⁵Ibid., p. 38.

²⁶Ibid., p. 33.

²⁷Ibid., p. 39.

Davy's achievement raises some questions. How could he have been referring to acids if he didn't know what a proton donor was? But how could he not have been referring to acids if he distinguished certain substances from others just as we do, and called them acids, just as we do? Some people suggest adopting a causal theory of reference, which suggests that "if you want to know what object a word refers to, find the thing in the world that gives the best causal explanation of the central feature of uses of that word."²⁸ On this approach, Davy was talking about acids even though he didn't know that they were proton donors, because his "acid-talk" was occasioned by encounters with proton donors. Appiah suggests that we can apply this method also to the study of race. On his view we should "explore the history of the way the word 'race' has been used and see if we can identify through that history some objective phenomenon that people were responding to when they said what they said."²⁹

Both the ideational and referential approaches, then, call for historical inquiry. The ideational approach examines history to locate a pure form of racial discourse that makes its ontological commitments perspicuous. The referential approach examines history in order to see if there is some phenomenon that is to our concept of race what proton donors are to Davy's concept of acid. That is, historical inquiry in the context of the referential approach will show either that our race-talk divides the world up correctly even though our reasons for so dividing it are mistaken, or that race-talk is no better, no more accurate and no more susceptible to after-the-fact reclamation, than Cartesian talk of animal spirits.

The history to explore in either case, according to Appiah, is "the history of the ideas of the intellectual and political elites of the United States and the United Kingdom."³⁰ The ideas of elites take on such importance because the multitudes of ordinary people who participated in and used race-talk did so on the understanding that there were "experts" who had established more precisely the meanings of the terms in question. These experts were drawn from the ranks of the Anglo-American elite, who were able to fix the content of racial discourse because of the semantic deference they received. Appiah selects Thomas Jefferson and Matthew Arnold as representative experts on race-talk (with gestures towards Shakespeare at the far end and Darwin at the near end of the historical continuum), and proceeds on the assumption that understanding their views is the key to understanding the meaning of

²⁸Appiah, "Race," p. 39.

²⁹Ibid., p. 40.

³⁰Ibid., p. 41.

racial discourse.

Exploring Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Appiah finds a version of the view that I labeled classical racialism a bit earlier. Like Hume, Jefferson holds that the human population is composed of smaller populations, called races, each of which is visibly distinguished by its members' common possession of a unique cluster of inherited physical features. He holds also that the clusters of distinguishing physical features cohere reliably enough to support and invite scientific projects of generalization and classification, that equally distinctive sets of moral, cognitive, and cultural characteristics accompany and covary with the clusters of physical features, and that the groups defined by these clusters of traits can be ranked along a graduated scale of worth and capacity.

But Jefferson can't think of race as a biological concept just yet, because his Enlightenment conception of "scientific project" can't yet avail itself of distinct sciences like biology. Jefferson does approach race as a matter of physiological inheritance that can then be "invoked to explain cultural and social phenomena."³¹ But he conflates issues of "biology and politics, science and morals, fact and value, ethics and aesthetics" in a way that prevents him from settling squarely on biological inheritance as the key to human variation.³² As a consequence, he sometimes wavers in his commitment to a comprehensive conception of human types whose various attributes are explained and unified by biological inheritance. He famously says in one place that black people are "in reason much inferior" to whites, adding that "in imagination they are dull, tasteless, and anomalous." But elsewhere he can muster only enough confidence to "advance it as a suspicion only, that the blacks . . . are inferior to the whites in the endowments both of body and mind."³³

Matthew Arnold, by contrast, writes in the latter half of the nineteenth century, after romanticism and advances in the biological sciences made it easier to think of human characteristics as a function of the expression of inherited essences. This new essentialism enables Arnold to argue, as Jefferson cannot, that the various complexes of traits that define race membership hang reliably together, and that their doing so is a matter to be referred to and explained by biological forces. So Arnold is confident that race membership carries with it some definite moral status and intellectual endowment, and that these traits are passed down through the

³¹ Appiah, "Race," pp. 47, 49.

³² Ibid., pp. 49, 51.

³³ And this after saying that "the opinion, that they [blacks] are inferior in the faculties of reason and imagination, must be hazarded with great diffidence . . ." (Appiah, "Race," pp. 45-46). All quotations are from Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia*.

generations along with, and as surely as, curly hair or white skin. It is worth nothing that for Arnold "racial classification proceeds . . . at different levels . . ." ³⁴ In a fashion that is entirely representative of the late nineteenth century, he thinks of the Irish and the British as different races, distinct from and opposed to each other in certain important and specifiable respects. But both belong to the European race, which is distinct from and opposed to the African race.

Appiah goes on to point out some of the difficulties with Arnold's racial essentialism. For one thing, Arnold seems unclear about the division of labor between racial inheritance and environmental factors. ³⁵ For another, he can make no predictions about the character of mixed race individuals, since he has no account of the mechanism by which racial traits are inherited. This second problem points toward the most important difficulty with Arnoldian racial essentialism: it was soon superseded by modern genetics and evolutionary biology. Darwin and Mendel together undermined essentialism by showing that

each person is the product of enormous numbers of genetic characteristics, interacting with one another and with an environment, and that there is nothing . . . to guarantee that a group that shares one characteristic will share all or even most others. ³⁶

After Arnold, the history of racial discourse is, so to speak, all downhill; so Appiah returns to the question that launched the inquiry and answers it negatively. Thanks to the nature of language use and the trajectory that racial discourse has followed in its development, race, if it exists, has to be the biological concept that Jefferson was groping for and that Arnold thought he'd found. And if that's the case, then race-talk cannot be meaningful on either approach to meaning. Reading Arnold's notion of race ideationally leaves us with criterial beliefs about human variation and biological inheritance that we now know nothing can satisfy. Arnold applies terms like "black" and "white" only where a population is rigidly distinguished from other populations by the possession of moral, physical, cultural, *and* intellectual traits that all and only its members have. And we know that there are no populations like that. Reading it referentially we have to say that there are no "objective phenomena" that can underwrite Arnold's uses of racial discourse. There are groups that correspond roughly to his cruder biological requirements, but only roughly; and none satisfy the extra-biological conditions, the entailed degrees of intellectual capacity and moral worth. Appiah

³⁴Appiah, "Race," p. 59.

³⁵Ibid., p. 60.

³⁶Ibid., p. 68.

concludes that “if we used this biological notion, it would have very little established correlation with any characteristics currently thought to be important for moral or social life.”³⁷

Appiah’s ultimate conclusion on the meaningfulness of race-talk is worth repeating in its entirety. “The bottom line,” he says, is this:

you can’t get much of a race concept, ideationally speaking, from any of these traditions [Arnold or Jefferson]; you can get various possible candidates from the referential notion of meaning, but none of them will be much good for explaining social or psychological life, and none of them corresponds to the social groups we call “races” in America.³⁸

That is to say, the tradition of classical racialism can’t yield a race concept that has any hope of being instantiated. “Race” doesn’t refer to anything: there are no races.

b. Synthesis

After presenting the negative eliminativist argument, Appiah turns to the constructive task of proposing an account of racial identity. He styles his approach as an alternative not just to Arnoldian essentialism, but also to W.E.B. Du Bois’s attempt to construct a sociohistorical, non-essentialist and non-biological racialism. He points to his earlier attacks on Du Bois’s alternative, attacks motivated by and seeking to bear out the conviction that, as he says, Du Bois’s approach “turns out not to replace a biological notion but simply to hide it from view.” And he notes, as I indicated earlier, that his earlier arguments need some improvement. But he declines to renew the direct attack on Du Bois. Instead, he says that the difficulties with Du Bois’s account will be clear only after he provides his own alternative, and so moves on to “reconstruct a socio-historical view that has more merit than I have previously conceded.”³⁹

The main ideas of Appiah’s alternative account are fairly straightforward. He says that the acceptance and use of racial discourse by figures like Jefferson, Arnold, and of course many others, was misguided but nevertheless efficacious. Racial labels were applied to people, there was “a massive consensus . . . as to who fell under which labels,” and the fixing of these labels had certain specifiable effects.⁴⁰ Chief among these effects was, of course, the differential distribution of opportunities, resources, and other social goods on the basis of race

³⁷ Appiah, “Race,” p. 74.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 75.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 76.

membership, a distributive project eventuating in practices and institutions like Jim Crow segregation and slavery. But in addition to this social and political consequence, there was, and is, a psychological consequence: race-talk provides a concept by reference to which we can form certain kinds of thoughts about ourselves and others.

Once the concept of race is made available, a person can use the concept to form a *racial identity*, which Appiah defines as

a label, *R*, associated with *ascriptions* by most people (where ascription involves descriptive criteria for applying the label); and *identifications* by those that fall under it (where identification implies a shaping role for the label in the intentional acts of the possessors, so that they sometimes act *as an R*), where there is a history of associating the possessors of the label with an inherited racial essence (even if some who use the label no longer believe in racial essences).⁴¹

On Appiah's view, then, racial identification is a social practice that is parasitic on a misguided but nevertheless efficacious history of racial discourse. Most individuals identify others as members of this or that race on the basis of certain "theoretically committed criteria for ascription"—criteria like straight hair or dark skin.⁴² And they recruit the concept of race into their own self-concepts, an act which may or may not be consciously undertaken, and which "shape[s] the ways people conceive of themselves and their projects."⁴³

As a result of all this, Appiah says, "there are at least three sociocultural objects in America—blacks, whites, and Orientals—whose membership at any time is relatively, and increasingly, determinate." What he seems to mean is that processes and practices of ascription and identification work on the level of individual interaction to sort persons into these three groups. And while "the criteria [for sorting a person into one group or another] . . . may leave vague boundaries . . . they always definitely assign some people to the group and definitely rule out others"—using recursive principles like "where both parents are of a single race, the child is of the same race as the parents."⁴⁴

Appiah claims that something like this picture of ascription and identification was what Du Bois was after. Unfortunately, he says, Du Bois erred in thinking that "for racial labeling of this sort to have the obvious real effects that it did have—among them, crucially, his own identification with other black people and Africa—there must be some

⁴¹Appiah, "Race," pp. 81-82.

⁴²Ibid., p. 80.

⁴³Ibid., p. 78.

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 77.

real essence that held the race together.”⁴⁵ Once again, Appiah’s conclusion is worth citing at length. He writes:

[O]nce we focus, as Du Bois almost saw, on the racial badge . . . we see both that the effects of the labeling are powerful and real and that false ideas, muddle and mistake and mischief, played a central role in determining both how the label was applied and to what purposes.

This, I believe, is why Du Bois so often found himself reduced, in his attempts to define race, to occult forces: if you look for a shared essence you won’t get anything, so you’ll come to believe you’ve missed it, because it is super-subtle, difficult to experience or identify: in short, mysterious. But if, as I say, you understand the sociohistorical process of construction of the race, you’ll see that the label works despite the absence of an essence.⁴⁶

6.

Appiah’s “synthetic” argument is that race-talk, however misguided, has been efficacious, in that it has provided individuals with the conceptual resources to ascribe identities to others and to find identities for themselves. As these twin processes of other-ascription and self-identification continued over time, they produced, he says, three sociocultural objects—blacks, whites, and Orientals—whose composition at any time is relatively, and increasingly, determinate.⁴⁷ Appiah’s willingness to speak of groups and sociocultural “objects” here leads one to wonder: Why can’t we just say that the processes of racial identification and ascription bring *races* into being?

The answer, of course, is that we can’t call Appiah’s objects races without running afoul of the conclusion of his “analytic” argument: that it is part of the content of “race” that the term refers to the biological populations of classical racialism. Appiah reaches this conclusion by exploring the history of racial discourse to see what “race” means, for the sake of laying bare the conditions that an entity must meet in order to be a race. But he renders the history of race-talk in a problematic and partisan manner, counting as producers and disseminators of racist meaning only those figures who subscribe to the tenets of classical racialism. As a consequence, his explication of “race” is somewhat less than reliable.

There are many people who, like Du Bois, rejected classical racialism while striving to “conserve” races. The only reason Appiah gives for

⁴⁵ Appiah, “Race,” p. 81.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 77.

excluding such figures from the history of race-talk is that Du Boisian racialism just is biological racialism, as it were, in drag. But we've already seen that this argument fails, and Appiah does nothing in the later essay to improve it. He doesn't begin discussing Du Bois in "Race, Culture, Identity" until the second half of the essay, after the metaphysical issue has already been decided. And then, despite claiming to have been moved by critical commentary on his earlier reading of Du Bois, he simply restates that reading. We are simply told that Du Bois's definitions of race rely on "occult forces," and that Du Bois was looking for a racial essence that he ultimately found in a biological conception and hid from view. All of the support for these points appears in the discussion from *In My Father's House*, and somehow manages to remain insulated from the criticisms by which Appiah claims to have been moved.

If the criticisms of Appiah's reading that I offered above are on target, then there is no reason not to consider Du Bois as the successor to Arnold in the evolution of racial discourse (to adopt Appiah's a priori progressivism about the historical account). On Du Bois's view as I have reconstructed it, the common history that defines the black race is a matter of parallel individual experiences under the conditions of racist culture. And he appeals to common history in an effort to recommend the maintenance of an institutional fact and a social-theoretic framework that the conditions of the modern world make useful. If I'm right about that, then Appiah's criticisms miss the point and his negative argument against Du Bois collapses, taking with it the motivation for excluding sociohistorical racialism from the history of racial discourse.

Once we democratize the history of racial discourse to include socio-historical accounts, we have no reason to assume that "race" necessarily refers to Arnold's biological populations. And if the concept can refer to sociologically defined populations, then there is little reason not to say that Appiah's sociocultural "objects" are races. Appiah's own account of racial identity, freed from the artificial burden of the claim that race-talk just is its classical racist incarnations, goes a substantial distance toward bearing out the ontological point that he wants to reject.

As an exercise in just how much Appiah's tendentious history excludes, we might consider some alternative instances of race-talk. We find one alternative in the deliberations of some participants in the black American convention movement in the first half of the nineteenth century. For several of its early years, the convention was driven by an eliminativist strategy, expressed in such recommendations as that "as far as possible, . . . our people . . . abandon the use of the word 'colored', when either speaking or writing concerning themselves; and . . . remove

the title of African from their institutions.”⁴⁸ In a letter to a popular black periodical of the day, one William Watkins criticizes this strategy while more or less explicitly accepting the scientific imprecision and, as some people say, arbitrariness of biological racialism. Watkins argues with regard to the word “colored” that

[w]ords are used as the signs of our ideas, and whenever they perform this office . . . they accomplish the object of their invention. In vain do we carp at some supposed inapplicability of a term as applied to a certain object, when imperious custom or common consent has established the relation between the sign and the word. . . . This is the case with the word in question. Custom has fixed its meaning in reference to a particular people in this country, and from this decision, however arbitrary, there is, I am sure, no successful appeal. Again, to decry the use of the word, colored, on account of some questionable inaccuracy in its applicability to us, is an argument, which if successful, would blot out from our English vocabularies certain words of established usage.⁴⁹

Watkins here attempts to defend race-talk *not* by vindicating its “questionable inaccuracies,” but by pointing out the extent to which it has become an entrenched way of speaking. I’m not very interested in the probity of his argument or of the philosophy of language that undergirds it; my point is just that he does not defer to Appiah’s semantic experts, and he articulates an approach to race-talk that is clearly not that of Jefferson or Arnold.

Another response to the convention’s anti-racialist strategy, this time directed by an anonymous writer to the society’s leader, William Whipper, makes the point even more clearly:

Whenever a people are oppressed, peculiarly (not complexionally) distinctive organizations or action, is [sic] required on the part of the oppressed to destroy that oppression. The colored people of this country are oppressed; therefore the colored people are required to act in accordance with this fundamental principle. If Mr. W[hipper], for a few minutes, get [sic] clear of the idea of color, perhaps he will then be able to understand.⁵⁰

For this writer, the appeal to race is a matter of politics, and understanding that fact requires “getting *clear*” of a focus on the questionable intrinsic meaning of the physical markers of race membership. As before, I’m not terribly concerned at this point with whether this is a compelling

⁴⁸*Minutes and Proceedings of the Fifth Annual Convention for the Improvement of the Free People of Color, 1835* (Philadelphia: William P. Gibbons, 1835), pp. 14-15. Cited in Eddie S. Glaude, “The Language of Nation and the National Negro Convention Movement, 1830-1843,” dissertation, Princeton University, 1996, pp. 182-83.

⁴⁹*The Colored American*, September 15, 1838. Cited in Glaude, p. 209.

⁵⁰*The Colored American*, March 13, 1841. Cited in Glaude, p. 212.

justification for the continued use of race-talk. My point is just that an Arnoldian essentialist conception of race is fairly far from this writer's mind: skin color simply provides a precondition for oppression and a means to identify the victims of oppression. What is interesting for this writer about the group known then as colored people is that they are oppressed *as colored people*, and that this oppression, like any other, demands "peculiarly distinctive organizations and action." Organization and action will be "complexionally" distinctive in this case not because black folk naturally constitute a people, but because the nature of the oppressive circumstances demands that they respond as a people. Samuel Cornish makes the point even more forcefully:

If we find a colored brethren enslaved and trampled upon, *solely because he is colored*, is brother Whipper so simple as to say we must not unbind nor elevate him, as a colored man, or that we must not organize *as colored men* to meet the condition of the millions of our brethren who are in bondage, lest in doing this we . . . make complexional distinctions[?] Nonsense!⁵¹

We might continue to flesh out the history of racial discourse by appealing to the work of the philosopher and doyen of the Harlem renaissance, Alain Locke. Despite his famous editorship of *The New Negro*, Locke argues in one place that "[t]here is . . . no 'The Negro'."⁵² More to the point, he denies that race is a fact of biology while accepting nevertheless that it is a fact. He writes: "[t]he best consensus of opinion . . . seems to be that race is a fact in the social or ethnic sense, that . . . has been very erroneously associated with race in the physical sense"⁵³ Elsewhere he adds that "[m]ost authorities are now reconciled to . . . the necessity of a thorough-going redefinition of the nature of race, and . . . the independent definition of race in the ethnic or social sense . . . apart from the investigation of the factors and differentiae of physical race."⁵⁴ It would take some work to figure out exactly what Locke has in mind here, especially given his talk of "ethnic facts." But the main outlines are clear: race is a matter of social facts, not of biological essences; it is a subject of professional concern for Du Bois's historian and sociologist, not for the biologist.

⁵¹*The Colored American*, March 29, 1838, p. 39. Cited in Glaude, p. 207. Emphasis in original.

⁵²"Who and What is 'Negro'?" in Leonard Harris, *The Philosophy of Alain Locke*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), p. 209.

⁵³Harris, p. 192.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*

7.

I said above that with the collapse of the argument against Du Bois, there is little reason left for refusing to call Appiah's sociocultural objects races. I say "little reason" instead of "no reason" because I can think of one more: the intuition that continuing to talk of race is more likely to do harm than good. This intuition is the principal motivation behind all of Appiah's work on race, and it's all that remains after the collapse of his metaphysical, descriptive eliminativism (unless he's willing to bite the bullet and deny that *any* social facts are real, which would completely undermine his talk of "sociocultural objects"). If what I've said above is right, then Appiah's very real and important ethical concerns can no longer hide in the shadow of metaphysical speculations: his ethical convictions about the role of race in Western culture will stand revealed as conclusions in need of argument. We'll have to talk openly about the benefits and drawbacks of racial politics and about the use of racial categories in public policy, because the option of implying answers to these questions by gesturing at the illusory character of race will no longer be available.

We might do well to close by considering Appiah's one attempt to clarify the ethical points at issue. He begins "Race, Culture, Identity" by announcing his belief that "there is a danger in making racial identities too central to our conceptions of ourselves; . . . if we are to move beyond racism we shall have, in the end, to move beyond current racial identities."⁵⁵ This conviction really involves at least two claims, both of which are familiar.

The first claim has to do with the danger of, as Appiah puts it, racial identities "going imperial."⁵⁶ Broadly speaking, racial identity goes imperial when it privileges race membership over individual personality; when it delimits the possibilities for human association so that relations like love and solidarity are locked within narrow racial bounds; and when it sacrifices individual autonomy to the requirements of racial "scripts." Appiah is right to point out that racial identity presents these dangerous possibilities; but the recognition that something carries with it a danger does not immediately entail that the something should be put aside—think of fire, for example, or of automobiles in the hands of teenagers. Specifically, if an object or device presents some dangers but is in other respects useful, then recognizing the danger and acting responsibly toward the object in question should require only that we

⁵⁵ Appiah, "Race," p. 32.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 103.

proceed with care. If the arguments of section 4 above are plausible, and if we take seriously the musings of Locke, Du Bois, Cornish, and others—including many people writing today on whiteness—then it is not obvious that race-talk is more dangerous than useful.

The second point is the familiar claim that the end of racism requires the end of race. Enough people have worried about this view for me to give it only passing attention here. Suffice it to say that race may be a historically necessary condition for racism, but it is no longer either necessary or sufficient—as Appiah himself notes in more circumspect moments.⁵⁷ It should be obvious that a commitment to race is not sufficient for racism. As an example, we might cite another moment in the history of race-talk that vanishes from the narrative of Appiah's history: the emergence of a strong current of racial egalitarianism in the eighteenth century, when racialists like Samuel Stanhope Smith and Johann Blumenbach actively sought to refute the idea that racial groups could be hierarchically ranked on a scale of worth and capacity.⁵⁸

It may be less clear how a commitment to race is not even necessary for racism, but the point should be familiar from what we know about institutional racism. Explicitly and consciously racist—and, hence, racialist—actions have, during the history of this country, brought into being many exclusionary practices and unjust arrangements. But, as Paul Gilroy has shown in his studies of British crisis racialism, and as Cheryl Harris, David Roediger, and others have argued in discussions of whiteness in America, patterns of exclusion and systems of privilege that were once explicitly racist may presently be maintained by commitments to race-neutral colorblindness.⁵⁹ In such cases an appeal to racial eliminativism can not only obscure existing inequities but also preclude the most efficient means of addressing them.

The foregoing suggestion that racism is somewhat independent of race could bear some unpacking, but racism is not my immediate topic here. My aim is to undermine Appiah's eliminativism—to show, in short, that we can meaningfully and reasonably say that races exist without

⁵⁷ Appiah, *Father's House*, pp. 174-75, 178-80.

⁵⁸ See Thomas Gossett, *Race: The History of an Idea in America* (Dallas: SMU Press, 1963), pp. 37-53. Gossett goes so far as to argue that egalitarianism carried the weight of opinion in the eighteenth century, thanks to the requirements of Enlightenment optimism and orthodox biblical interpretation. Thomas Jefferson, on this account, joins Voltaire and Lord Kames as prominent minority dissenters.

⁵⁹ See Paul Gilroy, *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), and *Small Acts* (New York: Snake Tail Press, 1994); Cheryl Harris, "Whiteness as Property," *Harvard Law Review* 106 (1993): 1707-91; and David Roediger, *Towards the Abolition of Whiteness* (London: Verso, 1994).

thereby invoking the spirit of Matthew Arnold. I mention the link between race and racism only because it seems to me that one way of conceiving that link is the key to Appiah's approach. His conviction that race is dangerous and limiting, that the construct of race serves the cause of racism more easily and often than it advances the campaign for emancipation, is what motivates his eliminativism. And in the wake of his failed arguments against Du Boisian racialism, ethical conviction is all he has left.

At this point, then, arguments about racial ontology should shift to the terrain of the ethical and practical, to the question of whether it is in fact more dangerous than not, more obscurantist than not, to talk of race. This is the discussion that Du Bois, Locke, and William Whipper's critics wanted to have, and these are the considerations that they thought motivated the acceptance of racial categories. My aim here has just been to clear the way for this discussion by showing that the metaphysical route to eliminativism is a red herring. Once it's clear that sociohistorical racialism is a viable conceptual option, the metaphysical eliminativist can reject it one of two ways: by arguing for a thoroughgoing physicalism, which would eliminate Mah-Jongg, money, and marriages along with races; or by recommending a revision of our social ontology, which requires some argument that race is a bad or problematic institutional fact. Appiah, for all that he has contributed to the emergence of race as a philosophical subject, has yet to make either argument. Until he does, his brief for eliminativism will be unfinished.

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