

Racial Identity and Non-Essentialism About Race

Those who would attempt to answer the question "what is race?" must either choose between an essentialist and a non-essentialist stance or be condemned to struggle endlessly and fruitlessly between them. Essentialist conceptions of race hold that the characteristics of physical appearance referred to by racial terms are indicative of more profound characteristics (whether positively or negatively construed) of personality, inclinations, "culture," heritage, cognitive abilities, or "natural talents" that are taken to be shared by all members of a racially defined group. Proponents of non-essentialist views, on the other hand, believe that essentialism about race grants inappropriate and excessive meaning to features that are "only skin deep." Non-essentialist conceptions of race claim that similarities and differences in physical appearance do not entail further similarities and differences. They have as support genetic studies such as those of Lewontin that show that the overall genetic differences among groups of humans classified by race is so small as to render race irrelevant as a determinate of any other human attribute.¹ For non-essentialists, race has meaning only as a socially constructed category, a way of dividing up human beings that is conventional rather than natural.

When the question being asked is "what does it mean to be 'black'?" the conflict between essentialism and non-essentialism has been continuously at the heart of the debate. Historically, W.E.B. Du Bois adopted an ultimately essentialist approach (albeit with some internal tension); Frederick Douglass took a non-essentialist stand.

For those who accept an essentialist understanding of race, the primary issue involved in the identification of oneself and others as members of a racially defined group is the issue of definition: what are the criteria for identifying someone as belonging to the

group? For those who are committed to a non-essentialist understanding of race, on the other hand, there is a further problem of justification. If the groups with which we identify do not reflect any essential differences between us, what grounds do we have for identifying ourselves and others as belonging to a group? Even if we accept that racial identification is valuable—in the form of "black pride," for example, or for the purpose of affirmative action—we must grapple with the question of how to understand and justify that identification.

My project in this paper is to supply committed non-essentialists who nonetheless see value in black racial identification with a justification for that identification that does not contradict non-essentialism.

Appiah,² Gates,³ and Wasserstrom,⁴ among others, have adopted the non-essentialist stance of questioning the legitimacy of the concept of a black race. Advocates of non-essentialist views tend to worry that metaphysical realism in regard to characteristics such as race lays the foundation for moral differentiation between people in a way that is counterintuitive to Western democratic beliefs about equality. Along with Foucault, many perceive the reification of socially constituted categories as a crucial moment in the deployment and reinforcement of social power.⁵ Thus, for example, Gates argues that:

Race, as a meaningful criterion within the biological sciences, has long been recognized to be a fiction. When we speak of "the white race" or "the black race," "the Jewish race" or "the Aryan race," we speak in biological misnomers and, more generally, in metaphors. Nevertheless, our conversations are replete with usages of race which have their sources in the dubious pseudoscience of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries . . . Race, in these usages, pretends to be an objective term of classification, when in fact it is a dangerous trope.⁶

Non-essentialism supplies a solid foundation for a strongly egalitarian conception of justice. If one wants to argue that all people ought to be recognized or respected as equals under the law (however one chooses to precisely formulate such a concept), a good reason for such a moral imperative is that none of the differences typically used to justify differential treatment between people is "real" in any morally meaningful sense. Of course, one could conceivably embrace an essentialist view and still advocate

an egalitarian conception of justice. The notion "separate but equal" is, however, notoriously suspect, and it is difficult to see why one would go to the trouble of insisting that people of different races are fundamentally different in human qualities only to argue that those differences are not morally meaningful in regard to questions of treatment and justice.

Non-essentialists about race who are strongly committed to egalitarian conceptions of justice, however, must deal with a practical dilemma. Many champions of the struggle to right imbalances of power have argued forcefully that identification with each other on the basis of race is empowering for people who have experienced racial oppression. Thus, it is argued, black people in the U.S. find an important source of self-esteem in "black pride," taking pride in the accomplishments of other black people, and derive political strength from "black unity," feeling that they are "connected" with other black people and can count on them for support and allegiance. According to these arguments, therefore, important psychological benefits stem from valuing the concept of a black race and seeing oneself as a member of it.

Committed non-essentialists who recognize the validity of this claim are faced with a challenge. Arguments in favor of non-essentialism tend to undermine the grounds for racial identification, while arguments in favor of racial identification tend to attribute so much meaning to race that the line between non-essentialism and essentialism becomes blurred. This conflict can be seen in the respective theories of Wasserstrom and Young, who endorse both non-essentialist views of race and also strongly egalitarian conceptions of justice.

Wasserstrom argues that social differentiation on the basis of race is purely arbitrary. It happens to be the case that in our society, we interact differently with people on the basis of race but not on the basis of eye color. It could, however, just as well have been the other way around. Wasserstrom proposes that the ideal society would be one in which race mattered as little as eye color does in our society. We would not notice people's skin color any more than we notice their eye color.⁷

In "Preferential Treatment," Wasserstrom argues in favor of affirmative action as a means of moving our society toward the

assimilationist ideal described above.⁸ Thus, although ideally we should not take notice of racial features, we may notice them if doing so moves us toward the ideal. While I sympathize with the motivation for this suggestion, it is problematic in two ways. First, it is questionable whether granting significance to race, however limited, will further the end of rendering race insignificant. A more important problem with Wasserstrom's views in regard to the issue of racial identification, however, is that Wasserstrom is attempting to justify racial identification by reference to a non-essentialist ideal. The dilemma for non-essentialists, however, is precisely that non-essentialist beliefs about race are incompatible with recognizing the legitimacy of any racial identification for any reason; as Wasserstrom asserts in "Racism and Sexism," there are absolutely no grounds for such identification. Wasserstrom does not satisfactorily address this tension in his work.

Wasserstrom's non-essentialism is undermined by granting any significance, however limited, to race. If taken seriously, it precludes racial identification. Young's view, on the other hand, grants primacy to racial identification. Young's position is non-essentialist in that she sees race not as an objective, essential attribute of individuals but as a quality around which people coalesce into groups. Some of these groups have come to hold power while others are marginalized, and the powerful groups retain their position by oppressing the marginalized groups. According to Young, a key way in which the privileged groups maintain their control is by institutionalizing standards such that their characteristics are definitive of "normal" and "human," while those of the oppressed groups are "different" and "other."⁹

Young believes that the existing power structure will be undermined if members of oppressed groups refuse to see their characteristics and interests as "different" or "lesser" than those of privileged groups. She proposes that the ideal society would be one in which members of various groups live and interact together, without either isolating themselves in small, homogenous communities or assimilating into one large, homogenous society. Each group would have the political power necessary to protect its specific needs and interests, and all needs and interests would be perceived as both group-specific and also equally worthwhile:

there would be no categorization of needs and interests as either "mainstream" or "marginal."¹⁰

The significance that Young attributes to groups undermines her non-essentialism. By seeing needs and interests as pertaining to groups that are recognized as groups on the basis of race, Young presupposes a very strong correlation between specific needs and interests and race. This assumption comes close to predicating the needs and interests on the presence of particular racial characteristics, a claim that contradicts non-essentialism.

The difficulties that Wasserstrom and Young face in reconciling non-essentialism about race and racial identification, however, are not insurmountable. The problems in each of these cases stem from the way in which race and groups based on race are conceptualized.

When we think of people in terms of groups based on race, even in terms of non-biological, non-essential groups, we have already reified those groups. By identifying a person as a "member" of a racial group, we semantically trick ourselves into believing that the group itself is a pre-existing entity. As Gates argues, however, these "groups" are categories that are constituted through social discourse, rather than material entities that have been named.¹¹ When we identify someone as a member of a racial group, it is easy to forget that the category represented by the idea of the group was constructed through discourse such as that in which we have just engaged and that our discourse has reinforced the category.

An analysis of the discourse involved in identifying ourselves and others in terms of race exposes the damage done by the discourse itself, in contrast to the damage done by persecution predicated on identifying people as members of particular racial groups. Theories such as those of Young and Wasserstrom acknowledge only the latter.

I will argue that the act of identifying oneself or others in terms of race, which I will refer to as "labeling," is harmful to the person being labeled regardless of the content of the label. This is true even if I am attributing the same label to myself and the person I am labeling. When I label a person, I am diminishing that person by seeing him as a representative of the category in which I have placed him, rather than as a complete, unique person.

If this is true, it raises important concerns for racial identification. Even if labeling is being used for positive reasons, it is still harmful to the very people whom the labeling is supposed to help. While there are benefits that stem from racial identification for the purposes of empowerment and political unity, we must consider the price at which those benefits are purchased.

My concerns here parallel those of Appiah. After arguing the strictly non-essentialist view that "race" is a social concept with no metaphysically real biological or sociohistorical foundation, he suggests that there are two reasons to recognize the mythical and illusory nature of concepts like "race," "tribe," and "nation." First, he is skeptical that "nationalism and racial solidarity can do the good that they can do without the attendant evils of racism—and other particularisms; without the warring of nations."¹² Second, he fears that the inevitable social fragmentation that results from the labeling of ourselves and others plays into rather than challenges the continuation of the status quo.¹³

I share these concerns, and they are closely related to the issues that I will discuss in this paper. Appiah's project falls short, however, insofar as he does not offer a substantial alternative to racial identification as it is presently understood. Racial identification is uniquely and irreplaceably beneficial for people who are experiencing oppression on the basis of race as a reinforcement of self-confidence and self-esteem, as a connection to others, and as a base for political action. If we reject racial identification as it is currently conceptualized, we must find some other way to realize it.

A better understanding of oppression is helpful in developing a new conception of racial identification. One weakness of both Young's and Wasserstrom's positions is their characterization of oppression. I do not disagree with Young's description of oppression as the institutional constraint on self-development, but it is too vague.¹⁴ Young cites "Blacks," "women" and "American Indians," among others, as examples of oppressed groups. Yet many members of these groups have by any criteria developed themselves well. Does this mean that they do not experience oppression? Wasserstrom understands oppression only in terms of discriminatory treatment of members of certain social groups. Yet

even when policies that discriminate against certain people are proscribed, those people may continue to experience oppression.

An analysis of oppression in terms of labels and labeling establishes a precise definition of oppression that makes it clear who is or is not experiencing oppression, without having to list groups of people. This in turn suggests a way of understanding racial identification that does not require labeling ourselves and others.

This paper has three main sections. In "The Liabilities of Labeling," I will argue that labeling is problematic, regardless of the content of the label. It interferes with mutually rewarding communication between people, it interferes, via label-specific social norms, with our ability to make well-informed decisions, and it is incompatible with respecting others as complete, unique human beings. In "Labeling and Oppression," I will define oppression in terms of labeling. I will argue that labels that signify inferior social status on the dominant hierarchy of a society are oppressive. It is oppressive to people to be routinely labeled as inferior. It is oppressive to contend with label-specific social norms that dictate against personal agency and achievement.

In "Labeling and Racial Identification," I will discuss ways in which racial identification by black people is presently understood. I will argue that when black identity is conceived of in terms of the existence of a black race, two problems arise. First, there is a problem of truth. If non-essentialists are correct, there is not in fact a black race and thus no basis for black identity. Second, there is a practical problem. Labeling oneself and others for the positive purpose of black pride and black unity nevertheless perpetuates the negative consequences of labeling. Using the material developed in the previous sections, I will suggest an alternative understanding of black identity that resolves these problems.

What I am attempting to do is to give committed non-essentialists the chance to "have their cake and eat it too." For those of us who do not wish to participate in the perpetuation and reification of empty concepts like race, but who recognize the present psychological importance of black identity, I am offering an understanding of racial identification that we can live with.

The Liabilities of Labeling

When we identify ourselves and others as belonging to socially meaningful groups, we are classifying each other in reference to a socially constructed taxonomy. People classify each other by reference to categories of gender; race; ethnicity; family, clan, or tribe; physical, mental, and behavioral characteristics; education and skills; work; sexuality; economic class; religion; cultural beliefs; and age.¹⁵

Labels are the terms we use to assign people to these categories. Although we use labels as if they told us a great deal about the person to whom they are applied, they do not in fact entail anything about a person except that that label has been applied to her. For example, the terms "female" and "male," if used only to indicate the presence of certain reproductive organs, are not labels. The terms "woman" and "man," however, are labels. To say that someone is a "woman" does not entail anything about her personality, her interests, her experiences, her appearance, or her skills. It does not even entail that "she" has female reproductive organs. The person whom we label as a "woman" may very well have male reproductive organs. Yet when we label someone as a "woman" or a "man," the use of the label carries with it specific (although not necessarily universal) assumptions about that person: about "his" or "her" capabilities, the extent to which "he" or "she" would be interested in or "suited for" various activities, and so forth. These assumptions are part of the *social meaning* of the label (the other part, which has to do with social status, will be discussed in the next section). The use of a particular label tells us more about the person doing the labeling, by indicating something about her perceptions and values, than it tells us about the person who is being labeled.

Langston Hughes gives an excellent illustration of this in his short story "Who's Passing For Who?"¹⁶ In the story, Hughes describes meeting up one evening in his youth with an acquaintance who is escorting "three assorted white folks," schoolteachers from Iowa, around the spots frequented by the literati of Harlem. A couple at the next table begins quarrelling and the man, who is "brownskinned" hits the woman, who is "blonde." One of the men

from Iowa jumps up and hits the man, saying "Keep your hands off that white woman," but apologizes for his action when he is informed that "She's not white . . . she's colored."

Hughes and his companions reproach the man from Iowa for his racist attitude and he leaves in a huff. Then they commence a discussion with the remaining schoolteachers, a husband and wife, about "colored" people who "pass for white." After listening for a while, the wife interrupts and explains that she and her husband know all about passing for white, because they have been doing it for fifteen years.

After their initial surprise, Hughes and his friends have a good laugh with the couple. "All at once we dropped our professionally self-conscious 'Negro' manners, became natural, ate fish, and talked and kidded freely like colored folks do when there are no white folks around." After an enjoyable evening, they put the couple in a taxi.

As the cab pulls away, the woman leans out the window and says "Listen . . . to tell the truth, my husband and I aren't really colored at all. We're white. We just thought we'd kid you by passing for colored . . ." Hughes and his friends are left standing on the corner wondering which way they had been fooled—was the couple "really" white, but passing for colored, or "really" colored, but passing for white?

In this story, we do not succeed in learning anything about the people who are being labeled (the "blonde woman" and the couple from Iowa) except that certain labels are being applied to them. We do, however, learn a great deal about the people who are labeling them: we learn about their perceptions, their beliefs, their attitudes, and, most importantly, about the assumptions they make about others on the basis of the labels they apply to them.

These assumptions are not necessarily negative. The problem with the assumptions that supervene on labels, whether negative or positive, is that they do not necessarily accurately reflect the innate capabilities, interests, or potential of the person to whom the label is applied. It is important to note that labeling is not the same as describing. If I describe a person in terms of one of the categories listed above *without that description carrying any social meaning*, then I have not labeled that person. Yet only in

very limited contexts, if any, could I refer to people in terms of these categories without my reference carrying social meaning.

The damage done to people by the act of labeling itself stems from the fact that the label carries assumptions about them that are not necessarily correct. This harm plays out in three ways. First, due to the not-necessarily-accurate presuppositions that contribute to the social meaning of a label, the act of labeling creates a barrier to mutually satisfactory interaction between people. Second, label-specific social norms, which dictate behaviors that conform to the social meanings of the related label, place excessive demands on people to whom that label is applied, since those people may not have any of the interests or attributes assumed by the social meaning of the label. Finally, since labeling involves attributing to people qualities that they may not possess and subsequently categorizing them, it is incompatible with respecting them as unique individuals.

Mutually rewarding communication and interaction among people is severely hampered by labeling. When someone labels me, she sees me as who she thinks I am based on the label, rather than seeing me as who I really am. Although she and I may share interests, we may not discover our compatibility if the labels we apply to each other carry the assumption that we are incompatible. If she is in a position to make decisions that affect me, she may make inappropriate decisions because she believes, based on her preconceived assumptions, that she is acting in my best interest. If she is supposed to be helping me in some way, she may fail to do so because she cannot see beyond her stereotypes to discover my actual needs. Labels are as likely to interfere with interaction when people "share" a label as when they perceive themselves and each other as belonging in different categories.

In addition to constraining communication, labels play a predominant role in our socialization. The pressures that are put on us by social norms to behave in certain ways are mostly label-specific. Thus, "boys don't cry" and "civilized people don't talk with their mouths full." Labels are assigned to us from the moment of conception, based on the labels assigned to our parents, and the first question people ask about a new baby is if it is a boy or a girl.

Label-specific social norms are especially problematic because they are liable to interfere with a person's ability to make well-informed decisions. Take two agents, A and B. Suppose that they have access to the same sources of information and that they are equally capable of understanding and applying that information. Suppose, however, that there is a label that is routinely applied to A and that A applies to herself, and that there are social norms specific to that label that concern the decision she is about to make. Suppose that the norms dictate that the choice she is considering making is wrong, regardless of consequences or costs, simply because "it would be wrong for someone like you (someone with this label) to do this" or "you (A) are not the kind of person who is supposed to be making this sort of decision" or "this is not up to you (A) to decide" or "someone like you ought not to even be considering these options in the first place." Suppose that there are no norms of this sort that apply to B in the case of this decision.

In this case, A's engagement with the label-specific norm will change the parameters of her choice situation. A will make her choice in reference to the dictates of the norm, her feelings and beliefs about the norm, and the ways in which her desires and other norms conflict or agree with the dictates of the norm in question. These considerations will influence A's approach to gathering and dealing with information. She may not seek out certain information, or she may ignore or discount information she has received.

Furthermore, the time and energy that A spends dealing with the implications of the norm is time and energy that B can put into getting more information or verifying the information she has. Suppose that in a non-norm-governed situation, A and B would make a decision after the same amount of time and energy spent gathering information and considering their options. In the norm-governed situation, A will make a less well-informed decision than B because some or most of A's time and energy has been spent dealing with the norm, while B has used all of her time and energy to gather information. Moreover, A may lower her standards for the amount of information she considers adequate to make a decision. She will be less tolerant of fully investigating

consequences when she already has reasons not to be considering certain options or not to be in a certain decision-making situation in the first place.

The socialization that occurs via label-specific social norms serves to reinforce and perpetuate the social meanings of labels. Take, for example, the stereotype in our society that boys are interested in sports. This stereotype plays out in label-specific social norms that dictate that boys *ought* to like sports. If a child is labeled as a boy but does not like sports, then there must be something wrong with him. Thus, a boy must either enjoy sports or else the applicability to him of the label "boy" is called into question. In this way, the stereotype is reinforced: all children to whom the label "boy" fully applies like sports, and those to whom the label might otherwise apply but who do not like sports are not accurate representatives of the category. They have not "lived up to" their label, and this is perceived as a failure on their part (and on the part of their parents). Furthermore, since girls are supposed to be different from boys, a girl who enjoys sports is not a proper girl. Neither, however, is she fully a boy, but a "tomboy," someone who does not conform to either category. Via label-specific social norms, labels and the categories they signify take on a life of their own. They generate meanings for our preferences and behaviors with which we must constantly contend.

Finally, labeling others is incompatible with respecting them as individuals. There is an ongoing controversy over whether there is an "individual" apart from or prior to the social.¹⁷ On the view that labels and label-specific social norms are the predominant media of socialization, this ontological question is exposed as misleading. On one hand, we are born into society with labels already affixed from the moment of conception. Therefore, the concept of a pre-social individual or "essential individuality" untouched by social interaction is empty. On the other hand, no label or set of labels can accurately or completely describe a person. We are not the sum of our labels. Thus, while our perception of ourselves is mediated by the labels affixed to us by others and by ourselves, we also recognize ourselves as at least slightly different from everyone else, including people to whom the same set of labels would be applied. This recognition expresses

itself in our characterization of ourselves as "individuals," and the belief we each have that there is an "I" apart from the labels.

Rather than defining "individuality" as essential and pre-social, therefore, I define it as the recognition by each of us that we are distinct from and at least slightly different from all other people. Individuality so defined is crucial for the formation of individual identity. It grounds our notion of being a "self" distinct from other selves, without which the notion of individual identity would be an empty concept. Individual identity in turn is a necessary (although not, of course, sufficient) condition for self-respect.

Furthermore, when individuality is defined in this way, it becomes apparent that people cannot respect each other when they are labeling each other. The act of labeling others compromises their individuality, since people, when labeled, disappear as individuals at that linguistic moment. They are subsumed under the image of an "ideal type" of that category that is a composite of stereotypes. When a person who is interacting with me labels me, she is interacting with the "ideal type," not with the unique "me" whom I perceive myself to be. To label others is to deny their existence as a "self." And just as my recognition of myself as a "self" grounds self-respect, the recognition of the "self" in others is the foundation for respecting them. Since labeling denies that individuality, labeling and respect are mutually exclusive.

An understanding of labeling allows us to see that labeling itself is problematic as a form of discourse, prior to the problems it creates in terms of discriminatory policies predicated on labels. Labeling interferes with mutually rewarding communication and shared understanding between people. Instead of asking people to tell us what their needs, interests and life experiences are, we make assumptions based on the labels we apply to them. We assume that certain people are our enemies based on labels and never give them a chance to prove otherwise. We assume, also based on labels, that others are our allies and feel betrayed when we discover that they do not see eye-to-eye with us. Furthermore, label-specific social norms entangle us at every turn, making it impossible for us to make a decision without considering the implications of our choices in terms of the relevant norms. If we conform to a label-specific norm, we reinforce the social meanings of the label.

If we do not conform, either through choice or through inability, we are stigmatized.

Finally, respecting ourselves and each other requires more than a Western democratic recognition of "equality." I cannot respect you as a unique, individual self as long as you are a representative of a category to me. I cannot respect myself as long as I perceive myself in that way. While there is no such thing as a pre-social individual, we are each more than a collection of labels. To label each other is to deny that.

Labeling and Oppression

Up to this point, I have been discussing why labeling is harmful for everyone. It is nonetheless true, however, that some people enjoy social power on the basis of the labels applied to them, while others are experiencing oppression for the same reason. By extending the analysis of labeling, it becomes clear how labels figure in domination and oppression.

Recall the kinds of categories with which we classify people. The social status of a person is determined by referents of this kind. Since these classifications confer social status, labels are signifiers of the social status of the person to whom they are applied. Since social status is hierarchical, labels do not merely distinguish between people with differing characteristics; rather, they evaluate people with differing characteristics. To label people is to rank them on a hierarchy from "superior" to "inferior," "standard" to "substandard," or "normal" to "abnormal." It is not the case that we first assign people to a category and then proceed to evaluate them: to assign people to a category *is* to evaluate them.

For most labels, there are multiple hierarchies on which we are ranked. There are hierarchies that are supported by the laws and institutional policies of a society. There are hierarchies that are reinforced in the dominant media. There are a multiplicity of hierarchies generated by various communities, cultures, and traditions. All of these hierarchies are interwoven, and their confluence determines how we are evaluated in a given situation by a given person or group of people.

For example, a child who performs well academically is in one sense ranked as superior to her classmates: she is the "head of the class." On the other hand, being "above average" means that she is different from the average and hence is "abnormal," a negative evaluation. School systems may be as unwilling to accommodate the needs of children who perform "too well" academically as they are to accommodate the needs of children who perform "too poorly." Furthermore, the child who is praised by her teacher for her performance may be reviled by her classmates as a "nerd." Yet she would not be reviled if she were not also praised. There is no single ranking system, nor is any system independent of the rest.

Yet although the same label may signify varying social rankings depending on who is using it and in what context, it is nonetheless possible to distinguish between people in a society who are and are not experiencing oppression due to the label applied to them. People who are experiencing oppression are those who are routinely assigned a label (or would be assigned that label if they did not take steps to hide something about themselves) that signifies inferior social status on the social hierarchy that is supported by the laws, institutional policies, and dominant media of the society.

In order to understand oppression, we need to understand what happens to people when they are being oppressed. An analysis in terms of labels and labeling allows us to see that there are two levels of oppression. At one level, oppression involves how people are treated on the basis of a label that is applied to them. People experience oppression when, due to the label applied to them, they are barred from opportunities or otherwise disadvantaged by the laws and institutions in a society.

At another level, however, the experience of being labeled can itself be oppressive. It is oppressive for people who are likely, in the course of their everyday lives, to be assigned a label that signifies inferior social status or if the frequency of this occurrence increases when the person is outside her immediate family sphere, community, or neighborhood, or as she progresses in her education or career. Although people make incorrect assumptions about people to whom they apply labels that signify superior social status, the assumptions that are entailed by labels that signify

inferior social status are particularly distasteful. To see people as having inferior social status is to see them as less than complete human beings, lacking a full array of options, desires, and preferences. And while everyone, in some situation or other, may be seen as having inferior social status, people who are ranked as having inferior social status on the hierarchy supported by the laws, institutions, and media of a society cannot escape being labeled in this way simply by removing themselves from a particular situation.

Furthermore, the label-specific social norms attached to labels that signify inferior social status on the hierarchy supported by the laws, institutions, and media of a society tend to be norms that discourage personal agency and achievement. Again, although any social norm may, in a particular situation, interfere with a person's ability to make a well-informed decision, social norms that discourage personal agency are consistently harmful.

In *The Rage of a Privileged Class*, Ellis Cose presents a plethora of examples of the oppression that results from labeling itself and from label-specific social norms for people who are labeled as "black." The people whom he is discussing, black upper middle-class and upper-class executives and professionals, are people who have not been discriminated against on the basis of race in the sense of being barred from educational opportunities or high-salaried employment. Nonetheless, they have experienced oppression in the assumptions made about them on the basis of the racial label applied to them and in the social norms with which they have had to contend. A few examples will suffice.

Cose quotes Francine Soliunas, legal counsel for Illinois Bell, on the subject of negative assumptions that are made about black executives. According to Soliunas, "even those among us who have achieved the ultimate power . . . [are] at some point . . . let know, in some way, shape, or form, that they are [considered] 'nigger[s]'." Soliunas describes this message, according to Cose, as being ". . . transmitted in any number of ways. People quietly make you aware at meetings that they doubt you know what you're talking about. Executives totally outside your area of expertise endeavor to prove that they are more expert than you."¹⁸

Cose also gives examples of how social norms within corporations dictate against black executives speaking up when they perceive racial discrimination occurring. He reports that an interviewee whom he describes as "on the verge of retiring from his position as personnel vice president for one of America's largest companies" told Cose that "Early in his career, he had been moderately outspoken about what he saw as racism within and outside his former corporation. He had learned, however, that his modest attempts at advocacy got him typecast as an undesirable. So when he changed jobs, he decided to disassociate himself from any hint of a racial agenda."¹⁹ Social norms in this case demanded that black executives "prove" that they are "team players" rather than "troublemakers" by not standing up for their own best interests by protesting the racial discrimination that affected them. When social norms place people in "damned if you do/damned if you don't" situations, they are particularly oppressive.

Finally, when people perceive that, because of the way they are labeled, they will be allowed to achieve a certain amount, but never to reach the limits of their potential, they may simply stop trying to do their best work. According to Cose, Ron Brown, a psychologist who specializes in helping corporations manage and motivate multiethnic workforces, describes black executives in this situation, who ". . . once so motivated and raring to go, simply 'shut down' in frustration. 'If businesses knew that they were somehow coopting and suppressing and stifling thirty to forty percent of their brains, they might say, "Well, we got to do something". . . But they don't see it that way'."²⁰

When oppression is analyzed in terms of labeling, it becomes clear that discriminatory policies based on labels are not the full extent of oppression. Being on the receiving end of labels that signify inferior social status on the dominant hierarchy of a society is oppressive in itself. To contend with label-specific social norms that dictate against personal agency and achievement and to face retribution and stigmatization for defying them is a part of experiencing oppression.²¹

With the relationship between labeling and oppression established, I will now turn to the final issue to be addressed in this paper. Since racial identification as it is usually understood

involves labeling and consequently the problems attendant upon labeling, I will offer an alternative, based on my understanding of oppression, that accomplishes many of the same benefits without perpetuating labeling.

Labeling and Racial Identification

For the purpose of this paper, I will restrict my discussion of racial identification to its function for people who are experiencing oppression on the basis of racial labels as a reinforcement of self-confidence and self-esteem, as a connection to others, and as a base for political action. I will accept as given that these functions of group identification constitute a unique and desirable contribution to the emotional well-being of people who are experiencing oppression and that successful political action can only be accomplished by people who act as a group, not by isolated individuals. There is a question as to what sorts of relationships justify partiality and obligation. There is also a question of whether racial identification is morally acceptable in some cases or in certain circumstances but not others. These last two questions, as well as a defense of my assumption about the usefulness of racial identification for people who are experiencing oppression on the basis of racial labels, are beyond the scope of this paper.

As racial identification is presently understood, we take the groups with which we identify to be groups of people with the same racial characteristics or racial ancestry. There are two problems with racial identification understood in this way. First, if we take non-essentialism seriously, people are not justified in identifying with each other on the basis of shared racial characteristics or ancestry. To do so is a delusion, a case of investing ourselves in a myth. This might be called the truth problem. Second, there is a practical problem. When people identify with each other on the basis of labels, they are denigrating and harming the very people with whom they identify.

Non-essentialism challenges the belief that people who share specific racial characteristics or ancestry are justified in identifying with each other. If the importance attributed to certain

features is arbitrary and the presence of these features does not determine other attributes of the person, as Wasserstrom argues, then it does not make sense to identify with others on the basis of these characteristics. If the fact that I have dark skin does not indicate anything else about me, why would knowing that another person with dark skin has been elected president boost my self-confidence? Why would I feel a sense of connection to someone whose parents are "black" more than to someone whose parents are "white?"

Furthermore, while it might be justifiable for family members or people who share a common history or cultural heritage to identify with each other, these cases, as Appiah suggests, are not analogous to identifying on the basis of shared racial characteristics. People who share racial characteristics are not members of one large genetically linked family, and members of groups defined in terms of racial characteristics do not all share the same history or cultural heritage. For these to ground group identification, we would have to define the groups with which we identify in these terms. While this might be satisfactory in some situations, it would not meet the needs that racial identification does. The point of people identifying with each other on the basis of race seems intuitively to be to transcend cultural and historical identities and to support one another regardless of cultural differences. Thus, racial identification cannot be passed off as identification with family members or as identification on the basis of shared history or culture, and it cannot be justified on its own merits without repudiating non-essentialism. Young seems to be acknowledging this and searching for an alternative understanding of group identification when she argues, citing Haraway, that:

. . . what makes a group a group is a social process of interaction and differentiation in which some people come to have a particular *affinity* (Haraway, 1985) for others. My "affinity group" in a given social situation comprises those people with whom I feel the most comfortable, who are more familiar. Affinity names the manner of sharing assumptions, affective bonding, and networking that recognizably differentiates groups from one another, but not according to some common nature . . . Membership in a social group is a function not of satisfying some objective criteria, but of a subjective affirmation of affinity with that group, the affirmation of that affinity by other members of the group, and the

attribution of membership in that group by persons identifying with other groups.²²

When we look at the work she makes the concept of an "affinity group" do, however, we see that she takes for granted that "affinity groups" will in fact organize around the categories referred to by labels: skin color, gender, sexuality, etc. She does not offer an explanation of why people who share these labels would feel an "affinity" for each other. Non-essentialism, however, demands an explanation of why people might share assumptions and bond with each other that does not rely on the presupposition that people who share racial characteristics would or ought to have anything to do with each other in the first place.

Racial identification also presents a practical problem. Racial identification is problematic in terms of labeling because it involves labeling oneself and the people with whom one identifies. This creates the same problems as labeling in any situation. People interact through the filter of the label. They make assumptions about each other. They are not truly respecting each other as individuals.

These problems with labeling in general have particular repercussions when group identification is based on labeling, as is the case with racial identification. When we identify with people on the basis of a label such as a racial label, we put the label first, before the individual. It is the racial label that is the most important attribute of the person with whom we identify, since we would not identify with that person if that label did not apply to her. This seems to be not quite right: we are implying that the people with whom we feel connected, the people with whom we are political allies, are people to whom we are attracted because of the label that is applied to them. We feel close to these people, yet we are interested in them first and foremost as labels, not as individual people. These feelings are at variance with each other.

The problem with making assumptions about people on the basis of labels also has particular repercussions in the case of labeling for racial or other group identification. Since racial identification satisfies a desire to feel connected to others and to generate strength in numbers for political action, people who label

each other for the purpose of racial or other group identification may tend to make particularly strong assumptions about the needs and interests of the people with whom they identify. This can easily lead to people imposing life experiences, needs, and philosophies on others by sending the message that "if you have not had thus and such experience, or if you do not believe thus and such, you are not really a member of our group." Although group identification may be useful in the fight against oppressive label-specific social norms that are reinforced in the society as a whole, the desire for homogeneity within the group tends to generate new label-specific norms that group members impose on each other. Young recognizes the potential for this problem,²³ but passes over it as just "something we need to watch out for." She does not take it as a serious objection to group identification on the basis of shared human characteristics. This is too quick a move on her part.

Thinking about these issues in terms of labeling suggests a way of understanding racial identification that avoids the problems just described. Groups defined as being composed of people who share a human characteristic such as race are, in the language of labeling, groups of people who are labeled in the same way. What do people who are labeled in the same way necessarily have in common? Since labels do not entail anything about the people to whom they are applied, people who are labeled in the same way do not necessarily share a common nature, common interests, common life experiences, and so forth. They do, however, necessarily share one thing in common: they are labeled in the same way.

This may not seem like much to have in common. On the surface, it seems like a tautology. To share being labeled in the same way is, however, to have something very significant in common. The fact that a particular label has been applied to a person makes a significant difference in that person's life. It has affected her interaction with other people in particular ways, and it has determined the label-specific social norms with which she has had to contend. People who live in the same society (and in some cases in the same world) and have been labeled in the same way may not have other experiences in common, but they have had to cope with the same label and the same norms.

Suppose that we were to define the groups with which we identify differently. On the usual understanding of groups, we conceive of identification as a process in which we proceed from "I am _____ (a label)" to "I identify with other people who are also _____ (the same label)." Suppose instead that we were to conceive of identification as a process in which we proceed from "I am routinely labeled as _____ (a label)" to "I identify with other people who are also labeled in this way."

This is not to suggest that, in the case of black identity, people would not continue to say "I'm black," "you're black," "black people need to stick together," and so forth. What I am suggesting is that we reconceive and redefine the *meaning* of saying "I'm black," that is, that we reconceive the meaning of racial identification. This is a similar project to what Gates attempts to do by bracketing the word "race" in the title and introduction of *"Race," Writing, and Difference*. According to Gates, "Our decision to bracket 'race' was designed to call attention to the fact that 'races', put simply, do not exist, and that to claim that they do, for whatever misguided reason, is to stand on dangerous ground."²⁴ Gates did not, however, insist that all the contributors to the collection bracket the word "race." Instead, ". . . each time the words 'race' or 'racial' appeared, we expected our readers to bracket the terms themselves."²⁵ There is no reason to abandon the terms that are usually used as labels in our language (except those that are patently offensive). There is every reason, as I have tried to show, to bracket those labels in our minds, to understand their meaning differently and to conceive of them differently. By doing so, we can say "I am _____ (a label)" and mean "I am routinely labeled as _____ (that label) in a society or world in which that label is socially meaningful."

By so doing, we pinpoint what we have in common with the people with whom we identify. We are not labeling others, since the only thing we are doing is recognizing that the same label has been applied to both of us. We are not making assumptions about people's life experiences: just because we are on the receiving end of the same label does not mean that we have had identical experiences or that we have similar philosophies or political views. But if we live in the same society (or in some cases in the

same world), we can know, based on the knowledge that the same label applies to both of us, that the same social norms have affected our lives and that the same sorts of assumptions have been made about us based on the label.

When applied to the case of racial identity, this proposal for how to conceptualize group identification is somewhat akin to Boxill's. Rejecting Du Bois's cultural definition of race, Boxill advocates a physical definition of race that he refers to as "the racist's definition." Boxill writes that:

The racist, we observe, takes a race to be a group of people distinguished either by their physical appearance or biology, or else descended from such a group of people, and since I have adopted their conception, I propose that, insofar as black people are a race, they are people who either themselves look black—that is, have a certain kind of physical appearance—or are, at least in part, descended from such a group of people.²⁶

The people whom Boxill is describing here are people who are *labeled* as "black." To be black in a given social context is to be someone who is labeled as being black. The problem with Boxill's proposal is that if we simply use the "racist's definition," we are still concealing the foundation of that definition, which is the interactional process of labeling. Furthermore, Boxill's definition of race does not provide a justification for identifying with others on the basis of race. He takes it for granted that black people should identify with each other solely on the basis of being "black" according to his definition. Non-essentialism, however, demands that this assumption be justified.

Identifying with people on the basis that we have been labeled in the same way may seem dry and unromantic, but it nonetheless provides a justification for identifying with people while avoiding the problems associated with labeling. Why does having had the same assumptions made about us and dealing with the same social norms justify our identifying with each other? Sharing these things in common does not, unless these assumptions and norms have contributed to our experience of oppression. In that case, however, to be labeled a certain way affects us in a very particular way. Because of the label, and for no other reason, we have been or may be barred from opportunities that are readily available to people

who are labeled differently. Because of the label, the assumptions that are or may be made about us are routinely negative in certain situations. Because of the label, the norms with which we contend deny our agency and achievement.

Recall the definition of oppression in terms of labeling that I offered in the second section of this paper. People who can be said to be experiencing oppression are people who are routinely assigned a label (or would be assigned that label if they did not take steps to hide something about themselves) that signifies inferior social status on the social hierarchy that is supported by the laws, institutional policies, and dominant media of the society. When the society in which you live generally perceives you to be inferior, the people who are most likely to not perceive you negatively are other people who are labeled in the same way you are. Although you may not have the same experiences or philosophies, you are in the same position vis-à-vis the society (or in some cases the world) in which you live.

This is what justifies identification with other people who are labeled in the same way. In a society in which people who are labeled in a certain way are denied opportunities or are under-represented in certain professions and offices, a person who is labeled in this way is justified in deriving added self-confidence and self-esteem from the knowledge that another person who is labeled in this way has overcome obstacles, whether legal obstacles or social norms, to become a member of one of these professions or to hold one of these offices. People who are experiencing oppression on the basis of the same label are justified in feeling connected to each other in a way that they may not feel connected to people to whom that label does not apply: although they cannot assume that they have had the same experiences with social norms and assumptions based on the label they share, they do know that the same norms and assumptions apply to them. Finally, they are justified in perceiving each other as potential political allies: although they may differ as to what is the best way to fight being labeled as inferior, it would be in the interest of all of them not to be labeled negatively.

The objection might be raised that understanding racial identity as the identity of people who have had the same oppressive label

applied to them is identical to suggesting that people identify with each other as "victims of oppression." This is not the case. The notion of identifying oneself as a "victim of oppression" is distasteful, because the term "victim" is itself a label, one that carries assumptions of weakness and vulnerability. If I label myself and the people with whom I identify as "victims," I face the same practical difficulties as I would in any case of group identification on the basis of labels. I am making assumptions about the people with whom I identify on the basis of the label "victim." I am putting the label first, rather than the person. I will assume that "being a victim" means the same to all of us, that we have experienced our "victimhood" in the same way.

On the contrary, when I suggest that people identify with each other on the basis of having had the same label applied to them, I am suggesting that they identify themselves in terms of social meanings and situations that are an integral part of the society or world in which they live. There is a fundamental difference between *being* a victim and *experiencing* having an oppressive label applied to you. When I say that someone is a victim, I am saying something about him. When I say that someone has an oppressive label applied to him, I am saying something about the environment in which he lives. I am arguing in this paper that people should conceive of their identification with each other on the basis of certain aspects of their environment that affect them in particular ways. The difficulties they experience are a result of the environment in which they live, not a result of something about themselves. And I am arguing that this identification is only justifiable as long as the environment continues to be problematic. If the environment changes for the better completely, these groups will no longer have any justification for conceiving of themselves as a group. That is the hard truth of non-essentialism.

To this it might be responded that I am still overlooking the real problem with my conception of racial identification, which is that, as is the case with identifying as a "victim of oppression," the grounds I have suggested for racial identification capture only the negative aspect of shared racial experience, not the positive aspect. To this, I can only respond that what is "positive" is in the eye of the beholder. To me, there is nothing more positive than people

celebrating and standing up for their own and others' uniqueness as individuals, refusing to be classified, and helping each other to resist that classification. On the other hand, to me there is nothing more negative than to see race and other labels taken as profoundly signifying characteristics of people, characteristics that dictate our abilities, our talents, and the "culture" in which we are expected to participate. Even when these are positively construed, they are still limiting.

If racial identification is understood in the way I suggest, it is not grounded in false assumptions made on the basis of labels. Thus, this way of thinking of racial identification does not contribute to the problems of labeling. In addition, identifying with people in this way may help to reduce labeling. First, when we identify with people in this way, we are being clear about the real problem, which is labeling itself. By acknowledging that what we have in common with people is that we have been *labeled* the same way, we draw attention to the act of labeling and its repercussions.

Second, by basing our identification on the recognition that we have been labeled, we are reminded not to label each other. It allows us to keep in mind that we cannot make assumptions about each other's life experiences, philosophies, interests, needs, and so forth. This way of identifying with each other forces us to keep an open mind about each other.

Finally, because the articulation of racial identification in this way of thinking is simultaneous with the articulation of non-essentialism, there is no blurring of non-essentialism and essentialism whenever racial identification is stressed. Racial identification understood in this way, with its inherent awareness of the sociopolitical nature of racial conceptualization, operates to move us away from rigidifying and reinforcing essentialism about race and thus away from repeating the mistakes of the past that have gotten us where we are.

Taking Non-Essentialism Seriously

The ideas in this paper arose from a consideration of the question, "what follows if we take non-essentialism about race seriously?"

I have tried to suggest not only that we ought to take non-essentialism seriously, but also that non-essentialism can only be taken seriously if it is formulated in the correct way. As we have seen with Wasserstrom's and Appiah's versions, when non-essentialism about race is formulated in certain ways, it precludes any sort of black identity. Yet it seems from Wasserstrom's support of affirmative action and Appiah's desire for some sort of Pan-Africanism that this is not what Wasserstrom and Appiah really want.

By analyzing the act of labeling itself and developing a definition of oppression based on labeling theory, I have attempted to formulate non-essentialism in such a way that it is compatible with an understanding of racial identification that is still beneficial to people who are experiencing oppression. Non-essentialism does not have to be purchased at the expense of racial identification, but neither does racial identification require a commitment to outdated essentialist notions. We can have our cake and eat it too.²⁷

Notes

1. Stephen Jay Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1981), p. 323. Gould states that: "Although frequencies for different states of a gene differ among races, we have found no 'race genes'—that is, states fixed in certain races and absent from all others. Lewontin (1972) studied variation in seventeen genes coded for differences in blood and found that only 6.3 percent of the variation can be attributed to racial membership. Fully 85.4 percent of the variation occurred within local populations (the remaining 8.3 percent records differences among local populations within a race). As Lewontin remarked (personal communication): if the holocaust comes and a small tribe deep in the New Guinea forests are the only survivors, almost all the genetic variation now expressed among the innumerable groups of our four billion people will be preserved."
2. Kwame Anthony Appiah, *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).
3. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "Writing 'Race' and the Difference It Makes," in *"Race," Writing, and Difference*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).
4. Richard A. Wasserstrom, *Philosophy and Social Issues* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1980).
5. See, for example, Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).

6. Gates, pp. 4-5.
7. Wasserstrom, "Racism and Sexism," pp. 11-50 in *Philosophy and Social Issues*.
8. Wasserstrom, "Preferential Treatment," pp. 51-82 in *Philosophy and Social Issues*.
9. Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), chap. 6.
10. *Ibid.*, chaps. 6 and 8.
11. Gates, p. 6.
12. Appiah, p. 175.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 179.
14. Young, p. 37.
15. For a more detailed study of labeling, see Bruce Lincoln, *Discourse and the Construction of Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).
16. Langston Hughes, "Who's Passing For Who," in *Something in Common and Other Stories* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1963).
17. For only one example among many, this is one of the key differences between Rawls and his communitarian critics. See John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971) and Michael Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982).
18. Ellis Cose, *The Rage of a Privileged Class* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), p. 82.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 66.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 34.
21. For a more detailed study of labeling and stigmatization, see Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1963).
22. Young, p. 172.
23. *Ibid.*, pp. 167-68.
24. Gates, p. 403.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 404.
26. Bernard Boxill, *Blacks and Social Justice* (Totowa, N.J.: Rowman & Allanheld, 1984), p. 178.
27. I thank Howard McGary for his generosity in reading and commenting on several versions of this paper. His insight was invaluable. Any remaining flaws are, of course, mine and not his.

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