

But what are you *really*?: The metaphysics of race

Lecture for
PHIL 3334:
Philosophy of Biology

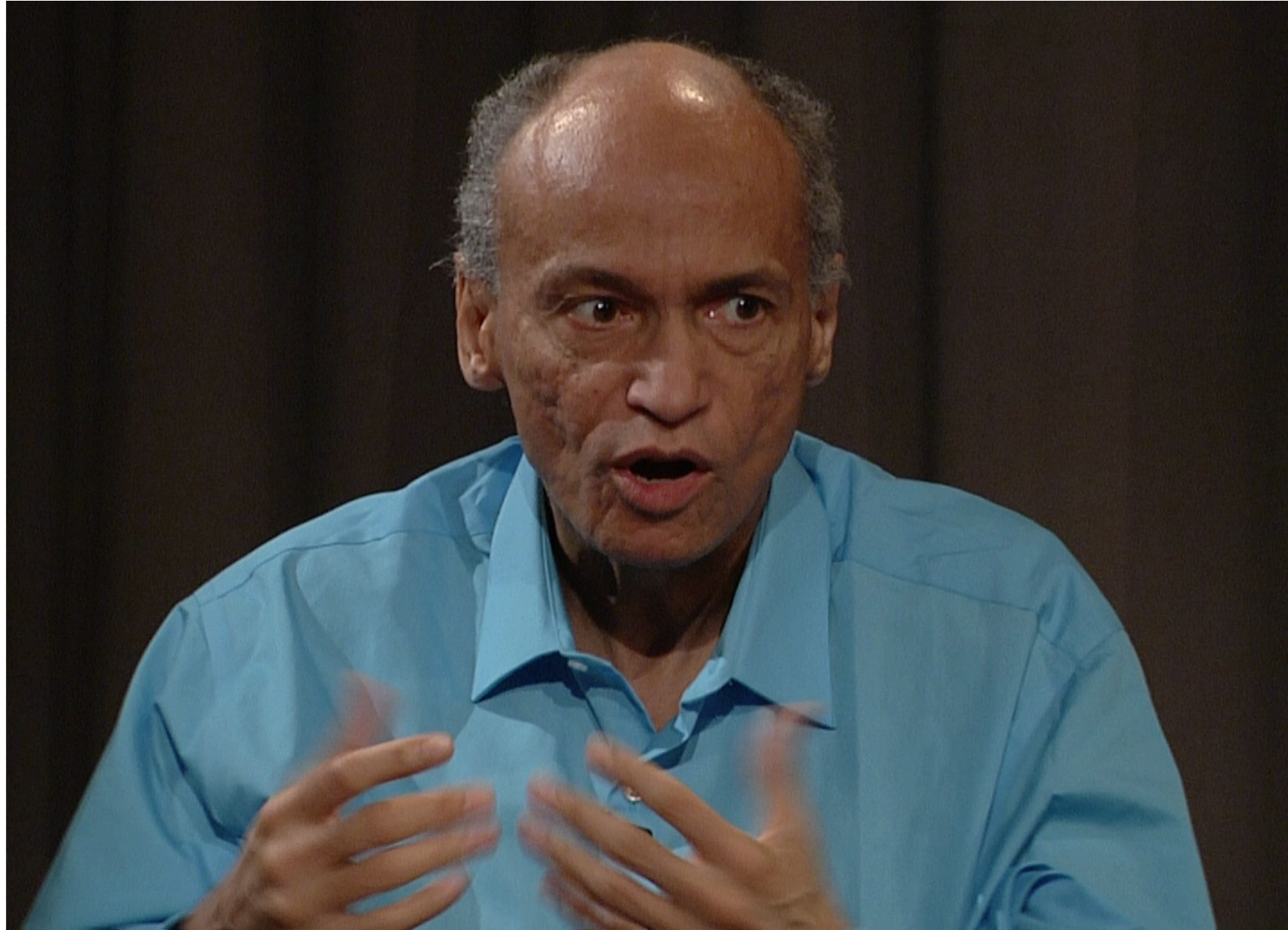
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3 “But What Are You *Really*?”

The Metaphysics of Race

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

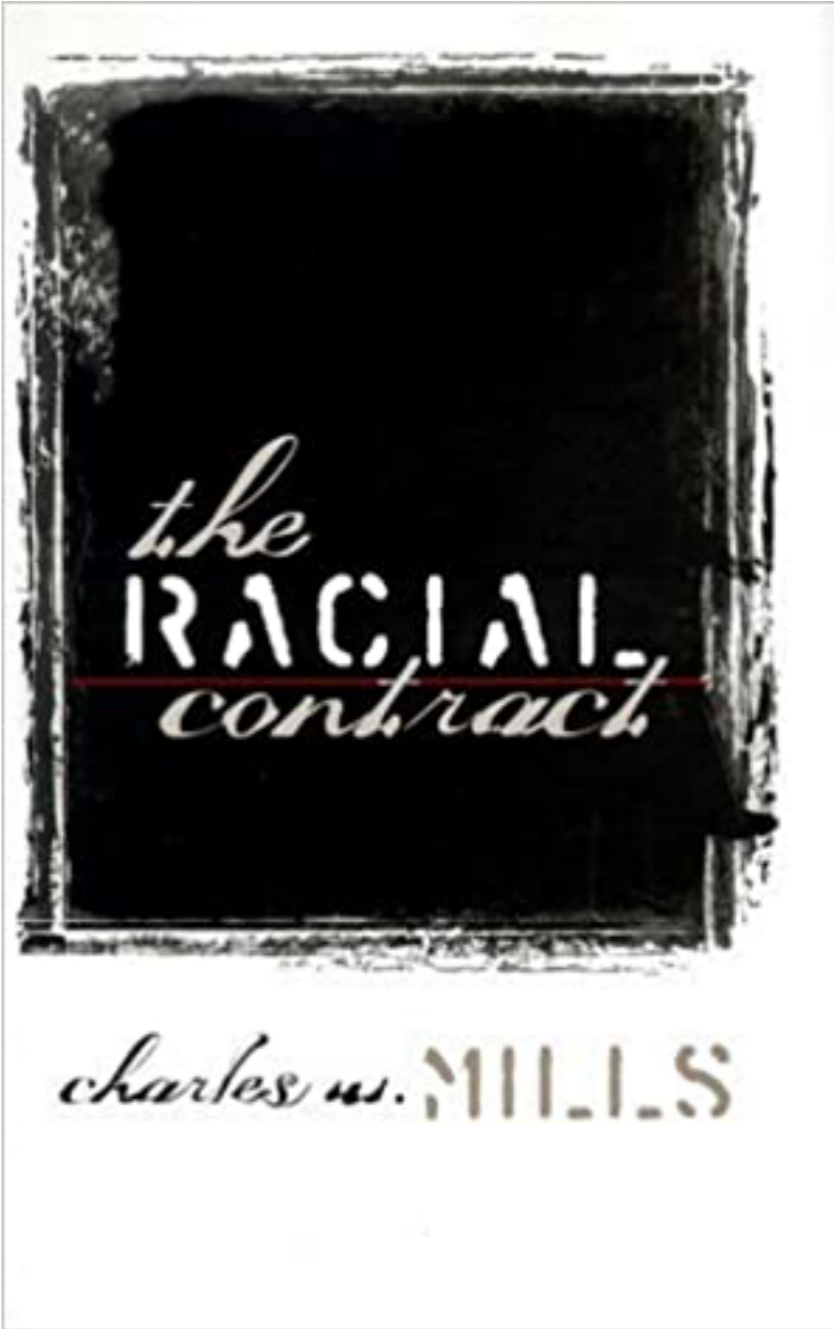
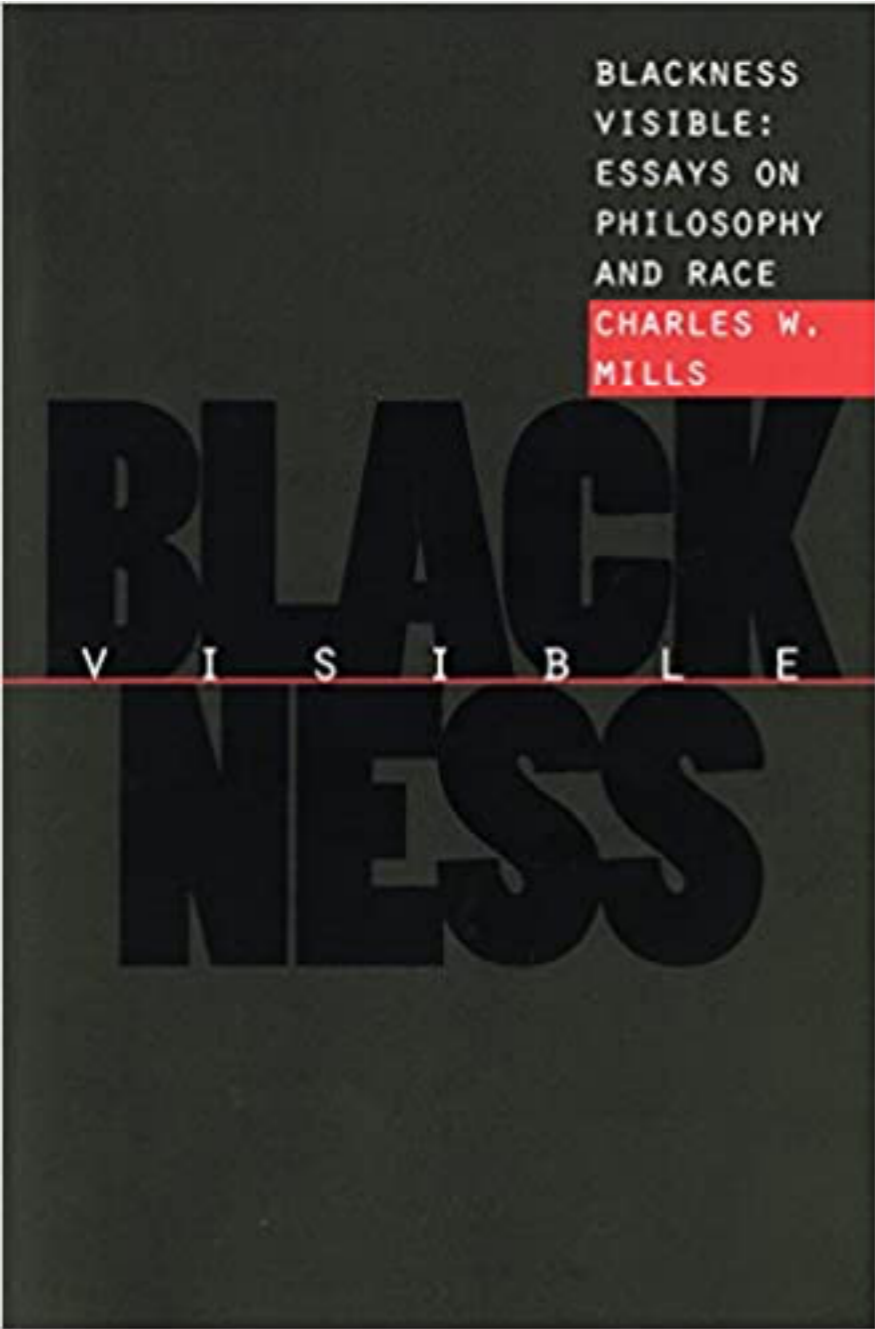
Charles Mills



political philosopher at the
Graduate Center at CUNY

Our version comes from

Another major work



What is the conclusion?

- 1) Race is real and is socially constructed
- 2) It is not *biologically* real (no natural divisions of people) but it is objectively real.
- 3) Race is “a *contingently* deep reality that structures our particular social universe, having a social objectivity and causal significance that arise out of *our* particular history”

Criteria for racial identity

- 1) Bodily appearance
- 2) Ancestry
- 3) Self awareness of ancestry
- 4) Public awareness of ancestry
- 5) Culture
- 6) Experience
- 7) Subjective identification

Criteria for racial identity

These seven are potential criteria (not entirely independent) and when they come apart we get problem cases. We can help ourselves to identify which criteria *really* matter by looking at these problem cases

problem cases

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

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

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

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

Case III: Unconscious passing (natural whiteness)

Case IV: Mr. Oreo

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

Case VI: Unconscious “passing” as black

Case VII: White renegade

Case VIII: (“Black”) White renegade

Case IX: “Biracial” (self-identified)

Case X: “No-racial” (self-identified)

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

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

Problem case I

conscious temporary passing

- 1) Person self-identifies as black but appears white
- 2) — Note that Mills says “black ancestry” but his example is Walter White whose ancestry was 1/64 black. But just change the example if you want
- 3) Mills says they are always black but sometimes pretend to be white

Problem case 2

conscious permanent passing

- 1) Person self-identifies as white and appears white
- 2) — Again, this is supposed to be an example of black ancestry, but Mills uses a mixed ancestry example
- 3) Plausibly this is where Rachael Dolezal would go (though her case has some peculiar complications)

Problem case 3

unconscious passing

- 1) Person self-identifies as white and appears white
- 2) Has black ancestry but doesn't even know it
- 3) If this person is really black, then ancestry seems to overwhelm everything else. Then why not just say that race is biologically real?

Problem case 3

unconscious passing

Instead of biological realism, here Mills seems to think that they actually are the race that everyone thinks they have

What about the case where they discover their ancestry? Mills suggests their race actually changes

Problem case 4

Mr. Oreo

- 1) Person self-identifies as white but is visibly black
- 2) Has black ancestry and knows it, but wishes to be white
- 3) Mills says they are black because we treat them that way. This is meant to show self-identification isn't everything

Problem case 5

Mr. Oreo cosmetically changed

- 1) Mr. Oreo who desires to be white undergoes a physical transformation so he now appears white
- 2) And ALL physical characteristics have changed (internal too if there are any such things) - not just surface skin color
- 3) Mills says “a case can be made” that he has changed his race

Problem case 6

unconscious passing (switched)

- 1) This is case 3 with the white/black switched.
- 2) They actually have white ancestry but are thought to be black (and they don't know it)
- 3) This is meant to force us to think about whether there is a white/black asymmetry

Problem case 7

reversed Mr. Oreo - white on outside but culturally black

- 1) This is case 5 with the white/black switched.
- 2) This is reminiscent of Rachael Dolezal - though there, she could (somewhat) pass for being black

Problem case 8

case 7 with various alterations

Alterations:

- 1) The white renegade actually has (unknown) black ancestry
- 2) He discovers black ancestry and makes it public
- 3) He discovers it but keeps it secret
- 4) Discovers and announces it, but actually ancestry is mistaken

Problem case 9

bi (or multi) racial individuals

- 1) Imagine someone (like Tiger Woods) who identifies as biracial. Are they a NEW race?
- 2) Do other individuals with the same ancestry count as biracial if they don't identify that way?

Problem case 10

individuals with no race

- 1) Some individuals (like philosopher Naomi Zack) accepts no racial designation
- 2) Does it matter if we tend to think they are white, black, mixed race, etc? If anyone has a race, does everyone?