But what are you really?: The metaphysics of race

Lecture for PHIL 3334: Philosophy of Biology

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>“Racial” criteria-</th>
<th>I</th>
<th>II</th>
<th>III</th>
<th>IV</th>
<th>V</th>
<th>VI</th>
<th>VII</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bodily appearance</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>W*</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>W</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ancestry</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>W</td>
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<tr>
<td>Self-awareness</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<td>of ancestry</td>
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<tr>
<td>Public awareness</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
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<td>Yes</td>
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<td>Yes</td>
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<td>of ancestry</td>
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<tr>
<td>Culture</td>
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<td>W</td>
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<td>W</td>
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<td>B</td>
<td>B</td>
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<tr>
<td>Experience</td>
<td>W/B</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>W/B</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>W/B</td>
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<tr>
<td>Self-identification</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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 1
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?