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"But Would That Still Be Me?" Notes on Gender, "Race," Ethnicity, as Sources of "Identity"

Author(s): Anthony Appiah

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“BUT WOULD THAT STILL BE ME?”  
NOTES ON GENDER, “RACE,” ETHNICITY,  
AS SOURCES OF “IDENTITY”\*

**I**F you had asked most Anglo-American philosophers twenty-five years ago what conditions someone had to meet in order to be (identical with) me, they would, no doubt, have taken this (correctly) to be a conceptual question, and (incorrectly) inferred that it was to be answered a priori by reflection on the properties whose presence would have led them to *say* that an imagined entity was Anthony Appiah. Since there are hardly any properties of persons whose absence we cannot intelligibly imagine, it was tempting to conclude that there was something odd about the very question.

In these enlightened post-Kripkean times, we think we know that it was the way of trying to answer the question which was odd. For we now think that the question whether (as we are likely to put it) some individual in a possible world is AA is an a posteriori question about a real essence. Some believe not only that this is a question about real essences, but that we know its answer: that the real essence of a person is the chromosomal structure produced by the coition of his actual parents, a thesis that is the biological fleshing out of the metaphysical doctrine of the necessity of origins.

These are important issues in the semantics, metaphysics, and logic of identity, and they are centrally concerned with the identification of individuals across (metaphysically) possible worlds. But it seems to me that there is an equally important set of questions that recent theorizing has left to one side, a set of questions that can also be raised by asking, about a possible individual, “But would that still be

\* To be presented in an APA symposium on Gender, Race, Ethnicity: Sources of Identity, December 30. Maria C. Lugones will be co-symposiast, and Thomas E. Wartenberg will comment; see this JOURNAL, this issue, 500–7 and 508–9, respectively, for their contributions.

me?” I want to argue that there is a sense of this question which is best answered in the “old-fashioned” conceptual way; and to get at what I have in mind, nothing could provide a better starting point than questions about “race,” ethnicity, gender, and sex.

Consider, for the purposes of an initial example, the possibility that I might have been born a girl. Someone convinced of the chromosomal account of individual identity, and convinced, too, that what it is to be biologically female or male is to have the appropriate chromosomal structure, will argue that this is only an apparent possibility.<sup>1</sup> A female person could have been born to my parents when I was, if a different sperm and egg had met: but she would not have been me. It will be false, in this view, that I could have been born a woman.

I am prepared to concede all this for the purposes of argument; but there is a different question I might want to consider about a different possibility. Might I not, without any genetic modification, have been raised as a girl? This sort of thing certainly can happen; as when, for example, surgeons engaged in male circumcision remove the whole penis in error: rather than face a child with what—in our society—is bound to be the trauma of growing into a man without a penis, surgeons will often, in such circumstances, remove the testes from the abdomen, construct a facsimile of the female external genitalia, and ask the parents to bring the child back for hormone therapy in time to manage a facsimile of female puberty. If the good doctor who circumcised me had made such a mistake, could not I—this very metaphysical individual here—have been raised with a feminine (social) gender even though, on the chromosomal essentialist view, I was still of the male (biological) sex?<sup>2</sup>

My claim in this paper is that, while there may be a sense of the question, “Would that have been me?”, under which the answer to this question is ‘yes’, there is another, intelligible reading under which it could, surely, be ‘no’.

To get at that reading, consider the—admittedly, very different—possibility that I might seek to have a sex change, prior to which I could consider our guiding question about the possible future social female this metaphysical individual would then become. “Would that still be me?”, I could ask. Now it seems to me that I can give either of

<sup>1</sup> Given the underlying biology, this is too simple a view: I assume it in this paper as a first approximation.

<sup>2</sup> I shall use male and female for biological identities (sex) and feminine and masculine for social identities (gender). See the remarks on the topic of XX and XY genotypes below.

two answers here, and that which answer I should give depends in large part on how central my being-a-man—my social masculinity and, perhaps, my possession of the biological appurtenances of maleness—is, as we would ordinarily say, to my identity. And it is in exploring this sense of the term ‘identity’ that we can come to learn why it is that there is a sense to this question—I shall call it the ethical sense—in which I may chose to answer it in the negative.

To say that I may chose is to speak loosely. The issue is not really a matter of choice. What answer I should give to the question understood this way depends on how central my being-a-man is to my identity, not on how central I choose to make it. Transsexuals will surely answer in the affirmative; they often say that they were always of the “other” sex all along. For the chromosomal essentialist, this will be false. But a transsexual might (after reading Saul Kripke) come to conclude that what he or she really had in mind was the different thought that his or her real identity, in the sense of the term I am now trying to explore, was that of the sex into which he or she was not born. And if I were a transsexual convinced of this I would say, contemplating the feminine person that I might become, “Yes, that would be me; in fact it would be the real me, the one I have always really been all along.”

But what I am actually inclined to say is: “No. A sex-change operation would make of this (metaphysical) person a different (ethical) person.” And so there is a sense in which she would not be me.

As many people think of them, sex (female and male, the biological statuses) and gender (masculine and feminine, the social roles) provide the sharpest models for a distinction between the metaphysical notion of identity that goes with Kripkean theorizing and the notion of identity—the ethical notion—that I am seeking to explore. I say ‘as many people think of them’ because the real world is full of complications. Not every human being is XX or XY. And there are people who are XY in whom the indifferent gonad was not prompted to form the characteristic male external genitalia; people whom it seems to me odd to regard as “really” biological males. Just as it would be odd to treat an XX person with male external genitalia, produced as the result of a burst of testosterone from a maternal tumor, as “really” biologically female. Once you have an inkling of how messy the real world of the biology of the reproductive organs is, you are likely, if you are wise, to give up the idea that there are just two biological sexes into which all human beings must fall. And this is important because most people do not make the distinctions (or know the facts) necessary to appreciate this, and thus have thoughts

about what it is to be a man or a woman which involve concepts that essentially presuppose falsehoods about how people biologically are. Before someone has made a sex-gender conceptual distinction we cannot always say whether what these thoughts were about was one or the other: there are, so to speak, thoughts that no one who *had* made these distinctions could have.

But the general point can be made in cases far from the biological hard cases: if you consider a straightforward case of an XY biological infant, born with standard male internal and external genitalia, who is assigned a feminine gender as the result of early loss of his gonads, it is clear that such a person can agree to a Kripkean “metaphysical” identification as a biological male and insist on the centrality to her of her feminine-gender identity, on being, so to speak, ethically a woman. But before I say more about what this means, it will help to have a couple of rather different cases before us.

Take next, then, so-called “racial” identity. Here the biological situation is much worse than in the case of sex. No coherent system of biological classification of people—no classification, that is, that serves explanatory purposes central to biological theory—corresponds to the folk-theoretical classifications of people into Caucasian, Negro, and such. This is not, of course, to deny that there are differences in morphology among humans: people’s skins do differ in color. But these sorts of distinctions are not—as those who believe in races apparently suppose—markers of deeper biologically-based racial essences, correlating closely with most (or even many) important biological (let alone nonbiological) properties. I announce this rather than argue for it, because it is hardly a piece of biological news, being part of a mainstream consensus in human biology. This means that here we cannot make use of an analog of the systematic sex-gender distinction: the underlying biology does not deliver something that we can use, like the sex chromosomes, as a biological essence for the Caucasian or the Negro.

But this does not mean that people cannot have ethical identities tied up with being, say, Euro- or African- or Asian-American; what it does mean, given that such identities often presuppose falsehoods about the underlying biology, is that, once the facts are in, a different theoretical account of those identities is required. From an external point of view, we can construct an account of what it is that people take to be grounds for assigning people to these racial categories. We can note that they are supposed to be asymmetrically based on descent: that “whites” in America are supposed to have no non-“white” ancestry, but that “blacks” and Asians may have

non-“black” and non-Asian ancestry. But from the point of view of people whose ethical identity is at stake, it is not going to be enough simply to remark how others classify them. And to see this we can return to our guiding question.

Let us suppose<sup>3</sup> that an American of African descent could be offered the possibility of losing all the morphological markers that are associated in this society with that descent. Her skin is lightened, her hair straightened, her lips thinned: she has, in short, all the services of Michael Jackson’s cosmetic surgeon and more. Surely, in contemplating this possibility, she could ask herself whether, once these changes had occurred, the resulting ethical person “would still be me.” And, so far as I can see, almost everyone who does contemplate this question in our society is likely to judge that, whether or not these changes are desirable, the answer here must be ‘yes’.

I am asserting here, therefore, a contrast between our attitudes to (ethical) gender and (ethical) “race.” I suggest that we standardly hold it open to people to believe that the replacement of the characteristic morphology of their sex with a (facsimile) of that of the other (major) one would produce someone other than themselves, a new ethical person; while the replacement of the characteristic morphology of their ethical “race” by that of another would not leave them free to disclaim the new person. “Racial” ethical identities are for us—and that means something like, us in the modern West—apparently less conceptually central to who one is than gender ethical identities.

That this is so does not entail that being-an-African-American cannot be an *important* ethical identity: it is a reflection, rather, of the fact that ethical identity is not a matter of morphology, that skin and hair and so on are simply signs for it. Such an identity is, as we ordinarily understand it, exactly a matter of descent: and nothing you do to change your appearance or behavior can change the past fact that your ancestors were of some particular origin. Nevertheless, even for those for whom being-African-American is an important aspect of their ethical identity, what matters to them is almost always not the unqualified fact of that descent, but rather something that they suppose to go with it: the experience of a life as a member of a group of people who experience themselves as—and are held by others to be—a community in virtue of their mutual recognition—and their recognition by others—as people of a common descent.

<sup>3</sup> As George Schuyler actually did in his engaging moral fantasy, *Black No More* (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1931).

It is a reasonable question how such “racial” identities differ from those we call “ethnic.” What matters about the identity of, say, Irish-Americans—which was conceived of racially in the nineteenth century in North America—is that it, like an African-American identity, involves experiences of community in virtue of a mutual recognition of a common descent. What differentiates Irish-American from African-American identity, as understood in these United States, is that it is largely recognized nowadays that what flows from this common descent is a matter of a shared culture. People of Irish-American descent adopted and raised outside Irish-American culture are still, perhaps, to be thought of as Irish-Americans; but they have a choice about whether this fact, once they are aware of it, should be central to their ethical identities, and their taking it as central would involve them in adopting certain cultural practices. Someone who refuses to do anything with the fact of their Irish-American descent—who fails to acknowledge it in any of their projects—is not generally held to be inauthentic; is not held to be being unfaithful to something about herself to which she ought to respond. So far as I can see, by contrast, African-Americans who respond in this way fall into two categories, depending on whether or not their visible morphology permits them to “pass,” permits them, that is, to act in society without their African ancestry’s being noticed.

If they cannot pass, they will often be thought of as inauthentic, as refusing to acknowledge something about themselves that they ought to acknowledge, though they will not be thought to be dishonest, since their morphology reveals the fact that is being denied. If they can pass, they will be thought of by many, as being not merely inauthentic but dishonest. And while they may have prudential reasons for concealing the fact of their (partial) African descent, this will be held by many to amount to inauthenticity, especially if they adopt cultural styles associated with “white” people.

Now, so far as I can see, these differences between the identities that we think of as “racial” and those which we think of as “ethnic” cannot be made intelligible without adverting to certain (false) beliefs. Someone who conceals the fact of an African ancestry in his social life quite generally is held to be inauthentic, because there is still around in the culture the idea that being (partially) descended from black people makes you “really” black—in ways that have ethical consequences—while being descended from Irish stock merely correlates roughly with a certain cultural identity. If “races” were biologically real, this would, perhaps, begin to be a possible distinction; though it would require further argument to persuade me that

ethical consequences flowed from membership in races. But since they are not, this distinction seems, as I say, to require a distinction that someone apprised of the facts should just give up.<sup>4</sup>

That “race” and gender have interestingly different relations to metaphysical identity should not obscure the fact that as ethical identities they have a central importance for us. What this means is, presumably, something like this: that for us, in our society, being-of-a-certain-gender and being-of-a-certain-race are for many people facts that are centrally implicated in the construction of life plans. To ignore one’s race and one’s gender in thinking about the ethical project of composing a life for oneself requires, in many minds, a kind of ignoring of social reality which amounts to attempting to fool oneself; and that is part of what is involved in the thought that passing for the “wrong” gender or race involves a certain inauthenticity.

We construct ethical identities—woman, man, African-American, “white”—in ways that depend crucially on false beliefs about metaphysical identities; something like each of them could be reconstructed out of other materials. But if we were to live in a society that did not institutionalize those false metaphysical beliefs, it is unclear that the project of reconstruction would be an attractive one. In a truly nonsexist, nonracist society, gender, the ethical identity constructed on the base of sexual differences, would at least be radically differently configured, and might, like “race,” entirely wither away; ethnic identities, by contrast—and this is something an African-American identity could become—seem likely to persist so long as there are human cultures and subcultures, which is likely to mean as long as people are raised in families.

ANTHONY APPIAH

Duke University

<sup>4</sup> Like race-ethnicity, sexuality provides an interesting contrast case to sex-gender. It would be interesting to explore, for the sake of further contrast, the ways in which the notion of a “gay” identity requires assumptions about whether sexuality is and is not a matter of acculturation.