

disparage this type of *social* solidarity. The form of emancipatory political solidarity that I would defend is perfectly compatible with it. Indeed, sometimes black social solidarity can foster black political solidarity and vice versa. Second, like the cultural nationalists considered in Chapter 5, some blacks might want to work together to cultivate and preserve black culture. They may also see this collective project as important quite apart from its relationship to the struggle against injustice. Provided such a project is not treated as a necessary component of black political solidarity, it is not threatened by the rejection of the collective identity theory. It may, however, suffer from other conceptual and normative difficulties, as we have seen.

Modes of Blackness

Before submitting it to critical scrutiny, it will be useful to specify the collective identity theory in a bit more detail. This will require discussing a long-standing philosophical conundrum—the meaning of “blackness.” According to collective identity theory, black people must embrace and preserve their distinctive black identity if a politically progressive solidarity is to flourish among them. Thus it is necessary to know what group of people the label *black* is supposed to be picking out here and what the nature of this “black identity” is that they must embrace and preserve. I want to approach these two questions by building upon the distinction introduced in Chapter 1 between “thin” and “thick” conceptions of black identity. Relying on this distinction, we will see, among other things, that the collective identity theorist urges the cultivation of thick blackness.

Recall that on a thin conception of black identity, blackness is a vague and socially imposed category of “racial” difference that serves to distinguish groups on the basis of their members having certain visible, inherited physical characteristics and a particular biological ancestry. There are widely shared, nationally variable,

intersubjective criteria for the classification of individuals into racial groupings. The prevailing (though not uncontested) thin conception of black identity in the United States, a conception that has its social heritage in chattel slavery and Jim Crow domination, holds that *blacks* include both (1) those persons who have certain easily identifiable, inherited physical traits (such as dark skin, tightly curled or “kinky” hair, a broad flat nose, and thick lips) and who are descendants of peoples from sub-Saharan Africa; and (2) those persons who, while not meeting or only ambiguously satisfying the somatic criteria, are descendants of Africans who are widely presumed to have had these physical characteristics. Thus, on a thin view, blacks are persons who (more or less) fit a particular phenotypic profile and certain genealogical criteria and/or who are generally believed to have biological ancestors who fit the relevant profile.

For those who meet these criteria, there is little room for choice about one’s “racial” identity. One cannot simply refuse to be thinly black—as the African American folk saying goes, “the only thing I *have* to do is stay black and die.” If, say, one were to assimilate completely to so-called white culture, one’s thin blackness would nevertheless remain intact, for cultural conversion provides no escape. No amount of wealth, income, social status, or education can erase one’s thin blackness, which of course is not to deny that these advantages might mitigate some of its negative consequences. One might alter her physical appearance so as not to “look black,” or if she doesn’t look black, she might then conceal her genealogy—as those who “pass” do—but in either case, she would still *be* black, in the thin sense, even if never found out.⁷ It is an individual’s thin blackness that makes her vulnerable to antiblack racism despite her law-abiding conduct and good character, her commitment to civic and personal responsibility, the extent of her assimilation to mainstream bourgeois or mass culture, her middle-class income and professional status, her educational success and intellectual

achievement, or her nonblack physical appearance.⁸ Thus the category of thin blackness, as an official “racial” classification, is all that would be needed for the administration of civil rights laws and the enforcement of antidiscrimination statutes.

A *thick* conception of black identity, which usually includes a thin component, always requires something more, or something other, than a common physical appearance and African ancestry.⁹ Here the social category “black” has a narrower social meaning, with specific and sometimes quite austere criteria for who qualifies as black. Unlike thin blackness, thick blackness can be adopted, altered, or lost through individual action. Drawing on the history of black social thought, five familiar modes of thick blackness can be distinguished.

First, there is the *racialist* mode.¹⁰ On this conception, black identity is based on the supposed presence of a special genotype in the biological makeup of all (fully) black people that does not exist among nonblacks. On this view, an underlying cluster of genes, transmitted through biological reproduction, accounts not only for the relatively superficial phenotypic traits that satisfy the criteria for thin blackness but also explains more socially significant traits, such as temperament, aesthetic sensibility, and certain innate talents. It is the possession of this genotype that defines membership in the black race. There is of course a racist conception that holds that the black essence significantly determines the native intelligence, reproductive traits and tendencies, and moral character of those who possess it. However, blacks generally regard this strong form of biological determinism as false and insulting, and so I shall proceed on the assumption that the collective identity theorist, as an advocate for black freedom and equality, does not endorse it either.

Second, there is the *ethnic* conception of blackness, which treats black identity as a matter of shared ancestry and common cultural heritage. On such an account, there is no assumption that two peo-

ple of the same ethnicity must necessarily share the same racial genotype. To be sure, as a result of their shared biological ancestry the members of an ethnic group may share certain physical traits—for instance, dark skin or the capacity to grow an Afro—and they may even value their possession of these traits as part of their ethnic identity. But these ethnic traits need not be viewed as indicating an underlying biological essence that explains black behavioral or psychological dispositions. Indeed, the ethnic conception of blackness is consistent with the complete rejection of racialism.

There are two dominant conceptions of black ethnicity among black Americans. One emphasizes the fact that black Americans are descendants of certain sub-Saharan African peoples, and it maintains that they share a culture that is traceable to the culture of those ancestors. The other stresses both the experiences of blacks with oppression in the New World and the rich culture they have created in the context of that oppression since being forcibly removed from Africa. On either version, though, one does not have a black ethnic identity, in the thick sense, unless one has the relevant lineage and embraces, to some significant degree, the corresponding cultural traits.

Third, there is blackness as *nationality*. “Nationality” has at least two meanings. It is often used to mean citizenship in a territorially sovereign state. A person would therefore have a black national identity if he or she were a citizen of a (predominantly) black nation-state (such as Ghana, Haiti, or Nigeria). But “nationality” also has a meaning that is quite similar to that of ethnicity. An ethnic identity can be considered a national one when the people in question think of themselves and their culture as derived from a particular geographical location, where the relevant territory is considered an ancestral “homeland” and a source of group pride. In the case of black Americans, this geographical region is, again, typically (some part of) sub-Saharan Africa. However, I will treat black nationality, in both its senses, as a variant of the ethnic conception, for

the differences between ethnicity and nationality, as here defined, will not affect the argument to follow.

Fourth, there is the *cultural* conception of blackness. It rests on the claim that there is an identifiable ensemble of beliefs, values, conventions, traditions, and practices (that is, a culture or subculture) that is distinctively black (see Chapter 5). Though this culture is thought to be the creative product of those who satisfy the criteria for thin blackness, the continued reproduction of the culture does not depend solely on the activities of these blacks, because nonblacks may participate in sustaining and developing it as well. On this model, thick black identity is tied neither to race nor to biological descent. Anyone could, in principle, embrace and cultivate a black cultural identity, in much the same way that anyone could, again in principle, become a practicing Christian.

Finally, there is the historically influential *kinship* mode of blackness. This view conceptualizes black identity on the model of the family—recall Du Bois's conception of race as a "vast family" or consider the common use of "brother" and "sister" to affectionately refer to fellow blacks.¹¹ Of course blacks are not a family, not even an extended one, in any ordinary sense. And earlier I criticized the invocation of this idiom insofar as it is meant to underwrite contemporary black political solidarity (see Chapters 3 and 4). So what is it about familial relations that could plausibly constitute a basis or suggest an analogous foundation for a thick black identity? There seem to be three possibilities. First, one could understand blackness in terms of biological relatedness or genealogy—"blood ties." But then the kinship conception can be adequately expressed in terms of the racist view, the ethnic view without the cultural requirement, or the thin conception of black identity.¹² Second, one could treat black identity as a matter not merely of biology but of the reproduction of a common way of life. But here the idea could be fully captured by the ethnic conception of blackness (perhaps with some additional racist assumptions). Or third, like familial

relations formed through marriage or adoption (whether formal or informal), blackness could be thought to rest on voluntary affiliation, custom, or (legal) convention. This form of blackness, however, would be simply a version of the cultural conception, a matter of *joining* the relevant group. The familiar kinship view is not, therefore, a conception of blackness distinct from the ones already considered, just a convenient (though often misleading) trope used to signify one or more of them. Now of course members of a family often share important experiences that contribute to their feelings of connectedness, trust, and loyalty. And in a similar way, black people have a common history of racial oppression and share a common vulnerability to racial discrimination. However, as I will argue below, these commonalities can form the basis for group solidarity without relying at all on a thick collective black identity.

There are several things to notice about thin and thick black identities and their interrelations. First, a person who satisfies the thin social criteria for being classified as black may nevertheless choose, with varying degrees of psychological difficulty and against various forms of social pressure, not to define his or her self-conception in terms of “blackness” at all. That is, such a person may choose not to subjectively identify with the label *black* or to conform to its associated behavioral norms.¹³ Some nationalists contend that those so-called blacks who refuse to self-identify as black are denying something important about themselves, usually out of racially motivated self-hate. But a different, more respectable, reason for rejecting a black identity, one that does not necessarily involve self-deception or bad faith, is that one may believe that the designation *black*, with its typical connotations, is not an apt characterization of either who one is or who one would like to be. Or one might think that a black identity, while perhaps perfectly appropriate for some, is too limiting in one’s own case. Yet another reason might be that one believes it to be an inherently invidious and repressive social distinction that should thus be repudiated on

moral or political grounds. It should be clear, however, that the choice not to self-identify as black, whatever its rationale, does *not* dissolve the often constraining social realities that are created by the fact that *others* may insist on ascribing such an identity to one and consequently may treat one accordingly, whether for good or ill.

Second, black identity is not only multidimensional—involving the thin/thick distinction and often including various types of thickness—but the content of each mode is intensely contested. This circumstance makes possible the familiar but controversial discourse of black authenticity. It sometimes happens, for example, that an individual who satisfies the thin criteria for blackness possesses only a subset of the three modes of thick blackness under consideration—for instance, the thinly black person may (seem to) embody the racist dimension without exemplifying the cultural dimension. There is intense disagreement among African Americans about whether anyone who identifies as black along one dimension should also, perhaps as a test of group loyalty or trustworthiness, identify as black along all the others—to be, in a sense, “fully” black. It is also possible for an individual to exemplify each of these modes but to different extents; for example, a person might have dark skin and love hip hop but have little fondness for or knowledge of African cultures and no interest at all in the blues. Recognition of this fact has also sometimes given rise to talk of “degrees” of blackness. Moreover, because the boundaries of each mode are both vague and fiercely disputed, there is often deep disagreement among African Americans about exactly when the label *black* applies in a given case, a circumstance that sometimes produces seemingly irresolvable questions about whether certain persons are “really” black.

Now given the thin/thick distinction, we can understand what it would mean to say of someone who is clearly black according to the thin criteria but who fails to satisfy the relevant criteria for thick blackness (whatever they turn out to be) that he or she isn’t “really”

black—a claim that is sometimes thought to be essentialist and paradoxical, if not completely incoherent.¹⁴ Here is how we might make sense of that familiar charge without relying on racialism and within the context of thinking about the relevance of a collective identity for black solidarity. Though a person cannot choose whether to be black in the thin sense, she can, as we've said, decide what significance she will attach to her thin blackness. This includes deciding whether to commit herself to pragmatic black nationalism. But if she does so commit, either explicitly or implicitly, then she could rightly be criticized for failing to live up to obligations she has voluntarily accepted as a member of that solidarity group. For instance, she might be criticized for not being sufficiently faithful to the goal of racial equality.

Of course we all, whether black or not, have an obligation to resist racial injustice. The obligations of blacks in this regard are certainly no greater than those of nonblacks.¹⁵ But blacks would arguably have an obligation to pursue their antiracism *through* black solidarity if in its absence racial justice could not be achieved. Such an obligation would follow from the principle that if one wills the end, one also wills the necessary means, provided of course these means are morally permissible. If such a position is sound, then blacks who fail to commit to black solidarity are open to criticism. And thus if collective identity theory is correct, any thinly black person who does not affirm thick blackness as part of his identity, whether he has made a commitment to black solidarity or not, would be vulnerable to criticism. In this book, I leave open the question of whether a commitment to black political solidarity is strictly obligatory, for answering it would require resolving the difficult empirical question of whether such solidarity is absolutely necessary to achieve racial justice. Instead I focus on what should and should not be required of those who *choose* to fight antiblack racism through black political solidarity, noting, as I have emphasized throughout, that such group efforts are a legitimate and con-

structive means to effect social change. This leaves open the possibility that it is permissible for blacks to work for racial justice through some other means, whether group-based or not.

Thus, if we think of authenticity, not as a matter of acting in conformity to or fully realizing one's inherent essence, but as being faithful to the practical principles that one has freely adopted, then black "inauthenticity" could be understood as not living up to one's solidaristic commitments (whatever these turn out to entail). If the goals of black solidarity cannot be achieved without a thick shared identity, as collective identity theory maintains, then a person who has signed on to this emancipatory project, but fails to identify as thickly black, may rightly be criticized for being "inauthentic"—fraudulent or fake. By using the thin/thick distinction, then, we can more clearly discuss the discourse of black authenticity and what role, if any, it has to play in black solidarity.

Finally, it is clear that among those who satisfy the criteria for thin blackness, many spontaneously embrace a thick black identity without treating this as a conscious strategy and without being concerned for how this would impact black politics. Even for those who do deliberately choose to cultivate a thick black identity, they do so for the most varied reasons, many doubtless having to do with resisting racial injustice but some having more to do with cultivating self-esteem, wanting a rich and relatively stable conception of who they are, or desiring a strong sense of community. It is moreover probably rare that blacks consciously embrace a thick black identity solely for political purposes. In fact, in order for such an identity to have a positive effect on black solidarity, it may be necessary for some to embrace it for reasons apart from its political value. The collective identity theorist could concede all this but nevertheless insist that were a sufficient number of blacks, for whatever reason, to reject or distance themselves from thick blackness, this would seriously hamper, if not undermine, emancipatory black solidarity, especially given the collective action problems that blacks

currently face. Indeed, the familiar policing of social identities that takes place among black Americans—which often frustrates those who seek greater freedom in the construction of their social identities—arguably functions to strengthen the bonds of solidarity necessary for effective resistance against racial oppression. It is for this reason that the advocate of collective identity theory urges blacks to accept a thick black identity, even if some will do so for reasons having little to do with antiracist politics.

Given the above distinctions and caveats, the collective identity theory can now be given a more precise formulation: There are persons who meet the criteria for thin blackness who also have available to them a black identity that is “deeper,” that is, *thicker*, than their thin blackness, and these persons must positively affirm and preserve their thick blackness if collectively they are to overcome their racial oppression through group solidarity. Thus, for the remainder of this chapter, when I speak of the alleged need for a common black identity, I will be using the term *black* in the thick sense, and when I speak of “black people” or simply “blacks,” I will mean “black” in the thin sense, unless otherwise indicated.

Is a Collective Identity Necessary?

On a racist conception of blackness, with its commitment to a more-than-skin-deep racial essence, embracing and preserving black identity would entail, at a minimum, fostering intraracial reproduction between blacks and, perhaps more importantly, discouraging interracial reproduction between blacks and nonblacks. This practice of racial endogamy is supposed to help keep the black essence intact and protect blacks from the dangers of racial hybridity. However, this view has a number of well-known problems. For one thing, it is now generally acknowledged that no “pure” biological races exist. Indeed, many biologists and anthropologists question the very idea of “racial” difference.¹⁶ But even if there are (or once were) pure racial groups, those Americans who are black by