

I'm Jewish and Don't Identify as White. Why Must I Check That Box?

By Kwame Anthony Appiah

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I realize that with everything going on in the world, this is a small issue, but it's bothered me for some time: Forms of all kinds often ask for a person's race. I strongly support affirmative action for historically disadvantaged groups. I'm Jewish, a category almost always lumped with white. I'm fair-skinned and have an Anglicized last name, which my paternal grandfather adopted on his arrival in this country. In other words, I can easily "pass" as white and am unlikely to personally suffer any anti-Semitism. Nevertheless, I bristle at being considered or listing myself as white. My father did suffer from anti-Semitism as a young man, and I have relatives who perished in the Holocaust, some in concentration camps.

I do not believe Jews in the United States need affirmative action. It's more of a moral question for me. I don't identify as white. Why should I list myself that way? Name Withheld

Like Jacob and Esau, the racial designations "white" and "Black" were born twins. In this country, since the colonial era, they have functioned to turn human beings from a wide range of societies on two continents into two vast assemblages. The highly diverse peoples who inhabited the Americas before either Europeans or Africans did were, in the same process, lumped together as Indians. As ideas about race as a supposedly biological category solidified through the 19th century, all three groups increasingly came to be thought of as races; and when migration from the rest of the world brought more peoples from elsewhere, they were fitted into this system, too, with certain modifications (notably when the United States decided to let in — and then keep out — workers from the Far East).

There are two big problems with the way our American race concept developed. First, the race idea presupposed that people who share ancestry, and some of the physical characteristics that go with it, are much more similar than they actually are; and correspondingly, that people of disparate ancestries are much more different from one another than they actually are. Once grouped together in this way, people were easily regarded not as individuals with particular virtues and vices but as representatives of types.

This intellectual error was compounded by a second, moral error: The system came with commitments to racial hierarchy. Those hierarchical ideas coalesced around the idea of white supremacy, the thought that the white race was superior, not just in the sense that its members supposedly had qualities superior to those of other races but also in the sense that they were therefore entitled to better treatment. The intellectual and the moral problems compounded each other. If, like Thomas Jefferson writing in 1785, you were committed to the intellectual error, you could suspect "that the blacks, whether originally a distinct race, or made distinct by time and circumstances, are inferior to the whites in the endowments both of body and mind." And if they were inferior, what could be more rational than treating them as such?

As so often, though, while making an intellectual error, Jefferson also made the key moral argument against drawing the wrong conclusion. Writing to the Abbé Grégoire in 1809, he observed that "whatever be their degree of talent, it is no measure of their rights." And he went on, "Because Sir Isaac Newton was superior to others in understanding, he was not therefore lord of the person or property of others." Jefferson saw that if you denied rights to Black people because you thought the average Black person was intellectually inferior to the average white person, you would have the same reason to deny rights to white people you thought were below average. Despite his own prejudices and participation in slavery, he grasped that that wasn't how rights should work.

Now, you might think that the trouble caused by these ideas over the long life of this republic could be made to disappear if we all stopped thinking of ourselves in racial terms. Black consciousness can be enlisted in the struggle against racism, but it wouldn't be so obviously attractive if we could get rid of racism. And white consciousness, too often, operates in the service of racism.

So I understand your impulse: There are good reasons for white people, in particular, to want to abandon whiteness. One, which you mention, involves the intellectual error. In massing together so many different experiences — including the

distinct experiences of white Jews and white gentiles — the system treats unlike cases alike. The experience of anti-Semitism is one reason many Jews have a deeper sense of the harms inflicted by racism than do white people who have not been victims of it. Indeed, Jews in Eastern Europe neither identified as white nor were identified as white when they arrived at these shores in a wave of migration that began more than a century ago. Lothrop Stoddard's best-selling "The Rising Tide of Color Against White World-Supremacy" (1920) made it very clear that Jews were to be considered "Asiatic elements."

A second reason is that, because the category "white" was developed in large measure to deny social and political equality to Black people, identifying with that category seems to put you in the business of maintaining white supremacy. That is a reason based in the moral error. Many progressive scholars, mindful of this troubled history, have indeed called for white identity to be disowned or abolished.

But alas, it is not up to us as individuals to determine the meaning of our racial terms. "When I use a word," Lewis Carroll's Humpty Dumpty avowed, "it means just what I choose it to mean — neither more nor less." For him, the question was simply "which is to be master." Mr. Dumpty was right to pose the question but wrong to claim that he himself could simply choose to be master of our common language. And it's not only our language but all our social practices that we build in common. This really must be done by "we, the People." What "white" means in America isn't up to each of us to decide on our own. To change those meanings, we'd have to work together to change practices. If you don't want to be white because you repudiate white supremacy or the racialization of public life, you first have to work alongside others to unmake an unjust social order.

Although you clearly disapprove of the privilege that comes with white skin in our society, your refusing the word "white" won't increase the chance that you'll be discriminated against or decrease the chance that Black people will be. Being white is not just a matter of identifying as white; it involves being treated as white, and that isn't up to you. So, however you think of yourself, your whiteness is doing work in social life.

In the current conjuncture, what's more, there's something to be said for accepting that you are, willy-nilly, white, because you can use your whiteness as an anti-racist instrument. Here's one kind of privilege that white people have in our society: When you point to acts of anti-Black racism, you're less likely than a Black person to be suspected of being hypersensitive or self-interested. You can also speak up in all-white settings when people venture anti-Black remarks. In the struggle against racism, it sometimes helps if you don't have skin in the game.