

Q&A: THE METAPHYSICS OF RACE

17 APRIL 2020 | PHILO 36000 | HUNTER COLLEGE | DANIEL W. HARRIS

On the nature of social kinds in general

Unicorns vs Vampires: What is the intrinsic property of them, Unicorns and Vampires? Is that “fictional (not having the property of materiality belonging to the physical law) entities?” or some characteristics like having four legs for unicorns or having hands for vampires? Also, are all the social kinds for them? like some stories the same as the law (legal stuff). —Chateldon

You raise an interesting question about whether uninstantiated properties can ever be natural kinds, or whether they always have to be social kinds. For example, is the property of being a vampire (or the properties that would make someone a vampire) a social kind, simply because vampires are human inventions? I think that a lot of people would say yes. But I suppose someone could believe in merely possible entities, and that person might say that these entities can belong to natural kinds. The philosopher David Lewis might be an example of someone who would say something like this, but I’m not sure. (Chapter 7 of the textbook, which had to be cut from the schedule, covers some issues like this.)

Racialism vs. racism

Overall, I think Ney wrote a great chapter on the topic of race, and I found her discussion of racialism to be very interesting. I feel like many people would take her definition of racialism, “the view that there are heritable characteristics possessed by members of our species which permit a division into a small set of races,” as synonymous to “racism” (267). Is it possible to divide biological realism from racialism in order for it to no longer be seen as ‘racist’? For skin color to be the same thing as eye color and shoe size? —Ksenia

The concept of racialism comes from an essay by Anthony Appiah in which he attempts to separate out different possible senses of the word “racism”. So I think he would agree that what he calls “racialism” is one possible meaning of the word “racism”. But it might be at least conceivable to be a racist without thinking that any of the inherent differences between the races makes any of them superior to the others in any interesting way. For example, imagine someone who believed that the difference between black people and white people was a genetic difference that caused certain morphological differences in skin color, etc, and that also caused trivial personality differences concerning which flavors of ice cream a person preferred, whether one preferred dogs or cats as pets, and so on. Someone who (rather ridiculously) believed this would be a racist, by Appiah’s definition, but I think they wouldn’t fit the most common definition of racism, since their

beliefs about the races wouldn't really favor one race over the other. In practice, this is typically not how racialism works, but it might be worth considering as a possibility. I could imagine a biological theorist of race arguing for this position, for example: races are biological categories and there are real differences in personality between the races, but these differences in no way make any race superior to the others.

Race as a biological kind vs. race as a social kind

Could the concept of race being natural vs. socially constructed just be a combination of the two? Our racial appearance is a biological property, so if we make demarcations based on appearance alone, it would be in the same way we recognizably differentiate colors. But when considering the causal properties of race, it doesn't seem to be from this demarcation alone, but from cultural associations. And since any person has the capacity to learn any culture, there is nothing natural about one's cultural identity, and therefore must be socially constructed. — Cynthia

I think this suggestion is plausible and worth considering. As we'll see, a lot of feminists say something similar about sex/gender: sex is a biological property that distinguishes males from females, but then there is all sorts of cultural baggage that people tend to layer on top of that in order to artificially exaggerate the differences between men and women. Feminists have often called the latter, socially constructed distinction "gender".

I think there are some reasons to be dubious of this way of making sense of race, though. The reason is that our usual racial categories (the ones on the census) seem not to correspond to any biological categories. For example, the group that the US Census calls "Asian" might be more genetically different from one another than they are from the group that the census calls "White". (Similarly, there is far more genetic diversity within the traditional population of Sub-Saharan Africa than there is in the rest of the world combined).

And so although it's possible that there are both biological categories that are race-like (such as the cladistic categories described on p.272) and also genuine social categories corresponding to the races on the US census, it's unlikely that they line up in a way that makes any sense. In this case, we can't use the biological categories to explain why the the social categories exist.

My main discontent with the topic of race is with biological realism when applied to individuals who don't necessarily fit the claims of racialism on there being heritable characteristics possessed by members that allow for the division into small sets of races. While it was briefly mentioned in the chapter as something that causes problems in the dilemma of race, I think is necessary to state that the existence of people who "pass" as a race that's not theirs or that don't fit the morphology of the race they are classified in, should be reason to believe that race is a social construct. Theoretically speaking, let's say race is of a natural kind in which people are biologically classified then couldn't we say that this classification depends more on "specific" biological characteristics that relate more to appearance than to genetics. If we take genetics into consideration, all human beings are 99.9 percent identical in their genetic makeup, the only thing that genetically sets us apart is that 0.1 percent difference, so basically we are all almost

biologically equal if we use DNA as our biological source, but with even that, no one human has the same DNA as the other, so even if we were to look at a group of people of the same race, they are all genetically different. However it seems to me that when we encounter the topic of race, external biological characteristics such as skin color, eye shape/color, hair etc. seem to dictate the category of race in which we belong to more than our genes do. The problem with this is that even if races are mostly divided by their similarity in "biological" characteristics, the only ones who care about such distinctions are those individuals in society that are immersed in social structure, therefore making race something socially dictated, a social construct. —Chelsea

You make a lot of good points here. A couple of brief responses:

The fact that we are 99.9% genetically similar doesn't, by itself, show that there are no interesting biological subcategories within the population of humans. It could be that that last 0.1% is very important! This is roughly what we see in different breeds of dogs, which are all members of the same species, and genetically about as similar to one another as humans are to one another. But Ney is right that the different breeds of dog (and the difference between domesticated dogs and wolves) are biological categories that are real and have real explanatory power.

I think you're right that the phenomenon of "passing" is one that should make us suspicious of racial categories. More generally: the morphological features by which we divide the races might in some ways be correlated with facts about which sub-populations our ancestors belonged to, but there is not even close to any fool-proof way of inferring facts about ancestry from facts about someone's appearance. There is just too much randomness and messiness in how human morphology is determined, and the different historical populations of humans have mixed together far too much throughout human history (and especially in recent centuries). A good demonstration of this is the show "Finding Your Roots", with Henry Louis Gates Jr., which does genealogical research on famous people and routinely finds facts about the racial makeup of their ancestry that surprise them.

The argument from genetics

The Argument from Genetics claims that racial categories aren't biological categories, which to me seemed concrete till I read the possible argument against it about black people are more likely to get sickle-cell disease based off from their genetic relation to their African ancestors. However, that is just one of the many notions of determining race. How can the claim that humans are part of one race when we are all biologically different from each other. Some may even come from similar backgrounds and look the same, yet have different genetic makeup through mutations, how would they be categorized then? —Raima

Nobody doubts that there are biological differences between different humans. Most people even accept that some of these differences are correlated with facts about our ancestors. The question is whether there is any way to use these genetic differences to divide human beings into categories that bear any interesting resemblance to our usual concepts of the races. If it turned out that all and only the people who get categorized as "black" by the US census shared a specific gene, that would be one reason to think that there is some genetic commonality shared by the "black" people. But of

course, it wouldn't begin to explain most of the things that tend to get associated with that racial category. And notice that Ney does not claim that all and only black people suffer from sickle-cell disease; it is just a loose correlation: some black people don't have it, and some non-black people do. So this is not on its own a good reason to think that there is a genetic category that tightly corresponds to the social category.

Throughout the history, we often used race in respects to power to justify social inequality or mistreatment of another group and used a biological difference as the underlying reason to such classification. (I am not sure if I am putting my thoughts properly into words) but would it be wrong to say that natural kind and social kind correlate and neither is necessarily a cause? So, if we take a simple example of caste system in India. It was a social-political-economical hierarchy of 5 categories. A Brahmin or a Kshatriya was born into his class and reserved educational to economical and political advantage based on his DNA rights for centuries. It was a strict division that didn't allow cross-breeding so, the biological difference correlated here with social difference. —Syeda

I think that this is an interesting question. It is similar to something that H.G. Wells imagines in his novel, *The Time Machine*. (Spoiler alert!:) The protagonist goes to the future where he discovers two categories of beings, one weak and stupid group who live above ground and eat fruit from trees that never seem to go out of season and live in structures that never deteriorate, and a second strong and wild group who live underground and sneak up to the surface at night to kidnap and eat the weak ones. The protagonist eventually discovers that these two kinds of being evolved from the upper and lower classes of his own time, who became more and more socially cut off from one another and subsequently drifted apart genetically, developing into a pair of predator/prey species.

I think what Ney would say about your example of the caste system is that although it may be true that individual families within a caste are genetically similar, there is no reason to expect any given family in one caste to be more genetically similar to the other families in their caste than to the families in other castes. Of course, with much more extreme social segregation over much longer periods of time than the caste system existed, social categories could eventually become biological categories. But in practice, human social institutions don't tend to last long enough or be rigid enough to make that happen.

The same is true of our racial categories, which have changed enormously over just the last century or two. For example: it wasn't that long ago that Irish and Italian immigrants weren't considered "white". Any social system that fluxuates that much won't have a chance to become genetically rigidified.

On the idea that race is essentially hierarchical

One difficulty I had with the chapter was its presentation of the 3 views and the distinctions between them. In particular, the section about social constructivism. The section spends a lot of time on motive for the social construction of race, "The social constructivist can argue that racial classification is essentially hierarchical" " 'when those associations take on evaluative significance concerning how members of the group should be viewed and treated' ", but the

notion of motive isn't present in the parred down definition of Social Constructivism. To me the question of motive seems orthogonal to the question of matching biology. For instance, I could imagine the chihuahuas separating dogs into different breeds in order to oppress the non-chihuahuas. This would be both biological and immorally motivated. Similarly, I could imagine purely social categories that don't have a particular motivation. That section of the text seemed to be presenting a false dichotomy. —Miriam

I think you're right about this, at least in principle. Probably there could be socially constructed racial categories that have nothing to do with hierarchy, just as there are with dog breeds. (Although with dog breeds it's complicated, since the different breeds were created with different functions in mind: hunting dogs vs. sheep dogs vs. guard dogs, etc.)

Here's roughly what I think a lot of social constructionists would say: although what you describe maybe *could in principle* happen, when we look at the history of how humans have actually constructed racial categories, the categories they construct *always* seem to play into some kind of social hierarchy. (I won't try to convince you of this; I don't know enough. But if you're skeptical I can try to give you some citations to read about it more.) But if this really is a universal feature of the racial categories that are created, it seems misguided to ignore that fact, or think of it as a big coincidence. It may help us to understand the nature of racial categories—at least in the way that they are actually created and function in human societies—to think of them as essentially hierarchical, and to avoid obscuring this function that they always seem to have.

The argument from relativity

While I understood Ney's point about the argument from relativity. I found one aspect of her presentation a bit ironic. She talks about different categorizations of races starting with Bernier's 4 and contrasts them with the periodic table of elements as a more stable form of categorization. However, the classification of the universe into elements, has also not been stable, and also has a famous categorization into 4: water, air, earth, and fire. I do see the point she made at the end of the chapter that it's ultimately about whether race as it exists now represents anything real. But I found the way she presented it not immediately compelling. —Miriam

She would agree about the history of our categorizations of the elements. But a very important part of her comparison to the periodic table is that none of the collections of racial categories used by different countries is any more or less correct than the others. If she's right about that, then they really are different. (Of course, some people would say that all of those categorizations are wrong, but that doesn't mean that there isn't a right one out there—perhaps the cladistic system. But that raises some other issues that I will address below.)

On a separate note, the “Asian” race category always confused me as well. I wasn't sure if it was geographical or was it applicable only to Chinese, Japanese, Korean ‘looking’ category? Since ‘brown’ is not an official race, I am usually down to two boxes – either an “Asian” by geographical classification or “Other” – as I didn't fall into White, Black, Latino and Native American category. LOL —Syeda

Yes, once we think about it for a few minutes, I think it's obvious that the categories on the US Census tell us a lot more about American History—for example, the history of its immigration policy and foreign relations—than it does about the people whom it classifies. The fact that Filipino, Korean, and Vietnamese get their own categories but Thai and Indonesian don't probably has something to do with the fact that the US invaded the first three countries for long periods of time (and then had special immigration relationships with them) but not the last two, for example!

Regarding the section about the argument from relativity, I feel this section does the best in showing how race isn't a biological factor as much as it is a morphological factor. The Author is right in saying, for something to be a natural kind, it needs to be absolute, and there doesn't seem to be an absolute set of categories when it comes to race. Even the chart by Andreasen doesn't seem any more convincing than the others even if it's claimed to be by scientists. —Brendan

I think you might be discounting Andreasen's chart a bit too quickly. She might be right that the categories listed are genuine biological categories that explain something about how the members of those groups look or behave differently than the others. We'll read more about this for Tuesday.

But suppose that's right: the real question is whether these categories really deserve to be called "races", given the fact that they bear almost no relationship to the racial categories that structure our lives. Maybe we should just invent a different label for them.

The fact that everyone seems to be coming up with different systems for categorizing races seems to show that we are trying to categorize something that isn't supposed to be categorized (isn't natural). I feel like when one is trying to bring up the claim of the natural fact of race and categorize it, what he/she is really trying to do is categorize ethnicity - categorizing a group of people that are from the same place or share ancestors from the same place. If we're talking about skin color, which many would classify as race, it can't be categorized. Even when Ney mentions Bernier as classifying Indians as white because of their dark skin being nothing more than the result of their harsher sun, I feel like this proves my point. That argument is the case for everyone, everyone's skin color is a direct result of the intensity of the sun in their native locations. You can't use that argument for one group and not the others. —Brendan

I think this is an *excellent* point. The way that we normally decide that something is a natural kind is that we're doing some kind of scientific research about something, and we find that we need to make certain distinctions between different kinds of things in order to proceed with the science. So, for example, physicists had to distinguish between bosons and fermions, and attribute different properties to the two kinds of particles, in order to make accurate predictions about the data they'd observed. It wasn't as though they had some pre-existing idea that there must be something called "bosons" out there and then desperately searched around until they found something that vaguely resembled the idea they started with, and then said "I have finally found out what bosons *really* are".

By contrast, you're right that a lot of attempts to figure out which biological categories races *really* are look like someone desperately trying to find something out there in the world that corresponds to the folk categories they started with. You're right to ask why they're bothering to do this. Are the categories that they're finding really independently motivated by the science, like the boson/

fermion distinction is? Or are they of scientific interest only because they lend credence to racial categories that we invented in the first place in order to oppress people? If it's the latter, I think that it would be legitimate to question whether the scientists are acting in good faith, and to argue that the categories they've come up with are too arbitrary and unmotivated to give us a reason to be biological realists.

...is ethnicity relative to the argument of relativity? Ethnic groups of people who share geographical, and even genetic characteristics who later move to another location are still grouped in a particular race despite the location of birth. For example, I have genetic ancestry to African and Spanish groups of people, but I was not born in Africa, Spain or a Caribbean territory that speaks Spanish, yet I would be grouped into one or both of these groups based on the genetic relation or my morphology. My ethnic group can best be described as African American, yet when I leave America I would be considered African or a relative category such as black. How is this justified in the argument for relativity? —Sheana

I think you're absolutely right that the argument from relativity works about as well for ethnicity as it does for race! (As Ney says, the distinction between ethnicity and race isn't all that clear.)

On eliminativism

I understand about biological realism and social constructivism. People survive by adapting to their environment and create their language and culture for a long time. The genes have some differences depending on the race. For example, only the Japanese have the enzyme to digest wakame seaweed. The difference in language, culture, or food is the result of the long history of each race. If there is no difference in race, how can we understand things (Japanese sushi or Italian pizza)? So, I am interested in eliminativism. Can we be freed from the race? Is race important to create our identity? —Misa

I think your example of the enzyme is interesting, but I doubt that it can be used to show that "Japanese" is a genuine biological category. Suppose that we discover a child born to Brazilian parents who happens to have the same mutation that gives him the enzyme needed to digest wakame. Would this make him Japanese? I don't think so! (And in general, I'm guessing that possession of this enzyme is merely correlated with being Japanese, and that any other genetic criteria you come up with will be merely correlated in the same way.)

If race is not biological, that doesn't mean that we can't call pizza Italian. We just have to understand what we're saying a bit differently. For example: we're just claiming that Pizza was invented in Italy, or that it is stereotypically associated with the cuisine of Italy. Race eliminativism doesn't mean that we can't study different cultures. It just means that those cultural differences can't be understood in terms of racial categories. But race eliminativists would say that that's correct anyway.

Eliminativist View: Although I agree--objectively speaking, that there are no such thing as races and that they are socially constructed, the eliminativist view does not provide a strong argument with the analogy of witches. I look at that example as something relative to religion. This seems similar to the idea of Jewish people being a race as well as a religious group. Would an eliminativist suggest that there is no such thing as Jewish people since religion is also a social construct? And since there is no distinct morphology for this group of people apart from the way they are dressed, how would an eliminativist or even a biological realist assess this cross categorization? —Sheana

I am not sure what the eliminativist would say about religions. I think they are separate questions. (More in my answer to the next question.)

“Why does it sound correct to many to say that there are no witches and yet wrong to say that there are no cool people?” => Of course, there might not be any cool person for someone because it is subjective? But to be a witch (I wanted to be), one needs at least certain properties?

I think the eliminativism/social construction issue comes down to the question of when the fact that some people believe that something belongs to a certain category is sufficient to make that thing belong to the category. Intuitively, even if we all believe that someone is a witch, it wouldn't make them a witch. We would all just be wrong. This seems to be because the category of being a witch is something that we don't think is just a matter of our opinion. We treat it as if it is a natural kind that is defined by possession of certain properties that are independent of what we think, and nothing actually has those properties.

By contrast, compare the property of being worth \$5. We all know (at some level) that this just boils down to people's opinions and preferences (and maybe also some social institutions, like the treasury, that we've created together). Maybe some people mistakenly believe that this is a natural kind, but for the most part we don't.

This line of thought seems to push in favor of eliminativism, because most people *think* that racial categories like “black”, “asian”, and “white” are natural kinds, and treat them as such, but there seems to be no biological basis for them. In that respect, they are a bit like witches.

(Of course, we may be able to come up with uncontroversial examples of social kinds that people systematically mistake for natural kinds, in which case this line of thought would be undermined.)

The argument from causal powers against eliminativism

One extra point- I feel like every discussion on race is incomplete until we mention that there is a very fine line between recognizing race doesn't mean much scientifically (as per what we know as science today) and acknowledging all that has been caused on its name, and continues to be caused to this day. In my opinion, this must be expressed explicitly and directly. —Loreta

I think that what you're getting at here is really just what Ney calls the causal powers argument. Her point is that although races are human creations, they still matter, since they still influence us in all kinds of important ways. The eliminativist response is that it's not anybody's race that's having this

influence, it's just our false beliefs about race. Similarly, people's false beliefs about witches mattered (especially for the people who were executed). But that doesn't mean that there really were witches!

On chapter ten's discussion on race, Ney mentions the eliminativism argument, which states that "race is neither biologically nor socially real" (266). On pgs.275-276, Ney says Alexander's dictum is a position that can be used against race. Alexander's dictum states that the entities that exist are "only those that possess causal powers" (276). Race doesn't always produce a cause and an effect like in Ney's racist bank teller example. Many people go about their everyday lives without race affecting their availability for a job or some other service. In addition, sometimes people don't feel strongly attached to their race or ethnicity's tradition like in Ney's American Samoa example. Race is not always the cause of something else. My question: If race doesn't produce strong "causal powers" like in Ney's example, does Alexander Dictum have any value against the eliminativism argument? Do all entities have to produce a cause and effect in order to be real? I don't see how Alexander Dictum can work if race doesn't produce a strong cause and effect like in Ney's examples. —Aanisah

I think you're right about all of this. But if it turns out that race even sometimes has causal powers, then Alexander's Dictum gives us a reason not to be eliminativists about it. It doesn't matter that it doesn't *always* have an influence. If it *sometimes* has an influence, it has to exist.

(Of course, we have to distinguish race's influence from the possibility that it is only people's false beliefs about race that have influence. The eliminativist says that the latter is what's going on. So the social constructionist needs to tell us why our beliefs (and practices, institutions, etc.) about categories can sometimes bring those categories into existence, but sometimes are just false and influence our behavior as if the categories did exist.

The metaphysics of race and the philosophy of language

Towards the end of the chapter, Ney mentions that in answering the questions involving race would require to consider issues in the applied philosophy of language. Can you elaborate on the overlap between the two fields. She gives some examples, but i need more. —Robert

There are lots of possible answers. There is a longstanding literature on natural-kind terms that bears on this debate, for example. (See §3 of [the SEP article on Natural-Kind Terms](#), for example.) So one question might be whether words for races function semantically like natural-kind terms.

Another connection comes from the study of how certain ways of using language tends to influence us toward thinking of certain categories as natural kinds. [Here](#) is a new paper by Katherine Ritchie (who is a philosopher of language and metaphysician at City College) on this topic. It's not specifically about race, but that's one of the obvious applications.

Antirealism about race vs. racial justice?

While I find it most believable that the notion of race doesn't exist as a natural kind, at least not in the common sense way it is often understood I wonder at the unintended consequences of such a belief. There is a long history of racist discrimination and that legacy negatively impacts the lives of people today. Does overturning the notion of race undermine arguments for racial justice and reparations in any way or is a historical account sufficient? Are these matters wholly the consideration of moral philosophy or does the metaphysician have a responsibility to consider the consequences of their position on the reality of race? —Matt

This is an excellent question, and it is in practice one of the main arguments that critical race theorists have given for not being full-on eliminativists. The thought is that we need racial categories to understand how certain racial groups have been oppressed, and to understand different possible strategies for alleviating that oppression. If we all go eliminativist, the oppression might just become less visible. (And of course, if that last point is true, then it would give us a good reason to discount the main argument for eliminativism, since it would show that not all of the causal powers of race can instead be thought of as the causal powers of racist beliefs.)