

# Q&A: RACIAL REALISMS

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## What does “realism” mean here anyway?

“Something is real just in case it exists” - what exactly does Glasgow mean? Since it’s used by Spencer to define racial realism, I’m confused by the linguistics of this as my understanding of ‘realism’ is something existing independent of our thoughts. —Ksenia

I think you’re right that this is an unhelpfully trivial way to begin the paper, since it gives us no way of establishing what sorts of things exist. In practice, the question of what sorts of things exist is just the central question of ontology, and we’ve studied some of the ways of establishing ontological claims earlier this semester. And of course, the question of how to establish that some way of categorizing things is real is itself something that’s up for debate as part of the debate over whether races are real. (This is part of what makes philosophy so hard: it’s like a game in which you’re constantly trying to figure out the rules while you’re also trying to play by them!)

## What does it mean to be biologically real? —Shah

For a kind (or property, or category, etc.) to be biologically real (i.e., for it to be a biological natural kind) is for it to be indispensable to the true (or at least the current best) biological theories that we have. So, for example, the kind “nucleotide” is biologically real because we stopped using this concept, we would no longer be able to even formulate some of our best and most explanatory biological theories. This is really just Quine’s ontological method applied to biology.

In practice, however, a lot of this debate turns on which biological theories are good ones, and that turns on which ones are motivated in by the questions of biology itself rather than by, for example, someone’s desire to come up with categories that justify racial oppression. It’s relatively easy to come up with some categories that can be defined in biological-sounding terms that sort of match up to races and genders. But if the only reason that we bother to demarcate these categories at all is because we were looking for something that fit with our pre-existing social prejudices, then a lot of people would say that that isn’t something that resulted from good biology. Spencer’s way of saying this is that some ostensibly biological categories aren’t “intrinsically motivated” by the biology.

What we learn about "realism" is, I believe, that 'one exists human mind independently.' So, what metaphysicians who accept “racial realism” say is that 'the race exists human mind independently?' —Chateldon

That’s how they talk about biological realism (see my answer to the last question). But social constructionists, like Haslanger, think that races are real because they are socially constructed, and this means that they are dependent on our beliefs, conventions, practices, and institutions.

## Subspecies Realism

Race as subspecies as it relates to animals is not a compelling enough to infer it as explanation for racial realism. When Spencer gave the example of the small genetic difference between chimps and humans, I think that convinced me that although chimps are similar they are not a race relate to humans simply because we cannot procreate with chimps to produce or continue a race. If we were convinced that race is biologically real as it pertains to chimps and humans, along with the idea that the geographic genealogy is sufficient, what would be the relation to certain animals that occupy certain parts of world such as the Siberian tiger, with an Eskimo? Surely these are two different species, yet the might share some sort of genetic relation because of their geographic location if we use the biological race argument. —Sheana

I think you're misunderstanding the debate a bit here. Spencer is not arguing that chimpanzees and humans are two different races. Everyone agrees that they are different species. What Gonder et al claim is that there are three distinct subspecies of chimpanzees that live in separate locations and that are genetically quite different from one another (but not different enough that they constitute different species—at least not yet).

Part of what's going on in the first essay is that Spencer is looking at the concept of race as biologists use it. But of course, biologists aren't just interested in humans, so they need a concept of race that allows them to ask whether animals other than humans can be subdivided into separate races. The concept of subspecies is an interesting candidate because it is "intrinsically motivated" by the biology, which means that biologists have good reasons to be interested in it that have nothing to do with the checkered history of human's attempts to categorize ourselves into races. The reason to be interested in subspecies or geographic races is that biologists want to understand speciation—the process by which species divide into distinct species over time. And dividing into subspecies is the first step in this process. So if we want to understand the process by which chimpanzees are slowly evolving into three separate, geographically isolated species, we need to understand the stage of that process that they're at now. One way that biologists use "race" is to talk about the way the members of a species are grouped at that stage of the speciation process.

Notice this remark by Spencer, though:

For a bit of context, the reader might be interested to know that  $\sigma^2_{a} \approx 1/4$  for humans when we are subdivided into our most genetically different population groups (Rosenberg, Pritchard, et al., 2002, 2,382).

This is his way of telling us that by the standards that biologists have used to divide chimpanzees into subspecies, there are no subspecies of humans, and there never have been. So this biological use of the term "race" has as a consequence that only other animals can be subdivided into races, not humans!

## Geographic Race Realism

In "Racial Realism 1: Are Biological Races Real?", Quayshawn Spencer discusses AMOVA and its formula. I'm not quite understanding the explanation for the AMOVA formula because of all the scientific jargon and numbers. What exactly is the AMOVA formula trying to prove and why is

the number 0.25 important? If a two chimp's or two humans' genetic material is above 0.25, what does that prove according to biologists. —Aanisah

I won't try to give you a technical definition. You can take a genetics class for that. But basically, AMOVA is a measure of how much more genetic variation there is across two or more populations than there is within a given population. A higher AMOVA number for a set of populations indicates that random individuals taken from two different populations are likely to be more genetically different than two random individuals from within a population. So, for example, if Manhattanites and Brooklynites had a high AMOVA score, that would show that the average Manhattanite is significantly genetically further apart from the average Brooklynite than they are from other Manhattanites. (This is just an example. It is definitely not true.) So What Gonder et al showed is that Chimpanzees from the different geographic populations are much more genetically different than chimpanzees within each of those populations. Because of genetic drift, if the populations were to stay isolated for long enough (a very long time!), then they would likely become distinct species.

As Spencer says, the AMOVA number 0.25 is arbitrary; there is nothing magical about it. It is just the number that biologists have chosen as the cutoff for subspecies. They could have chose 0.26 or something else instead. The fact that they have chosen this number arbitrarily is one thing that makes some people object to the concept of subspecies, saying that it's not all-or-nothing, but a continuum. On that topic:

Can the continuity argument be used to cast any type of distinction as not real? —Shah

I think that this is sort of Spencer's point when he says the thing that Loreta is asking about in her question:

Talking about geographic race realism : "While this line of attack has been persuasive to many in the literature, I am not convinced. For one, any quantification of genetic difference in this context is merely a measure of taxonomic difference, not what constitutes taxonomic difference. In the case of subspecies, what constitutes taxonomic difference is being an incipient species. So, even if a threshold of genetic difference is biologically arbitrary, that fact does not imply that the geographic race itself is biologically arbitrary, just that our quantitative tests for subspecific difference are biologically arbitrary. And they are!" Could you explain this part a bit, what does it mean that 'what constitutes taxonomic difference is being an incipient species'? I had an easy time following the rest of this paper but got stuck on this part. —Loreta

One point, I take it, is that we don't want to conclude, just because a difference between As and Bs is continuous, or vague, and so doesn't have a sharp cutoff, that there is no difference. If we accepted arguments of this kind, we would have to conclude that there is no real distinction between a baby and an adult, between a tadpole and a frog, between different species, or between desserts and rainforests, etc. Maybe Shah is right that it would follow that there would be (almost) no distinctions that we could accept, since (almost) all distinctions are to some degree continuous. (Perhaps the distinction between different kinds of fundamental particles would be an exception, and presumably there are some other fundamentally discrete distinctions in nature.)

So I think that's part of what Spencer is getting at. Complaining that the 0.25 cutoff is arbitrary does not give us a reason to think that there are no real subspecies. It just points out that any attempt to precisely demarcate the distinction will be somewhat arbitrary, not that there is no distinction at all. I think this is what Shah is getting at too:

Species are discontinuous in a particular point in time/endpoints, but because there is a common ancestor for all life on Earth, species are continuous if we ignore time or treat past things as existent; if we plot evolutionary development without an axis for time, everything would be continuous and all distinctions would be equally meaningless and arbitrary, thus making categorical definitions real only subjectively. —Shah

Right, so this is an interesting example because some biologists and philosophers of biology actually do conclude from this type of reasoning that species aren't natural kinds. The problem is that this reasoning applies to an awful lot of other putative natural kinds as well, and so this kind of argument would have sweeping implications for science.

## Ecotypes

the part I found unconvincing was on races as "ecotypes" and the depiction of race as a group of organisms within a species that's genetically adapted to a certain environment. The article then analyses Pigliucci and Kaplan's example on the light pigmentation of fair-skinned people as an adaptation in the human species for survival in low UVB environments. The article then mentions that light pigmented skin originated as a genetic mutation in the indigenous people that lived in low UVB environments. This example in a way showed that ecotype race is real as there are individuals in the same species that have genetically adapted to a specific environment. However, and as the reading states, ecotypes and race can't be only based on genetic adaptations. It is true that if we look at certain "racial" groups we will find a majority of similarities in their "intrinsically interesting" to biologists physical features and gene adaptation, yet this brought me back to last week's reading on certain individuals that "passed" as another race or that don't necessarily fit their race. A certain "race" could be composed of mostly light skinned people, but so can any other race. Therefore it's impossible to believe that ecotypic race is real on the premises of environment and genetic adaptations. —Chelsea

Like Sheana's question above, I think this question might not appreciate the degree to which the concept(s) of race that biologists use is different than it is in ordinary usage. As Spencer says, nobody doubts that ecotypes exist. But we might question whether it makes any sense to call them "races". This might force us to conclude, for example, that all of the people who have the gene that allows them to process lactose constitute a race. And it has the conclusion that everyone belongs to many different races, most of which we don't even have ordinary vocabulary for. So the ecotypic concept of race is just very distant from our ordinary concepts of race, like "black" and "white". And given this use of the word "race", it's not even all that clear what it would mean to "pass" as a member of a different race.

## Biological vs. Social Realism

One thing I was wondering about the reading was as follows. There was a discussion of what people mean when they use the word race, but not what people think they mean when they use the word race. For example on page 5 of the second article, Spencer discussed how most of the races Hardimon referred to don't actually satisfy C2. Could Hardimon respond and say that this is okay, because they were thought to have satisfied C2, but now we know better and know that they are not races, (as apposed to being confronted with 13 counterexamples to his notion of race). Similarly the discussion of Hispanics at the end. Is the confusion among English speakers due to a difference of opinion on the question of what race means or due to a lack of knowledge regarding what Hispanics are. —Miriam

It's important to recognize that part of Hardimon's project is to show that folk races are biologically real. This is the point of his condition C2. So if we showed that people merely believe that (e.g.) Hispanics don't satisfy C2, then they aren't a race by his definition. On the other hand, Spencer seems to show that the vast majority of his example races don't satisfy C2. This could be compatible with the possibility that some groups of humans out there do satisfy C2, but presumably those groups don't satisfy C1. And even if they do, then they won't turn out to line up with our folk categories (i.e. the racial categories that we normally think in terms of).

## Hardimon's Permuted World

Hardimon's example of "the permuted world" (folk races, 3) was of interest to me; "a whole generation of "black-looking" parents gives birth to a whole generation of "white-looking" children who (after reaching reproductive age) give birth to a whole generation of "Asian-looking" children who (after reaching reproductive age) give birth to a whole generation of black-looking children, and that this process repeats itself indefinitely" - this could only happen if the previous "black-looking" generation were to breed with "white-looking" people in order to produce a "white-looking" generation, no? This goes hand in hand with globalization, in my opinion, because so many of us are just a mix of a whole bunch of ethnicities. It makes "race" seem very pointless nowadays, as we no longer have a distinct ancestry group. Groups are no longer bound to one specific location where they adapt certain traits for ecological survival. —Ksenia

The point of Hardimon's thought experiment is to imagine a world in which things work very differently from how they work here. So he's not imagining that the first generation of black-looking parents mate with anyone other than themselves. But in this world, he imagines, the way things work is that it's basically random whether your children will be black-looking or white-looking. (Or rather, the different appearances cycle through, generationally.) His point, I take it, is that in such a world we just wouldn't have the same racial categories that we have here, and this shows that our racial concepts entail that a person's race connects their appearance to their lineage.

But I think you're right that in a world where enough people from different historical populations mix, the old racial categories will become difficult to use. Then again, we're very good at inventing new ones, often with very scant reason!

Hardimon's "permuted world" was very interesting and weird in a way, primarily because I've never come across any similar views, I would be interested in reading more about it. —Chelsea

You can read more about it on pp. 46–49 of his book, which you can download a pdf of [here](#).

To finish, I was quite confused on based of what did Hardimon determine the 17 archetypical examples of races to be minimalist races? and what make a "race" a "minimalist race"? —Chelsea

A "minimalist race" is just whatever meets Hardimon's three conditions, C1–C3, that Spencer lists on p.2. My impression is that Hardimon knows less of the science than Spencer, and so what we've been treated to in this essay is a debunking of the idea that most of the 17 concepts of race that he discusses really do meet C2. But Hardimon's reasoning is also laid out in his book (linked in my last answer).

## Haslanger's Social Constructionism

...in "Racial realism II," Spencer brings up several concerns about an academic named Haslanger's theories and intuitions about race. In the article, Spencer brings up that Haslanger thinks Hispanics are not a "biological group," what does that mean? Are Hispanics not a biological group because the majority of them are mixed with Spaniard and Native American ancestry? —Aanisah

Yes, that's one reason. More generally: there seems to be no biologically interesting classification on which Hispanics get grouped together. They don't meet any of the criteria that Spencer discusses: they aren't a geographical population, a subspecies, a branch on the phylogenetic tree, etc. (Of course, the other folk races, like "black" and "white" don't meet these conditions either.

## Spencer's Criticisms of Haslanger

Bolnick's first worry is that "structure will identify as many groups as the program user tells it to identify," which makes its result 'not surprising-or significant' (10). I do not understand the meaning of the "structure" in the sentence. Then, Spencer does not agree with Bolnick and says that "However, I fully acknowledge that, usually, structure will identify as many genetic clusters as the user tells it to identify. Nevertheless, even in these cases, the clusters that structure finds may still be surprising and significant."—Misa

Spencer answers your question in the previous sentence: "*structure*...is the computer program that Rosenberg et al. (2002) used for human genetic clustering". Spencer's point is that if we tell this



program to divide humans into two groups or into 50,000 groups based on genetic similarity, it can do that, and so the specific number of distinctions needs to be justified before we accept that it has told us which “races” exist. The passage you go on to quote is Spencer’s attempt to defuse this reasoning.

I am confused that Spencer says about clones and randomly mating. Why does Spencer mention them? —Misa

The point about clones or random mating is that in these cases, a population will be genetically homogenous, and so the computer program won’t be able to detect any subpopulations within it. But assuming that this condition isn’t met, I think the earlier point largely holds.,

## Spencer’s Pluralism

It seems clear that the genetic reality of race, at least as it relates to anything commonly understood, rests on shaky ground and hard to continue to defend. Social racial realism holds up better but ultimately seems too murky and contingent to come to a clear understanding of what race can be defined as under this heading. The position we’re left with at the end Spencer’s essays of radical racial pluralism does seem to take on the ambiguity and complexity of race and accept that it isn’t possible to speak with generalities and neat definitions when the topic itself has to contextualize to get at what is meant when race is used. Still, I fear that this answer will prove unsatisfactory to many and I wonder if more can be done to flesh out this definition to increase its persuasive power.

This is an easy question to answer, I think. Pluralism is Spencer’s own position, which he defends in much greater detail in his 2014 paper, “A Radical Solution to the Race Problem”. [Here](#) is a link to that paper. Of course, his arguments there may not convince you of his position, but there really is more to it than he can quickly summarize in this survey article. And I think Spencer is someone whose position is deeply informed by the relevant science and philosophy in a way that many other positions aren’t.

Spencer claims that there is no right and no universal answer to race. People can biologically be one race but claim they identify with another race, like on the census. With this radical racial pluralism, there is bound to be a clash between biological and social race claims. Does this mean one can claim to be part of multiple races without having any biological connection to them? This is where cultural appropriation comes into play. For instance, white people have appropriate other cultures like the black culture and associating it with hip-hop and rap. Some have even claimed to be black despite not having any biological and social experience in being a black person. Those claims of race are definitely wrong. I think with radical racial pluralism, people may use that as an opening to appropriate other races based on how they look and their experiences. —Raima

I think that Spencer would say that there’s no “clash”. Rather, we should just accept that the word “race” is many-ways ambiguous, and the different meanings categorize things differently.

That said, I don't think we should conclude from Spencer's position that a person's social race is totally up to them. Just because something is socially constructed doesn't mean that there aren't social rules—sometimes strict social rules!—about how the concept is applied. A good thing to check out on this topic is Professor Alcoff's appearance on Democracy Now!, discussing the Rachel Dolezal case. As she puts it, just because the fact that a certain piece of paper counts as a dollar doesn't mean that I can decide that mine is worth two dollars. Similarly, just because being black or white is a social construct doesn't mean that I can decide that I am black instead of white. It's not, in general, up to any one person, but it instead rests on a whole set of beliefs, practices, and institutions that are spread through our culture.