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Philosophy and Race: An Introduction to Philosophy of Race

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Race is central to many issues about justice and ethics, as well as our identities and lived experience as persons in communities.

Race thereby raises many philosophical issues.^[1]

This essay introduces some of the major topics in the *philosophy of race*.

1. What Are Races?

Many people's idea of "race" has to do with genetics and biology, which contrasts with "ethnicity," which is normally understood to refer to groupings of people based on common ancestry and culture.^[2] And most people understand races to be certain types of groups of people, but this could be false or, at least, misleading.

So what are races? Do different races even exist?^[3]

We can summarize major theories about the existence of race as follows:^[4]

- *realist naturalism*: that races are real, and are naturally or biologically individuated groups of people;^[5]
- *constructivism* or *constructionism*: that races are real—they clearly have important social and political roles—but they only exist because human beings create and allow them to exist, much like money exists;^[6]
- *skepticism* or *anti-realism*: that races don't exist.^[7]

Even if there is some biological component of race, there is very little scientific basis to the modern

division of races into four or five categories such as "White,"^[8] "Black," "Asian," etc.^[9]

We can also summarize the main theories about *talking about race*:^[10]

- *eliminativism*: that it's a mistake, or wrong, to think and talk as if races were real;^[11]
 - analogy: most psychiatrists are anti-realists and eliminativists about demons: demons aren't real, and it's harmful to cite them as explanations for psychological events;
- *conservationism*: that it is useful or beneficial in some way to talk about races or behave as if they are real.

Last, philosophers study how race and ethnicity fit into the traditional philosophical topic of *personal identity*, that is, the question of what makes someone who they are, as well as questions about the meaning of their existence.^[12]

Philosophers of race commonly critique *essentialism*, which is the view that the experiences or identities of members of some group can be reduced to key, invariable traits.^[13]

2. Ethics, Social, and Political Philosophy

There are also many ethical topics relevant to philosophy of race.

A core question is understanding what racism is. It is often understood as *disregard*, *prejudice*, *inferiorization*, or *antipathy based on race or racial appearance*. Many thinkers add that "racism" exists when that racial prejudice is reinforced by systems of power, which can happen even without overt hatred or disregard of people because of their race ^[14]

Some philosophers have connected debates about *political authority and obligation* to the history of racial injustice. Martin Luther King Jr. wrote prolifically in philosophy,^[15] and his "Letter from Birmingham Jail," defends civil disobedience and argues against moderation in the fight for justice.^[16] Charles W. Mills's *The Racial Contract* argues that we can understand recent history and present-day practices and laws in the United States as being based on a social contract to promote white supremacy.^[17]

There is substantial debate about *affirmative action*: in general, to give some preference in hiring or admission to people from historically underrepresented groups. Racial prejudice still exists in hiring,^[18] so affirmative action might be a morally permissible (if not required) way to help give people of all races a fair chance, or to compensate victims of injustice.^[19]

3. Public Policy

There are several public-policy issues to which race is deeply relevant.

Philosophers study *hate-speech* and *hate-crime laws*.^[20] Some jurisdictions punish hate speech, but some philosophers argue that freedom of expression should extend to hate speech.^[21] Similarly, some jurisdictions impose stiffer penalties for hate crimes.^[22]

Another important topic is *reparations* for slavery and segregation. Many philosophers have argued that the U.S. government ought to pay compensation to African-American citizens because of these citizens' lesser (on average) socioeconomic position.^[23] Other legal practices, such as redlining, have also harmed the socioeconomic status of African-American families.^[24]

Racial profiling—singling out people with certain racial appearances for heightened investigation or surveillance by authorities—is another topic related to race and public policy.^[25]

There is important philosophical and social-scientific work about ways in which the criminal-justice system is unfairly harmful to non-White people in the United States, including mass incarceration and unfair applications of the death penalty.^[26]

4. Other Theoretical Issues

Intersectionality is the phenomenon by which different systems of oppression—such as racism, sexism, and ableism—can combine or intersect to create forms of oppression that uniquely affect people from more than one of these oppressed groups.^[27] For example, Black women are sometimes subject to a unique kind of unfair treatment, beyond what Black men experience and beyond what White women experience.^[28]

Other important race-related topics are *critical philosophy of race* and the related field of *critical race theory*,^[29] which draws attention to racism that is not “merely” overt and individual-versus-individual, but

instead, woven (sometimes subtly) into a society's institutions, laws, norms, and discourse. In some societies, ostensibly neutral concepts such as “fairness,” “citizen,” and “merit,” as well as the legal system itself, may be infected by racism.^[30]

Beyond these, there are the general theoretical topics of privilege and oppression, including the degree to which being White confers privilege in certain ways.^[31]

5. Other Areas of Philosophy

Some philosophers of race have described important features of the phenomenology (i.e., the study of first-person experience) of being of a certain race.^[32] Historians of philosophy study historical philosophers' views about race.^[33] In terms of international ethics, race is very relevant to imperialism, colonialism, and immigration.^[34] And there is an important area of epistemology dealing with race and ethnicity.^[35]

There are also areas of philosophy that focus on the ideas and experiences of people from particular racial or ethnic backgrounds: there are Africana philosophy,^[36] Asian philosophy,^[37] and Latin-American philosophy,^[38] for example, as well as philosophical work about being multi-racial or multi-ethnic.^[39]

6. Conclusion

For philosophy to engage with the full range of human experiences, it must engage with race. As we see, philosophy of race is a large, diverse, and important area of philosophy, with extensive relevance in the present day.

Notes

[1] Philosophers have not always had enlightened views of race. Aristotle (384-322 BCE), for example, has commonly been cited in defense of slavery, and has been interpreted as arguing for a biological basis for slavery (Fritsche, 2019), and his work has been cited in defense of slavery (de Sepúlveda, 2003 [1551]). Other authors argue that at least “proto-racist” beliefs existed in the ancient world (Isaac, 2004). Racist beliefs were clearly present in the Enlightenment world as well (Eze, 1997). See also Taylor (2022, § 2.2) on ancient ideas of race. See also Victor Fabian Abundez-Guerra and Nathan Nobis, [Responding to Morally Flawed Historical Philosophers and Philosophies](#) and Dan Lowe, [Aristotle's Defense of Slavery](#).

[2] Cornell and Hartmann (2007, p. 19). Still, many philosophers have questioned this division. See especially Gracia (2007b). See Cornell and Hartmann (2007, ch. 1) for an introduction to the concepts of race and ethnicity. See also the other essays in Gracia (2007a). Alcoff (2004) defends the meaningfulness of ethnicity. See also James and Burgos (2022, § 3) for an overview.

[3] See Zack (2017c, pp. 135–36) for an overview. See James and Burgos (2022, § 2) for another overview. See Taylor (2022, ch. 4) for a thorough investigation. See also Abiral Chitrakar Phnuyal, [The Ontology of Race](#).

[4] See James and Burgos (2022, § 2) for an overview. Other helpful overviews are Spencer (2018a and 2018b). See Mallon (2004) on constructivism. This division is based on Mallon (2006, pp. 525–26), although I use “constructivism” instead of his “constructionism.” See also Abiral Chitrakar Phnuyal, [The Ontology of Race](#). For the philosophy-of-language side of these questions, see Atkin (2017); Glasgow (2017); Taylor (2022, ch. 4). See Mallon (2006) for a landmark discussion of race terms’ semantics. See Appiah (2007) about ascription of racial and ethnic identities. See Haslanger (2000) about the normative question of how we should use race and gender concepts.

[5] This can come in minimal or robust versions. Minimal realism: “Races are naturally existing populations, but they bear very little resemblance to modernistic ideas of races; and they have very little importance” (cf. Hardimon (2017) and Relethford (2017)). Robust realism: “Races are naturally real and have substantial resemblance to the modernistic view of races.” It is very difficult to find present-day philosophers who believe in this robust realism. However, some authors have argued that there is some genetic basis to sorting certain groups of people into categories based on their ancestry and genetics; see the authors cited in this footnote.

[6] For example, one might argue that there is no biological basis to race, but it obviously has enormous social and political implications, and helps explain various phenomena (such as, especially, racism and other oppression). For introductory sources in this debate, see n. 4.

[7] Some philosophers have argued that there isn’t even enough in common in our ideas of race for there to be shared conceptions of races that would underwrite constructionism or constructivism. For

overviews, see n. 4. Others have argued that for eliminativist reasons, we should adopt anti-realism; see n. 10.

[8] Here we follow the APA style guide (American Psychological Association n.d.) in capitalizing “Black” and “White,” except when making explicit references to skin color alone. See also Appiah (2020) about capitalizing “Black.” See Ewing (2020), the National Association of Black Journalists (2020), and Painter (2020) about capitalizing both “Black” and “White.”

[9] Atkin (2017, p. 142 ff.). See also Taylor (2022, § 3.4). See Glasgow (2010) for the topic of whether laypersons’ general ideas of race are close enough to anything supportable by science to say that those general ideas are accurate. Such a division goes back at least as far as the fifteenth century. This “Enlightenment” or modern definition held, for example, that there are four or five races individuated by physical characteristics, roughly corresponding to Asian, black (south of the Sahara), indigenous, northern Scandinavian, and European and central Asian white. See Bernasconi and Lott (2000, pp. vii–3). See Taylor (2022, § 2.3) for a very informative discussion and chart. And see also Gracia (2007b, 1–3) for a discussion of the “factual” challenge to race and ethnicity. One major problem for such a division is that genetic variation within modernistic “races” is often higher than across these “races.” For example, many populations of “black” people are far more genetically similar genetically to populations of “white” people than they are to other populations of “black” people. For a summary of the scientific background, see Zack (2002, pp. 87–88), and for an important historical antecedent, see Montagu (1997). See also James and Burgos (2022, § 1) for a history of the concept of race.

[10] See e.g. Mallon (2006, p. 526). Even if races exist, it might be harmful to talk about them or cite them as explanations (Taylor 2022, § 3.2). And even if races don’t strictly exist, it might be useful to talk about them, for example because talking about them helps us identify systems of oppression. For example, it may be useful, in furthering our moral goals, to refer to “White supremacy,” even if we don’t think there is a set of people who are objectively, naturally “White.” See e.g. Taylor (2022, §§ 1.3, 3.2., and 4.4). One other important race-related topic concerning language—in this case, speech acts—is the activity of speaking on behalf of oppressed people (Alcoff 1991).

[11] Appiah (1985) is an influential presentation of this view. And even if we decide not to refer to traditionally-understood races, and not to talk about “race,” we might want to refer to similar terms, such as “racial identities,” “ethnoraces,” or “racialized groups” (Appiah, 1996; Blum, 2002). See also Hill (2017) who argues against holding racial identities at all.

[12] See for example Appiah (1990). See also Chad Vance, Personal Identity: How We Exist Over Time. In brief, one issue is whether race is “essential” to someone’s identity in a way so that, in theory, someone’s race could change, yet they remain the same person. Another way to approach this issue is to ask the question: could *you* have been born as a member of a different race? See also Kristin Seemuth Whaley, Psychological Approaches to Personal Identity and Animalism and Personal Identity. Also, see African American Existentialism by Anthony Sean Neal.

[13] A landmark essay in the discussion of intersectionality and essentialism is Grillo (1995). See also e.g. McPherson (2017) for a discussion of Black identity and essence.

[14] “Racism” can be defined in many ways. Taylor’s (2022, § 3.3) definition holds that racism is unethical disregard for people who belong to a particular race. Bloom (2002, p. 8) considers racism to comprise inferiorization (viewing others as inferior based on their biology) and antipathy (hatred based on physical traits). Oluo (2018) regards racism as prejudice based on race that is reinforced by systems of power (p. 26).

[15] See the essays in Washington (1986). See also Weinberg (2018) for King’s social-philosophy syllabus.

[16] Civil disobedience, generally speaking, is publicly breaking the law in order to make a point and advance the cause of justice. See King (2003).

[17] Mills (1997). See also e.g. Alexander (2010). Philosophers also investigate whether the American electoral system, given the country’s history, can be improved to better-serve the cause of racial justice (Young, 1990, p. 183 ff.; Altman, 2022, § 4.1).

[18] Kline et al. (2021); Bertrand and Mullainathan (2003).

[19] Himma (2001); Cohen and Sterba (2003); Boonin (2011, chs. 4–5); Sterba (2017); Fullinwider (2022).

[20] Boonin (2011, chs. 6–9); See Hertz and Molnar (2012) for essays about hate speech. See also McGowan (2019) and Anderson and Barnes (2022). And see also Free Speech by Mark Satta.

[21] See Parekh (2012) for examples. An obvious example would be to threateningly shout a racial slur at a person apparently of that race, or claim that a certain race is inherently evil and endangers the health of the nation.

[22] Wellman (2006). Boonin (2011, chs. 8–9). See Hall et al. (2017) for an overview on hate crimes.

[23] Douglass (2017 [1865]); Fullinwider (2000); Boonin (2011, chs. 2–3); Coates (2014); Lyons (2017); Boxill and Corlett (2022). See also Joseph Frigault, Reparations for Historic Injustice.

[24] Redlining is denying mortgages or subsidies based on the racial or ethnic composition of neighborhoods. See e.g. Coates (2014) and Rothstein (2017).

[25] Risse and (2004); Boonin (2011, chs. 10–11); Alexander (2010); Sheth (2017); Hosein (2018).

[26] Lowery (2016). Relatedly, police generally don’t solve crimes in black-dominated neighborhoods at the rate that they solve crimes in White-dominated neighborhoods (see Vaughn (2020) for discussion). See e.g. Nathanson (1985) on the racial component of the death penalty and Alexander (2010) for a general discussion of race and mass incarceration. See also The Death Penalty by Benjamin S. Yost.

[27] Lorde (1984); King (1988); Crenshaw (1989 and 1991); Taylor (2022, § 3.5). One may also define “intersectionality” as a belief, such as that “our social justice movements must consider all of the intersections of identity, privilege, and oppression that people face in order to be just and effective” (Oluo 2018, 74).

[28] Zack (2017a); Taylor (2022, § 3.5.5); See Sharpley-Whiting (2017) for an example and Oluo (2018, p. 44 and ch. 5) for other examples.

[29] Critical philosophy of race influences, and is influenced by, critical legal studies and critical race theory. See Alcoff (2022, § 1) for a discussion of the connections. See also Philosophy of Law: An Overview by Mark Satta.

[30] Bell (1987); Delgado and Stefancic (2017); Crenshaw et al. (1996); Mills (2017); Zack (2017a). See also Chelsea Haramia, Feminism Part 3: The Dominance Approach.

[31] For example, White people might find it easier to get jobs and mortgages, might be less suspected of crimes, and more generally, might be considered the standard or “normal” versus other races. See Sullivan (2006) and (2017) for investigations of white privilege, and see Oluo (2018, ch. 4) for a popular overview of privilege and its relation to race discourse. Other landmark essays in discussions of racial privilege and oppression include McIntosh (1989) and Young (1990, ch. 2). See also Lowe (2020) for a general discussion of privilege. See also Chelsea Haramia, Feminism Part 3: The Dominance Approach.

[32] Du Bois (1997 [1903]); Fanon (2008 [1952]); Henry (2005); Gordon (2017); Taylor (2022, § 5.5).

[33] Zack (2017d, pt. I); Taylor (2022, ch. 2). See also Victor Fabian Abundez-Guerra and Nathan Nobis, Responding to Morally Flawed Historical Philosophers and Philosophies.

[34] Whyte (2017); Taylor (2022, ch. 7).

[35] For example, some philosophers investigate the possibility that there are ways of knowing, or there is access to knowledge, that depends on one’s race or racialized experiences (Collins, 2000, chs. 2 and 11). Similarly, some philosophers discuss racial injustices that have to do with epistemology; see e.g., Epistemic Injustice by Huzeyfe Demirtas.

[36] Eze (1998); Gordon (2008); Mosley (2017); Zack (2017d, pt. IV). See also Gyekye (1995, ch. 12) on the concept of African philosophy.

[37] Van Norden (2011); Koller (2018).

[38] Gracia and Zeibert (2004); Nuccetelli (2017); Gracia and Vargas (2022).

[39] Zack (2017b).

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