

Why there are no human races

Lecture for
PHIL 3334:
Philosophy of Biology

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22 Why There Are No Human Races

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My aim in this essay is to defend the claim that American social distinctions cannot be understood in terms of a supposedly biological concept of race.¹ The only human race in the United States, in a slogan, is *the* human race. But (typically for a philosopher, perhaps), I'm going to come at the question in a somewhat roundabout way. And to make my argument I'm going to need to draw on two different and competing philosophical notions of what it is to give an adequate account of the meaning of a word or expression, such as the word "race."

One—we can call this the *ideational* view of meaning—associates the meaning of a term with what you might call an idea. Understanding the idea of race involves grasping how people think about races: what they take to be the central truths about races; under what sorts of circumstances they will apply the idea of race; what consequences for action will flow from that application.

The other picture of meaning—the *referential* view—suggests that what it is to explain what the word "race" means is, in effect, to identify the things to which it applies, the things we refer to when we speak of "races."

These views are not as far apart as they might at first appear. To find out what people are referring to in using the word "race," after all, you might need to know what idea their word "race" expresses: if they had no ideas, no thoughts, about race and if there were no circumstances when they used the word, no consequences to their applying it, then we could hardly suppose that their making the sound "race" meant anything at all. In practice, at least, access to an idea of race is probably needed to find the referent.

And, conversely, once we have identified the referent—found, that is, the races—we can assume that people who understand the word "race" have some beliefs that are at least roughly true of races. For if people are talking about races, it is because they have, or think they have, experience of races: and, generally speaking, some of that experience will be reliable. A little bit of knowledge of what races are like combined with a

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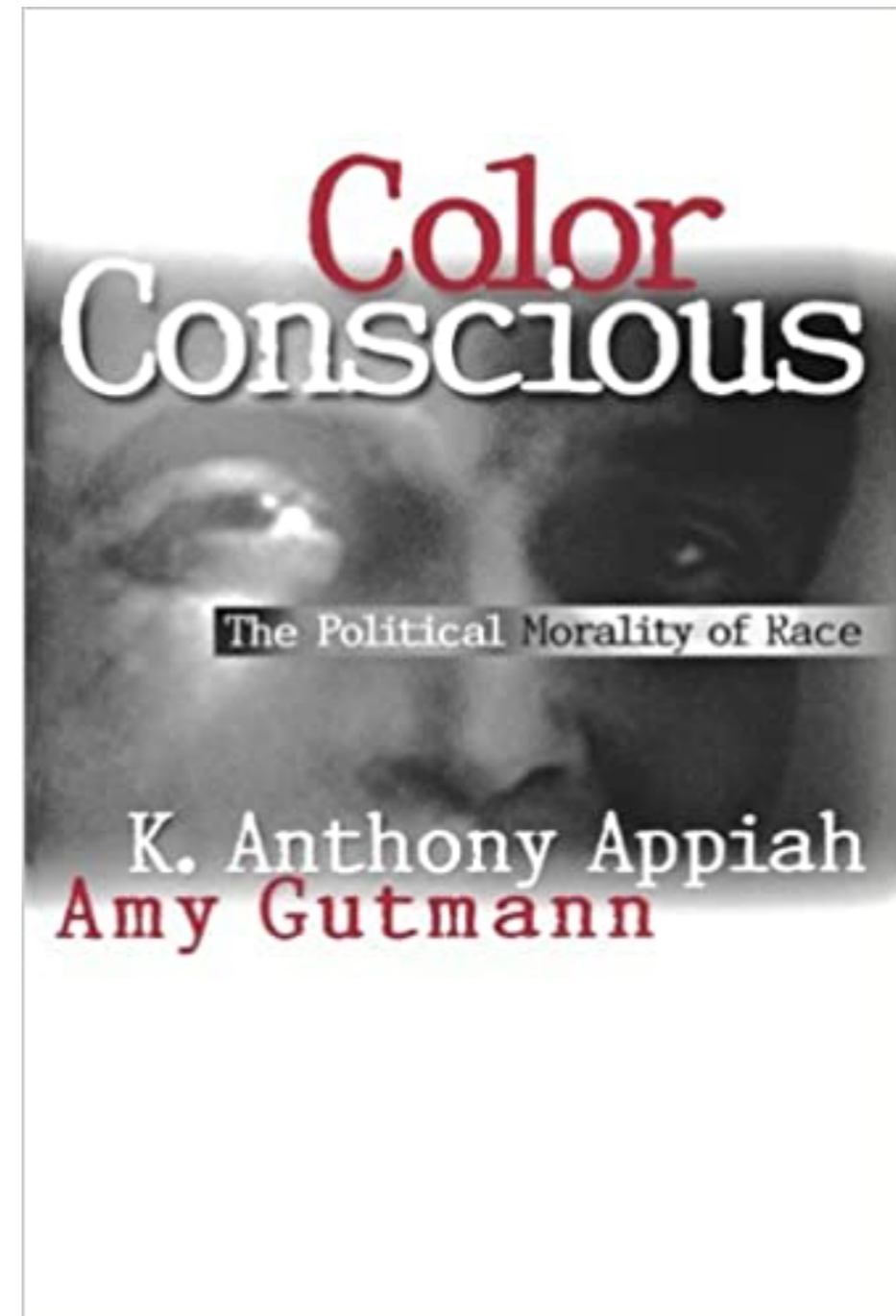


In philosophy and law
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Our version comes from



Longer version



What is the conclusion?

- 1) There are no biological races
- 2) The history of racial terms refers to essential biological divisions
- 3) There are no such divisions so there are no races

Defining Race

- 1) On the *ideational* view of meaning, there are various criteria that determine the meaning
- 2) In the case of race, maybe:
 - A. Most sub-saharan Africans are negro
 - B. Most Europeans are white
 - C. Most Chinese are yellow
 - D. Everybody has a race
 - E. There are only a few races

Defining Race

- 1) On the *referential* view of meaning, the reference is in the meaning so we figure out the underlying thing in the world that we are pointing to
- 2) The natural view is a causal theory - what is the causal explanation underlying the phenomenon we are pointing to
- 3) Obvious scientific examples include electricity, acid, bird but also god, phlogiston, witches

Ideational Race

- 1) The problem here is that there just is nothing that satisfies all (or even most?) of the important criteria

- 2) In the case of race, maybe:
 - A. Most sub-saharan Africans are negro
 - B. Most Europeans are white
 - C. Most Chinese are yellow
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Referential Race

- 1) On the *referential* view of meaning, the reference is in the meaning so we figure out the underlying thing in the world that we are pointing to
- 2) Appiah argues biological race is a scientific term - we can make mistakes, there is an underlying scientific fact, etc.
- 3) Human races are *natural kinds* - there is a correct, natural division of humans into races regardless of what anyone thinks

Referential Race

- 1) We need to look at the history of racial terms to see what we have been talking about all along
- 2) Here the modern concept of race is invented in the 18th century (or so) and refers to significant differences between people in intellectual, moral, aesthetic talents not to mention physical attributes
- 3) But we now know that there are no such natural divisions and hence no such thing as race

The history of race

This is why we read Bernier's *New Division of the Earth* - to see that from the very beginning, races were assumed to be essentially, biologically different

Appiah looks to Thomas Jefferson - a serious, scientific intellectual - as a representative of 'expert' racial knowledge

Bernier, Jefferson, (and everyone) just assumed that the differences among races were biological (not due to culture or environment) and essential - part of what makes the different races what they are

The history of race

What the underpinning biological reason for the physical and mental differences was unclear (was it blood? semen? genes?) but the point is that a person's race was determined by biological things whether we understood why or not

— But we now know that we were just massively mistaken about these differences. There are no natural, biological divisions of people that answer to the concept of “race”. So races don't exist (just like phlogiston, the aether, witches, possibly tachyons, god, moral facts,...)

But there are differences!

But obviously people are different! What about skin color, hair texture, alleles like sickle cell, etc.

First, they typically vary continuously and don't 'cluster'
Second, they don't divide up the same way

So you could pick one of these (say skin color) and insist that is what race just means, but then many of the criterial beliefs will be false and it won't play the explanatory role it is supposed to play

The conclusion

- 1) “Race” as a term, is meaningless
- 2) It is meant to attach to groups of humans with meaningful, essentially different biological (physical and mental) characteristics
- 3) There are no such groups so there are no races