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Race, Culture, Identity: Misunderstood Connections



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PART I. ANALYSIS: AGAINST RACES

Explaining Race Thinking

IMAGINE yourself on Angel Island in the 1920s. You are helping an inquisitive immigrant from Canton to fill in an immigration form. *Name*, it says. You ask her name. She tells you. You write it down. *Date of birth*. She gives it to you (according to the Chinese calendar, of course, so you have to look up your table for translating from one system to another). Then there is an entry that says *Race*. This you do not have to ask. You write “Oriental.” And your interlocutor, because she is inquisitive, asks politely: “What are you writing now?” (After all, until now, everything you have written has been in response to her answers.)

Disingenuously, you say: “I am writing down where you are from.”

“Ah yes,” she replies helpfully, “Canton, I was born in Canton. How did you know?”

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“No. Actually, that’s the next question I was going to ask. Place of birth.”

“So what have you written already?”

How do you answer this question? Seventy years ago, how would you have explained to someone from outside the modern West what our English word “race” meant? Or how would you have explained to a Sicilian across the continent on Ellis Island, thirty years earlier, why the right answer for him was “Caucasian”? (Where he came from, the people of the North of Italy, the ancestors of the modern Lombard league, think of him, as he very well knows, as of a different, darker, *razza* than theirs: how do you explain that here he is going to become white?) And would you give the same explanation today?

Or, again, imagine yourself in North Carolina, in the later nineteenth century, as Reconstruction is coming to an end. You are in a small town, out of the way, where there are families that come in all shades of skin color, milk through chocolate. A message comes through from the state capitol in Raleigh. Everyone now has to be white or colored. If you’re white, step this way; colored, go the other. You are talking to Joe, a teenager, whose skin is milky white, whose eyes are blue, but whose grandmother, Mary, is a brown-skinned woman who remembers *her* mother’s stories of Africa. “I was gonna go with my grandma,” he tells you. “But then I saw my Uncle Jim was gonna be with her, so I’m gonna cross to the other side of the room. ’Cause one thing I know for sure; I don’t want to be anywhere my Uncle Jim’s gonna be.”¹

Is Joe making a conceptual mistake? Or is he unintentionally making what will turn out to be a lucky choice for him and his descendants; a choice that will leave him and them with a vote, better schools, better jobs? Can you imagine someone like Joe, in the nineteenth-century South, born after emancipation but raised before the high-water mark of the strange career of Jim Crow, who doesn’t know that in America, or at least in the Carolinas, even white-skinned people with black grandmothers are Negroes?

My preliminary aim in this essay is to explore the concept of race that is at work in these cases—an American concept, though

¹ I owe this thought experiment to a conversation with Samuel R. Delany.

also, of course, one that draws on and interacts with ideas from elsewhere. I will go on to argue for three analytical conclusions. First, I want to explain why American social distinctions cannot be understood in terms of the concept of race: the only human race² in the United States, I shall argue, is *the* human race. Second, I want to show that replacing the notion of race with the notion of culture is not helpful: the American social distinctions that are marked using racial vocabulary do not correspond to cultural groups, either. And third, I want to propose that, for analytical purposes, we should use instead the notion of a racial identity, which I will try to explore and explain.

Finally, I will argue for an ethical conclusion: that there is a danger in making racial identities too central to our conceptions of ourselves; while there is a place for racial identities in a world shaped by racism, I shall argue, if we are to move beyond racism we shall have, in the end, to move beyond current racial identities.

Meaning

If in the 1920s you'd left Angel Island and traveled much farther east than Ellis Island, sailing across to England, landing at Southampton and taking the train up to London and on to Cambridge, you could have consulted the leading experts in the English-speaking world on questions of meaning. In 1923 Charles K. Ogden and I. A. Richards had published *The Meaning of Meaning: A Study of the Influence of Language upon Thought and of the Science of Symbolism*, with supplementary essays by various people including the anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski. A year earlier Ludwig Wittgenstein had published the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, which was to become a classic in a field that was not yet called the philosophy of language.

We do not need to delve deeply into that field. But it will help us later, when we turn to some of the difficult philosophical ques-

² I'm going to avoid my normal custom of using scare-quotes around the word "race" throughout, because in this context it would be question begging. It would also be confusing, since a lot of what I have to say is about the alleged relation between the word "race" and allegedly actual races. So quotes around the word "race" in this piece are for the purposes of distinguishing between use and mention.

tions about understanding the idea of race, if we make a distinction that was already available when Wittgenstein was writing the *Tractatus*.

Before I introduce that distinction, however, I want to draw attention to the fact that the issues I am going to be discussing next grow out of a tradition of philosophical reflection that is not directly concerned with ethical matters. It is particularly important, I think, to illustrate how technical philosophy can be of the greatest help in clarifying our moral predicament; and to show that what can be helpful lies as much in the spheres of metaphysics and epistemology and philosophy of language as it does in the field of ethics. Now to the theoretical distinction.

In the 1920s there were—and there are still today—two very different and competing philosophical notions of what it is to give an adequate account of the meaning of a word or expression.

One—we can call this the “ideational” view of meaning—which goes back to at least the seventeenth century and the Logic of Port Royal, associates the meaning of a term, like “race,” with what the Port Royal Logicians called 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 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 little information about what people are like—how sensory experience works, for example—will allow us to predict at least some of people’s ideas about races.

My aim is not to decide between these two broad traditions of conceiving of meaning. Anyone concerned to understand our concept of race ought, I think, to be interested both in the reality of race and in the way people think about it, in both the referential and the ideational aspects: we can leave it to the philosophers of language to wrangle about which of these ought to have the central place in semantics (or whether, as I suspect, we need both of them).

The Ideational Account of Race

Perhaps the simplest ideational theory of meaning runs like this: what we learn when we learn a word like “race” is a set of rules for applying the term. Everybody who knows what the word “race” means—which means most competent speakers of English—learns the same rules: so that while people have different beliefs about races, they share some special beliefs—I’ll call them the criterial beliefs—that define the concept. These beliefs may not be very high-powered. They might include, for example, the thought that people with very different skin colors are of different races or that your race is determined by the race of your parents. But on this simplest ideational theory, all these criterial beliefs have this property: someone who doesn’t believe these things doesn’t understand what the English word “race” means.

The simplest theory would also require that if we collected together all these criterial beliefs about race and took them all together, they could be thought of as defining the meaning of the word “race.” (This is equivalent to saying that there are things that have to be true of something if it is to be a race—conditions necessary for being a race; and that these necessary conditions are, when taken together, sufficient for being a race.) We can use a

device invented by the English philosopher Frank Ramsey in the 1920s to make this an explicit definition: something is a race just in case all the criterial beliefs are true of it.³ Let's call this the "strict criterial theory."

The Ramsey definition makes clear the connection between defining a term and questions of existence: there are races if, but only if, there are things that satisfy all the criteria.

For a number of reasons, which again I want to skirt, you won't get many philosophers of language to buy into this strict criterial theory today; there is a general skepticism about it, which goes back, I suppose, to W.V.O. Quine's attack on the idea of the analytic truth, which he called one of the "dogmas of empiricism." For if the strict criterial theory were right, those criterial sentences would be analytically true: they would be sentences that were true simply by virtue of their meanings, and Quine urged us to doubt that there *were* any of those.⁴

But you don't need highfalutin semantic arguments to be lead to wonder whether we could in fact write a Ramsey-style definition of the word "race." Consider each of the two claims I gave a little while ago. *People with very different skin colors are of different races. Your race is determined by the race of your parents.*

Take the first one. Suppose Jorge were to speak of the Latino "race" and to maintain that the whole range of colors found among people that the U.S. census would classify as Hispanic simply demonstrated that a race didn't have to be fairly monochrome. Is this a mistake about the meaning of the word "race"? Now take the second claim. Two people marry. The wife has one Ghanaian and one British parent. The father's parents are Norwegian. They have children of various shades, one of whom looks, to all intents and purposes, like an average Norwegian. My friend Georg agrees that the mother's parents are of different races and contends that the Norwegian-looking son is Caucasian, but his darker brothers are not. Does Georg not know what "race"

³ See "Theories," in Frank Ramsey, *Foundations: Essays in Philosophy, Logic, Mathematics and Economics*, ed. D. H. Mellor (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), pp. 101–25.

⁴ W.V.O. Quine, "Two Dogmas of Empiricism," in *From a Logical Point of View* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1953), pp. 20–46.

means? Apparently, if people with two parents of the same race are of the same race as their parents. For if your race is determined by the race of your parents, you must have the same race as your full siblings.

It seems to me simply unconvincing to insist that Jorge and Georg don't know what the word "race" means; at least if knowing what it means is knowing whatever you need to know to count as a competent user of the English word "race." This fails, of course, to establish that we couldn't find a set of beliefs necessary and sufficient for understanding the word "race"; beliefs, that is, that everybody who understands the word "race" must have and such that everybody who has them understands the concept of race. But if even *these* rather uncontroversial-looking claims turn out to be ones that can be denied by someone who understands the word "race," then one might begin to wonder whether *any* claims will turn out to be necessary: and if none are necessary, then certainly the conjunction of the necessary conditions won't be sufficient.

Such doubts about the strict criterial theory—in terms of criteria individually necessary and jointly sufficient—lead us on to the next obvious proposal, one that might seem to be suggested by Wittgenstein's use of the notion of a criterion.⁵ Perhaps what is required to know what "race" means is that you should believe most of the criterial beliefs (or a good number of them) but not that you should believe any particular ones. The explicit definition that captures the common notion of those who understand the word "race" will then be given by a modified Ramsey-style definition: a race is something that satisfies a good number of the criterial beliefs. I'll call this the "vague criterial theory."

Accepting this theory has certain important consequences. First of all, it isn't going to allow us to draw a sharp line between not knowing what the word "race" means and having unusual views about races. That boundary is vague, because the expression "a good number" is vague.

Second, the theory admits that among the criterial beliefs are

⁵ See P. F. Strawson, "Wittgenstein's Conception of a Criterion," in *Wittgenstein and the Problem of Other Minds*, ed. Harold Morick (Brighton, Sussex: Harvester Press, 1981).

some that are plainly not held by everybody who uses the word “race.” For example, *Most sub-Saharan Africans are of the Negro race. Most Western Europeans are of the white race. Most Chinese are of the yellow race. Everybody has a race. There are only a few races.*

There are clearly people who count as understanding the term “race” who don’t believe each of these things. Somebody who uses the word “race” may have no thoughts at all about Africa or Western Europe or China, need not know even that they exist. I, as you will see, deny that everybody has *a* race, because I think nobody has a race: but there are more moderate folks who think that people of so-called mixed race are neither of the race of their parents nor of some separate race and deny that everybody has *a* race for that reason.⁶ And there have been physical anthropologists who felt that the only useful notion of race classified people into scores of kinds.

If the strict criterial theory had been true, it would have been easy to argue against the existence of races. One would only have had to find the correct definition and then show that nothing in the world actually satisfied it. This looser theory correspondingly makes it harder to argue against the existence of races. But the vague criterial theory does suggest a route to understanding the race concept: to explore the sorts of things people believe about what they call “races” and to see what races would have to be like for these things to be true of them. We can then inquire as to whether current science suggests that there is anything in the world at all like *that*.

Now, suppose there isn’t one such thing in the world; then, on this view, there are no races. It will still be important to understand the vague criteria, because these will help us to understand what people who believe in races are thinking. That will be important, even if there are no races: first, because we often want to understand how other people are thinking, for its own sake; and second, because people act on their beliefs, whether or not they are true. Even if there are no races, we could use a grasp of the vague criteria for the concept of race in predicting what their

⁶ See Naomi Zack, *Race and Mixed Race* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993).

thoughts and their talk about race will lead them to do;⁷ we could use it, too, to predict what thoughts about races various experiences would lead them to have.

I have already declared myself very often on the question whether I think there are any races. I think there aren't. So it is important that I am clear that I also believe that understanding how people think about race remains important for these reasons, even though there aren't any races. To use an analogy I have often used before, we may need to understand talk of "witchcraft" to understand how people respond cognitively and how they act in a culture that has a concept of witchcraft, whether or not we think there are, in fact, any witches.

The ideational view might, therefore, lead you to explore contemporary thought and talk about races. But I think—remembering Jorge and Georg—that this is likely to produce a confusing picture. This is because current ways of talking about race are the residue, the detritus, so to speak, of earlier ways of thinking about race; so that it turns out to be easiest to understand contemporary talk about "race" as the pale reflection of a more full-blooded race discourse that flourished in the last century. The ideational theory can thus be combined with a historical approach: we can explore the ideational structures of which our present talk is, so to speak, the shadow, and then see contemporary uses of the term as drawing from various different structures, sometimes in ways that are not exactly coherent.

Before we turn to historical questions, however, let me ask what route to understanding the race concept is suggested by the referential account of meaning.

*The Referential Account of Race:
Philosophy of Science*

The answer is most easily understood by thinking about an issue in the history and philosophy of science. From the point of view of current theory some previous theories—early nineteenth-cen-

⁷ Strictly speaking, if there aren't any races, there's no talk or thought about races. So this is a shorthand for "talk they would assent to (or thoughts they would express) using the word 'race' and its cognates."

tury chemistry, say—look as though they classified some things—acids and bases, say—by and large correctly, even if a lot of what they said about those things was pretty badly wrong. From the point of view of current theory, you might argue, an acid is, roughly, a proton donor.⁸ And our recognition of the fact that the classification of acids and bases was in itself an intellectual achievement is recorded in the fact that we are inclined to say that when Sir Humphrey Davy—who, not having any idea of the proton, could hardly be expected to have understood the notion of a proton donor—used the word “acid,” he was nevertheless talking about what we call acids.

The issues here are at the intersection of the philosophy of language and the philosophy of science. And in explaining why it seems proper to think that Sir Humphrey Davy was referring to the things we call “proton donors,” even though much of what he believed about acids is not true of proton donors, philosophers of science have borrowed ideas about reference from recent philosophy of language.

One proposal some have borrowed is what is called the “causal theory of reference.” The idea is simple enough: if you want to know what object a word refers to, find the thing in the world that gives the best causal explanation of the central features of uses of that word. If you want to know what the name “New York” refers to, find the object in the world that is at the root of most of the causal chains that lead to remarks containing the expression “New York.”

So in the case of acids, we are urged to believe that the stuffs “out there” in the world that really accounted for the central features of Davy’s “acid”-talk really were acids and that that is what accounts for our sense that Davy was not simply talking about something else (or, of course, about nothing at all). Early physiologists (like Descartes) who talked about “animal spirits” in the nerve fibers, on the other hand, we now say were referring to nothing at all: there is no currently recognized stuff that can account for what they said about animal spirits; instead there are truths about sodium pumps and lipid bilayers and synapses. There

⁸ This is the so-called Bronsted theory of the Danish physical chemist Johannes Nicolaus Bronsted.

simply is no substance that was usually present when and only when the expression “animal spirits” was uttered and that behaves at all as they thought animal spirits behaved.

*The Referential Account of Race:
A Proposal*

How can we use these ideas to develop a referential account of the concept of race? Well, we need to explore the sorts of things people have said about what they call “races” and see whether there is something in the world that gives a good causal explanation of their talk. If there *is* one thing in the world that best explains that talk, then that will be what the word “race” refers to; and that can be true, even if it would surprise most people to know that that was what they were really talking about—just as Sir Humphrey Davy would have been surprised to discover that when he said “acids,” he was talking about—referring to—proton donors.

As a practical matter, at least three things are required for us to allow that a past theorist who spoke of \mathcal{Y} s and was badly mistaken was nevertheless talking about *something*, call it X .

First, the existence condition—*we* must acknowledge the existence of X .

Second, the adequacy condition—*some* of what was thought to be true of what \mathcal{Y} denoted must be at least approximately true of X .

Third, the uniqueness condition— X must be the best candidate for the job of \mathcal{Y} 's referent, so that no other thing that satisfies the existence condition satisfies the adequacy condition equally well.

On the causal theory, what it is for X to be the best candidate for the job of \mathcal{Y} 's referent in the speech of a community is for X to be the thing that best causally explains their talk about \mathcal{Y} s. So what we need to do, on this view, is explore the history of the way the word “race” has been used and see if we can identify through that history some objective phenomenon that people were responding to when they said what they said about “races.”

The difference between ideational and referential theories of

meaning, then, is roughly that the referential theory requires that we do a historical version of what the ideational theory permits us to do. On the referential theory, exploring the history of the term is central to understanding what it means. Semantical considerations thus steer us toward historical inquiry.

A Note on Method

The history I am going to explore is the history of the ideas of the intellectual and political elites of the United States and the United Kingdom. You might ask why I don't look at the words of more ordinary people: race is statistically most important in ordinary lives. A good question, I say. (This is what you say when you think you have a good answer.) The reason is itself embedded in the history: as we shall see, throughout the nineteenth century the term "race" came increasingly to be regarded, even in ordinary usage, as a scientific term. Like many scientific terms, its being in use among specialists did not stop its being used in everyday life. Treating it as a scientific term meant not that it was only for use by scientists but that scientists and scholars were thought to be the experts on how the term worked. That is, with the increasing prestige of science, people became used to using words whose exact meanings they did not need to know, because their exact meanings were left to the relevant scientific experts.

In short, there developed a practice of *semantic deference*: people used words like "electricity" outside the context of natural philosophy or physical science, assuming that the physicists could say more precisely than they could what it meant. This semantic deference thus instituted a new form of what Hilary Putnam has called "linguistic division of labor," just as older specialties, like theology or law, had for a long time underwritten concepts—the Trinity, landlord—whose precise definition ordinary people didn't know.

The result is that even ordinary users of the term "race," who operated with what I have called vague criteria in applying it, thought of themselves as using a term whose value as a tool for speaking the truth was underwritten by the experts. Ordinary users, when queried about whether their term "race" really

referred to anything, would have urged you to go to the experts: the medical doctors and anatomists, and later, the anthropologists and philologists and physiologists, all of whom together developed the scientific idea of race.

This makes the term “race” unlike many other terms in our language: “solid,” for example. “Solid” is a term that we apply using everyday criteria: if I tell you that materials scientists say that a hunk of glass is not a solid but a liquid, you may well feel that they are using the term in a special technical sense, resisting semantic deference. Some people might want to defend the word “race” against scientific attacks on its legitimacy by denying, in effect, that semantic deference is appropriate here. Of this strategy, I will make just this observation: if you’re going to go that route, you should probably offer some criteria—vague or strict—for applying the term. This is because, as we shall see, the arguments against the use of “race” as a scientific term suggest that most ordinary ways of thinking about races are incoherent.

Thomas Jefferson: Abolitionist

The understandings of “race” I am exploring are American; it seems appropriate enough, then, to begin with a thinker who helped shape the American republic: namely, Thomas Jefferson. And I want to begin with some representative reflections of his from the first quarter of the nineteenth century; for it is in the nineteenth century, I think, that the configuration of ideas about race we have inherited began to take its modern shape.

In Thomas Jefferson’s *Autobiography*—~~begun~~, as he says, on January 6, 1822, at the age of seventy-seven—the third President of the United States reproduces his original draft of the Declaration of Independence, with the passages deleted by the Congress “distinguished by a black line drawn under them.”⁹ There are only two paragraphs entirely underlined in black; and the second, and by far the longer of them, gives, as grounds for complaint against “the present king of Great Britain,”¹⁰ the fact that “he has

⁹ *Autobiography*, in Thomas Jefferson, *Writings* (New York: Library of America, 1984), p. 18.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

Jefferson's discussion is representative of a transition in the way the word "race" is used in reflecting on the characters of different kinds of peoples: the outer manifestations of race—the black skin of the Negro, the white skin and round eyes of the European, the oval eyes of the Oriental—have taken their place for him besides other, less physical, criteria, in defining race. The race of a person is expressed in all these ways, physical, moral, intellectual: they are referred back, so to speak, to a common cause or ground.

Before Natural History

If we look back, for a moment, to the seventeenth-century traditions of English thought that are Jefferson's background, we see a different configuration of ideas, in which the physical body was important not as a cause but as a *sign* of difference.²⁵ Remember Othello. As G. K. Hunter has well expressed the matter:

Shakespeare has presented to us a traditional view of what Moors are like, i.e. gross, disgusting, inferior, carrying the symbol of their damnation on their skin; and has caught our over-easy assent to such assumptions in the grip of a guilt which associates us and our assent with the white man representative of such views in the play—Iago. Othello acquires the glamour of an innocent man that *we* have wronged, and an admiration stronger than he could have achieved by virtue plainly represented.²⁶

This device works only if the audience accepts that the Moor is *not*, simply by virtue of his Moorish physical inheritance, incorrigibly evil. Othello's blackness is a sign of his Moorishness; and it can associate him, through that sign, with the Infidel (since, unlike the Moor of Venice, most Moors are not Christian) and thus with moral or religious evil.

²⁵ For more on the background here see Hugh B. MacDougall, *Racial Myth in English History: Trojans, Teutons, and Anglo-Saxons* (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1982); and Reginald Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny: The Origins of American Racial Anglo-Saxonism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981).

²⁶ George K. Hunter, "Othello and Race-Prejudice," in *Dramatic Identities and Cultural Tradition: Studies in Shakespeare and His Contemporaries* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1978), pp. 45–46.

The ensuing discussion of what Arnold calls “physiology” is not what we should expect: it turns out that he is simply going to discuss the likelihood of mixture—that is, breeding—between the races. He cites, for example, the opinion of a certain Monsieur Edwards that “an Englishman who now thinks himself sprung from the Saxons or the Normans, is often in reality the descendant of the Britons.”³¹ The appeal to philology, on the other hand, might seem to suggest an alternative mechanism for the transmission of racial traits—namely, through language—but, in fact, philology is, for Arnold and his contemporaries, largely a guide to racial filiation, with those whose languages are most closely related being also most closely related by blood. Arnold is clear that language can, in fact, be misleading: “How little the triumph of the conqueror’s laws, manners, and language, proves the extinction of the old race, we may see by looking at France; Gaul was Latinised in language manners, and laws, and yet her people remained essentially Celtic.”³² But he is also convinced, as I say, that it can be a guide to racial character.

Racialism

What Arnold lays out in these passages is the essence of what I call *racialism*. He believed—and in this he was typical of educated people in the English-speaking world of his day—that we could divide human beings into a small number of groups, called “races,” in such a way that the members of these groups shared certain fundamental, heritable, physical, moral, intellectual, and cultural characteristics with one another that they did not share with members of any other race.

There are a few complications to this basic picture, which we should bear in mind. First, there are two major ways in which counterexamples to claims about the members of the race could simply be ruled out. It was acknowledged that there were, to

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 72. Arnold never explicitly discusses sex, of course; and so we are left with the possibility of interpreting this as meaning either that there are Englishmen who are of wholly British (i.e., Celtic) descent or that there are some of partially British descent. Given, however, that some of the former have “passed” many centuries ago, the existence of the latter can be assumed.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 69.

begin with, in all races, as there are in animal species, occasional defective members: in animals, the two-headed pigs and three-legged cats so beloved of tabloid journalism in my homeland of Ghana: in human beings, the mute, the mentally disabled, the blind. These individuals were not to count against the general laws governing the racial type. Similarly, the norm for each race might be different for males and females, so that a racial type might be defined by two norms, rather than one.

A second complication derives from the fact that many of the characteristics of the various races were described as dispositions or tendencies: a single person who was not defective might still differ from the average member of his race because his individual character dominated the natural tendencies he had inherited in his racial essence. Celts might all tend toward the sentimental; but a particular Welshman might, through an exercise of will, conquer his natural racial temper. As a result, the failure of an individual to fit the norm for her race would not by itself refute the theory: for it might be that that person had simply conquered her inherited disposition. Many of what I shall call the characteristics of a race were thus not, to use a modern term, phenotypic: they did not necessarily display themselves in the observable behavior of every individual.³³

These characteristics, then, that each normal woman (and man) of a race was supposed to share with every other woman (and man) together determined what we can call the *essence* of that race; they were characteristics that were necessary and sufficient, taken together, for someone to be a normal member of the race. Arnold's concept of race should, then, provide the materials for what I have called a strict criterial theory of the meaning of the term "race."

Arnold was uncharacteristic of his age in many ways: and one of them is the cosmopolitanism—or, at least, the Europeanism—of his temperament: he quotes frequently from French and German scholars. And on the question of race his views conformed with

³³ Nevertheless, it is a point about the logic of dispositional terms that it is hard (though not impossible) to make sense of applying them to the members of a group if no one in the group ever displays the disposition: see Anthony Appiah, *Assertion and Conditionals* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), chap. 2, sec. 4.

what was coming to be the common sense of Western European intellectuals.

Arnold's discussion in *On the Study of Celtic Literature* makes it plain that he believes that the racial essence accounts for more than the obvious visible characteristics of individuals and of groups—skin color, hair, shape of face—on the basis of which we decide whether people are, say, Asian- or Afro-Americans. For a racist, then, to say someone is “Negro” is not just to say that she has inherited a black skin or curly hair: it is to say that her skin color goes along with other important inherited characteristics—including moral and literary endowments. By the end of the nineteenth century most Western scientists (indeed, most educated Westerners) believed that racialism was correct, and theorists sought to explain many characteristics—including, as we see here, the character of literatures—by supposing that they were inherited along with (or were in fact part of) a person's racial essence.

Mixing Essences

In the British people, Arnold is arguing, not only are there some whose ancestors are Celt—the first Britons—and some whose ancestors are Saxon, but these two lines have become literally joined through intermarriage, and the character of British literature is thus not only the product of a cultural syncretism but a joining of the essences of two races. Thus while the Celtic essence survives, it survives mixed with a Saxon essence: the character of the English thus contains both essences, both are available as driving energies of English poetry.

All tendencies of human nature are in themselves vital and profitable; when they are blamed, they are to be blamed relatively, not absolutely. This holds true of the Saxon's phlegm as well as the Celt's sentiment. Out of the steady humdrum habit of the creeping Saxon, as the Celt calls him,—out of his way of going near the ground—has come, no doubt, Philistinism, that plane of essentially Germanic growth, flourishing with its genuine marks only in the German fatherland, Great Britain and her colonies, and the United States of America; but what a soul of goodness there is in Philistinism itself! and this soul of goodness I, who am often supposed

teristic feature is the want of slope: marsh, waster, shoal; the rivers hardly drag themselves along, swollen and sluggish, with long, black-looking waves.”⁴⁷ The “Saxons, Angles, Jutes, Frisians . . . [and] Danes”⁴⁸ who occupied this region of Holland at the beginning of the first millennium are, according to Taine, the ancestors of the English; but since they, themselves, are of German descent, Taine also refers, in describing this “race” a few pages later, to some of the traits ascribed to Germans in Tacitus.

It is the conception of the binding core of the English nation as the Anglo-Saxon race that accounts for Taine’s decision to identify the origins of English literature not in its antecedents in the Greek and Roman classics that provided the models and themes of so much of the best-known works of English “poesy”; not in the Italian models that influenced the drama of Marlowe and Shakespeare; but in *Beowulf*, a poem in the Anglo-Saxon tongue, a poem that was unknown to Chaucer and Spenser and Shakespeare, the first poets to write in a version of the English language that we can still almost understand.

Darwin and the Rise of Race Science

Arnold represents, then, a version of an older theory couched in terms of the new vocabulary of “race,” whose authority derives, in part, from its association with the increasing prestige of the natural sciences. (You will have noticed that in the excerpts from the *Celtic Literature* lectures Arnold uses the word “data” several times.) And the most important theoretical development in the growth of a biological conception of race had already occurred by the time Arnold published *Culture and Anarchy* in 1869. For on November 24, 1859, Charles Darwin had published a work whose full title reads: *The Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life*.

The word “race” had been used in this way to refer to kinds of animals and plants, as well as to kinds of people, for some time; but there is no doubt that even for a mid-nineteenth-century ear this title promises something of relevance to the study of human

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

difference. Indeed, the very fact that a single scientific theory promised to account for the variety of kinds of animals, in general, made its application to humans a natural step in the continuing process of placing the study of human anatomy in the context of a comparative zoology.

Darwin suggested, with characteristic caution, in *The Origin of Species*, that his theory might throw light on “the origin of man and his history”; the implication being that human beings developed, like other modern organisms, out of earlier forms. Taken to its “logical conclusion” this view suggested the oneness not only of all human beings—related by common descent—but, at least potentially, the common ancestry and thus unity of all life.

Darwin’s theory can be thought of as consisting of two components: one is the claim that kinds of organisms develop by “descent with modification.”⁴⁹ This claim was immediately widely accepted and applied to understanding the classification of organisms, representing, as it did, a continuation of arguments made five decades earlier by Lamarck.

But Darwin’s more distinctive claim was that the mechanism of modification was natural selection: the selective survival of characteristics that gave individuals advantages in the “struggle for life.” Darwin here drew on the parallelism with artificial selection of animals that was carried on by horse and cattle breeders and by pigeon fanciers. Just as they worked only with the natural variation among animals, selecting those with characteristics they favored and breeding from them, so, in Darwin’s theory, nature “selected” organisms for breeding, not (as the rather colorful talk of the “struggle for life” suggested) by destroying some and allowing others to survive but by affecting differentially rates of reproductive success.

This claim was not so easily accepted. To begin with, it was not clear that there was sufficient variation within most kinds of organisms on which selection could work; and, indeed, though Darwin and Darwinians did stress the variability of natural populations, they had no account of the origin of the variations on which selection could act. More than this, most selective forces did not look as though they applied sufficient selection pressure

⁴⁹ My account here is based on Coleman, *Biology in the Nineteenth Century*.

to lead to any very substantial effects: it was only much later, with the development of population genetics, that it was possible to show that relatively small differences in survival rates could produce cumulatively large effects.

And, finally, Darwin had an inadequate and undeveloped theory of inheritance: the modern account, in terms of the gene, had no real impact until after Mendel's work was rediscovered in 1900. The theory of evolution by natural selection required that organisms should inherit the characteristics of their ancestors: otherwise the surviving offspring of an organism with a trait that gave it an advantage in the struggle for life offered no guarantee that its children would carry the same trait. Indeed, since Darwin believed in a sort of blending theory of inheritance, in which what accounted for a particular observable characteristic was the blended mixture of the factors that determined that characteristic in one's parents, he could not really explain why a factor that was rare in a population could survive at all, since it would be constantly "diluted" by more common forms.

There were other problems: if you want to treat all creatures as derived from a single ancient population, there must be some source of new variations: otherwise every characteristic in any modern organism must have existed in the earliest population. (Darwin was aware of "sports," creatures like the two-headed pigs to which I have already referred; but he thought—rightly, as it turns out—that these were of little importance in evolution.)

It is thus only with the development of Mendelism, with its account of inheritance in terms of genes and its recognition of the possibility of new variety arising by mutation, that the theory of natural selection was placed on a sound footing.

This second part of Darwin's theory—the view of natural selection—was thus rightly greeted with less immediate enthusiasm than the general idea of descent with modification.

Descent with modification was all that was required, however, to allow biology to give a much more straightforward account of how organisms should be classified. Darwin thought of species as essentially classificatory conveniences;⁵⁰ he was interested in how

⁵⁰ See George W. Stocking, *Race, Culture, and Evolution* (New York: Free Press, 1968), p. 46: "Darwin's own position on the question of human races was

populations changed their character and separated from each other, not in drawing boundaries between them. But his theory allowed that the accumulation of differences by selection could gradually produce kinds—varieties or species—that were measurably different; and thus suggested a mode of classification in which kinds that were more closely related by evolution should be classified together.

Thus the general acceptance of descent with modification and the increasing acceptance of Darwin's theory of natural selection gave scientific support to the idea that human kinds—races—could, like animal and plant species, be both evolutionarily related and biologically distinct. Furthermore, even though human races were not mutually infertile, the theory of evolution suggested a way of thinking of varieties as being in the process of speciation: races might not be species, but they were, so to speak, moving in that direction.

The Problem for a Biology of Race

Darwin, as I have said, thought of the species as essentially a classificatory convenience: he was, in philosophical jargon, a nominalist about species, holding that the boundaries between species were not clearly marked "in nature"; and if species were not marked in nature then varieties or subspecies (which is what, on his view, human races were), being even less distinct from one another than species, were presumably classificatory conveniences also.

To believe this was already to move away from the sort of racial essences that we find in Arnold. For Arnold, the interest of the characteristics of a race was exactly that you could suppose that its members all shared certain properties; so that having identified a person's race membership from her appearance one could then make inferences about her moral or literary dispositions. It makes sense that Darwin, whose whole analysis depends on the recogni-

equally congenial to polygenist thinking. Although he thought it a matter of indifference whether human races were called species or subspecies, he granted that a naturalist confronted for the first time with specimens of Negro and European man would doubtless call them 'good and true species.'"

tion of variation within populations, was more interested in the ways individuals differed from each other within their varieties than in the ways they were similar.

Once we have the modern genetic picture we can see that each person is the product of enormous numbers of genetic characteristics, interacting with one another and with an environment, and that there is nothing in the theory of evolution to guarantee that a group that shares one characteristic will share all or even most others. Characteristics on different chromosomes are, as the Mendelians said, independently assorted. The theory of evolution will also predict that as you move through a geographical range along a gradient of selection pressure, the frequency of certain characteristics—those that affect skin color, for example—may change fairly continuously, so that populations may blend into one another; and characteristics may drift from one neighboring population into another over time by intermarriage (or, to speak less euphemistically, interbreeding). Indeed, it turns out that, in humans, however you define the major races, the biological variability within them is almost as great as the biological variation within the species as a whole: put another way, while there are some characteristics that we are very good at recognizing—skin color, hair, skull shape—that are very unevenly geographically distributed, the groups produced by these assignments do not cluster much for other characteristics.

This fact was noticed by Ralph Waldo Emerson, only a few years after Arnold's essays. In 1876, in *his* essays on English traits, he wrote:

An ingenious anatomist has written a book⁵¹ to prove that races are imperishable, but nations are pliant constructions, easily changed or destroyed. But this writer did not find his assumed races on any necessary law, disclosing their ideal or metaphysical necessity; nor did he on the other hand count with precision the existing races and settle the true bounds; a point of nicety, and the popular test of his theory. The individuals at the extremes of divergence in one race of men are as unlike as the wolf to the lapdog. Yet each variety shades down imperceptibly into the next, and you cannot draw the line where a race begins or ends. Hence every writer

⁵¹ The reference is to Robert Knox's *The Races of Men* (1850).

makes a different count. Blumenbach reckons five races; Humboldt three; and Mr. Pickering, who lately in our Exploring Expedition thinks he saw all kinds of men that can be on the planet, makes eleven.⁵²

Even limiting oneself to the range of morphological criteria available to these comparative anatomists it is hard to classify people objectively into a small set of populations; and whichever way you do it, it will turn out that, for biological purposes, your classification will contain almost as much human genetic variation as there is in the whole species.⁵³

“Race,” then, as a biological concept, picks out, at best, among humans, classes of people who share certain easily observable physical characteristics, most notably skin color and a few visible features of the face and head.

The materials for an evolutionary explanation for skin color variation are easily laid out. The original human population had dark skins, which give you a selective advantage in the tropics, because they protect you somewhat from skin cancer. Lighter skins developed in colder climes, no doubt in part because skin cancer is less of a problem where you are permanently clothed, because of the cold, and the sun’s rays pass more obliquely through the atmosphere. There may have been actual selection for white skins—maybe a landscape of mist and snow makes it easier to hide from your enemies—or it may just be that the mutations that make for white skin developed and survived because there was no longer selection pressure against them.⁵⁴ This sec-

⁵² Ralph Waldo Emerson, *English Traits* (1876), vol. 5, Concord ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1904), pp. 44–45.

⁵³ “On average there’s .2 percent difference in genetic material between any two randomly chosen people on Earth. Of that diversity, 85 percent will be found within any local group of people—say, between you and your neighbor. More than half (9 percent) of the remaining 15 percent will be represented by differences between ethnic and linguistic groups within a given race (for example, between Italians and French). Only 6 percent represents differences between races (for example, between Europeans and Asians). And remember that’s 6 percent of .2 percent. In other words, race accounts for only a minuscule .012 percent difference in our genetic material.” Paul Hoffman, “The Science of Race,” *Discover*, November 1994, p. 4.

⁵⁴ See Bernard R. Ortiz de Montellano, “Melanin, Afrocentricity and Pseudoscience,” *Yearbook of Physical Anthropology* 36 (1993): 33–57.

ond possibility illustrates a form of evolutionary change that is of some importance, namely the development of populations whose character is the result not of adaptation but of the presence, by chance, in an isolated environment of a particular nonrepresentative sample of the total gene pool. And we may as well mention a third possibility here, one that Darwin noticed as well, which is that skin color was maintained by sexual selection: because, for some reason or other, human beings of one sex or other (or both) developed a preference for mates with lighter skins.

Why does biological variation in skin color not correlate more with other characteristics? Partly because the other characteristics have been selected (as has, say, sickle-cell disease in parts of West Africa and the Eastern Mediterranean) under pressures not highly correlated with the presence of harmful amounts of sunlight. Perhaps, too, because there are mechanisms that have evolved to maintain the stability of the genotype, reflecting, among other things, the fact that certain combinations of genes are adaptive only when they are present together.⁵⁵ As a result, even after long periods—of the order of hundreds of thousands of years—of geographical separation, human populations do not drift apart significantly with respect to most of their biological properties. And finally, because there has been continuous exchange of genes between the major geographical areas of human settlement over the hundreds of thousands of years since the first humans set off out of Africa.

The United States bears witness to the continuing significance of this phenomenon. It is true that Americans still tend, overwhelmingly, to marry people of their own, as we say, “racial identity.” But very large numbers (perhaps as many as two-thirds) of African-Americans have some European forebears; up to two-fifths may have American Indian “blood”; and at least 5 percent of white Americans are thought to have African roots. It is estimated that 20 to 30 percent of the genes of the average African-American come from European and American Indian ancestors.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Ernst Mayr, *Populations, Species, and Evolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970), p. 300.

⁵⁶ James Shreve, “Terms of Estrangement,” *Discover*, November 1994, p. 58. All these claims should be interpreted bearing in mind the fact that a “recent study found that in the early 1970s, 34 percent of the people participating in a

The result is that even if the four roughly separated populations of the four continents from which the ancestors of most Americans came had each been much less genetically variable than was in fact the case, there would still be large numbers of people whose skin color predicted very few other biological properties.

Why There Are No Races

We have followed enough of the history of the race concept and said enough about current biological conceptions to answer, on both ideational and referential views, the question whether there are any races.

On the ideational view, the answer is easy. From Jefferson to Arnold, the idea of race has been used, in its application to humans, in such a way as to require that there be significant correlations between the biological and the moral, literary, or psychological characters of human beings; and that these be explained by the intrinsic nature (the “talents” and “faculties” in Jefferson; the “genius,” in Arnold) of the members of the race.⁵⁷

That has turned out not to be true; the recent fuss generated by *The Bell Curve* about the correlation of race and IQ in the United States notwithstanding. Even if you believed Murray and Herrnstein’s estimates of the heritability of IQ within groups in the United States—and you shouldn’t—they offer almost no evidence relevant to refuting the claim that the differences between American groups are entirely caused by the environment; say, in particular, by the ways that blacks are treated in a racist society.⁵⁸

census survey in two consecutive years changed racial groups from one year to the next.”

⁵⁷ That is, *not* produced by the fact that people who have certain physical appearances are treated in ways that produce differences.

⁵⁸ Since this point is elementary it is perhaps worth explaining. Heritability measures the ratio of variance in a characteristic in an environment that is due to genes to the total variance. The heritability of height in the United States, in India, and in the human population in general is large. There is, too, a significant difference in average height between Indians (in India) and Americans (in America). But this interpopulational difference is almost entirely due to differences in nutrition. High heritability is quite consistent with most of the difference between populations being environmental.

Herrnstein and Murray, authors of *The Bell Curve* (New York: Free Press,

Once you have the modern theory of inheritance, you can see why there is less correlation than everyone expected between skin color and things we care about: people are the product not of essences but of genes interacting with one another and with environments, and there is little systematic correlation between the genes that fix color and the like and the genes that shape courage or literary genius. So, to repeat, on the ideational view we can say that nothing in the world meets the criteria for being a Jeffersonian or an Arnoldian race.

The biological notion of race was meant to account only for a narrower range of characteristics, namely, the biological ones, by which I mean the ones important for biological theory. There are certainly many ways of classifying people for biological purposes: but there is no single way of doing so that is important for most biological purposes that corresponds, for example, to the majority populations of each continent or subcontinent. It follows that on an ideational view, there are no biological races, either: not, in this case, because nothing fits the loose criteria but because too many things do.⁵⁹

On the referential view we are required to find something in the world that best explains the history of usage of the term. Two candidates suggest themselves for the biological uses of “race”: one is the concept of a population that I have been using for a while now. It can be defined as “the community of potentially interbreeding individuals at a given locality.”⁶⁰ There are interesting discussions in the literature in population genetics as to how one should think about where to draw the boundaries of such communities: sometimes there is geographic isolation, which makes interbreeding in the normal course of things much less likely. But the population concept is generally used in such a way that we speak sometimes of a population defined by one geo-

1994), are aware of this fact and so seek to offer some rather unconvincing arguments for the suspicion that interracial average differences are in fact significantly genetic in origin. For arguments that they are *not*, see chap. 6 of Thomas Sowell’s *Race and Culture: A World View* (New York: Basic Books, 1994).

⁵⁹ This is essentially the point of Jared Diamond’s essay “Race without Color,” in *Discover*, November 1994, pp. 82–89.

⁶⁰ Mayr, *Populations, Species, and Evolution*, p. 82.

graphical region and also, at other times, of a wider population, defined by a wider range, of which the first population is a part; and at yet other times of populations that are overlapping.

I have no problem with people who want to use the word “race” in population genetics.⁶¹ What Darwin was talking about—evolution, speciation, adaptation—can best be understood in terms of talk of populations. And the fact is that in many plants and animals there are, in fact, local populations that are reproductively isolated from one another, different in clustered and biologically interesting ways, and still capable of interbreeding if brought artificially together; and biologists both before and after Darwin could have called these “races.” It’s just that this doesn’t happen in human beings. In this sense, there are biological races in some creatures, but not in us.

A more ecumenical proposal in this spirit would be to say that the word “race” refers to populations, more generally. The trouble is that, in this sense, while there are human populations that are and have been for some time relatively reproductively isolated, it is not at all plausible to claim that any social subgroup in the United States is such a population. In *this* sense, then, there are human races, because there are human populations, in the geneticists’ sense, but no large social group in America is a race. (The Amish, on the other hand, might come out as a race on this view, because they are a relatively reproductively isolated local population.)

A second candidate for the biological referent would simply be groups defined by skin color, hair, and gross morphology, corresponding to the dominant pattern for these characteristics in the major subcontinental regions: Europe, Africa, East and South Asia, Australasia, the Americas, and perhaps the Pacific Islands. This grouping would encompass many human beings quite ade-

⁶¹ I think, however, that this usage carries two risks: first, it gives an ill-deserved legitimacy to ideas that are mistaken, because those who listen in on these conversations may not be aware of the fact that the usage here does not correspond at all to the groups that have mostly been called races in Europe and America; second, because speaking this way, you can actually find yourself relying, illicitly, on those other modes of classification. Still, if you can avoid these two dangers, there’s no problem.

quately and some not at all: but it is hard to see of what biological *interest* it would be, since we can study the skin and gross morphology separately, and there is, at any rate, a good deal of variation within all these areas, in skin, hair color, and the morphology of the skull. Certainly this referent would not provide us with a concept that was central to biological thinking about human beings. And once more, in the United States, large numbers of people would not fit into any of these categories, because they are the products of mixtures (sometimes long ago) between people who do roughly fit this pattern, even though the social distinctions we call “racial” in the United States do, by contrast, cover almost everybody. And so, if we used this biological notion, it would have very little established correlation with any characteristics currently thought to be important for moral or social life.

The bottom line is this: you can’t get much of a race concept, ideationally speaking, from any of these traditions; you can get various possible candidates from the referential notion of meaning, but none of them will be much good for explaining social or psychological life, and none of them corresponds to the social groups we call “races” in America.

PART 2. SYNTHESIS: FOR RACIAL IDENTITIES

“Speaking of Civilizations”

In 1911, responding to what was already clear evidence that race was not doing well as a biological concept, W.E.B. Du Bois, the African-American sociologist, historian, and activist, wrote in *The Crisis*, the magazine of the NAACP, which he edited:

The leading scientists of the world have come forward . . . and laid down in categorical terms a series of propositions⁶² which may be summarized as follows:

1. (a) It is not legitimate to argue from differences in physical characteristics to differences in mental characteristics . . .

⁶² This claim was prompted by G. Spiller, ed., *Papers in Inter-Racial Problems Communicated to the First Universal Races Congress Held at the University of London, July 26–29, 1911* (London: P. S. King and Son, 1911). Republished with an introduction by H. Aptheker (Secaucus, N.J.: Citadel Press, 1970).