

What is  
race?

What is  
gender?

## What is race?

Thought about race is a central feature of modern life. The census asks people to identify their race. People form views about other people based on their race.

And racial categories have long played an important role in American law. The Naturalization Act of 1790 (only revoked in 1952) restricted the naturalization process to whites. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 bans segregation or discrimination on the basis of race.

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One place to start is with what we might call the **traditional conception** of race. On this view, races are groups of people which are distinguished by biological differences which are heritable and result in both observable physical and behavioral differences between members of different groups.

Interestingly, the concept of race is a relatively recent invention. People have always distinguished between members of different groups — e.g., different religions or members of different nation-states. But the idea that humanity can be divided into of a number of discrete biological categories along the lines sketched above has only been around for a few hundred years.



One of the first explicit discussions of race came in the dissertation of Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, sometimes thought of as the founder of modern anthropology, in 1775. He thought that the world could be divided into five races: Africans, Europeans, Asians, Native Americans, and Pacific Islanders.

We can come up with at least one strain of thinking about race in the 19th and 20th centuries as follows:

### **The traditional theory of race**

The human population can be divided into some small number of distinct races. The differences between races correspond to biologically important differences which explain many differences in appearance and behavior across the races. Members of one race are more biologically similar to other members of their race than they are to members of other races.

It will (I hope) not surprise you to learn that what I am calling the traditional theory of race is false. Humanity simply can't be divided into some small number of distinct groupings of this kind.

This is not to deny the obvious fact that there are biological differences between distinct people which are often inherited from their parents. Nor is it to deny the obvious fact that some biological features are more common in some parts of the world than others.



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But these obvious facts are clearly not enough to support the existence of races, as those are thought of by the traditional theory.

This raises one of the central puzzles in the philosophy of race. If the traditional theory is wrong, why are we still talking about race? What are races, if they are not groupings of the kind the traditional theory describes?

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One answer to this question is simple. On this view, we should respond to the obvious falsity of the traditional theory by denying that there are races. This is **racial skepticism**.

On this view, you cannot truly list your race on the census form (there being no races for you to have one of).

Nor can you truly use racial categories in explaining certain social phenomena. For example, many commentators have held that Black voters were key to Biden's victory in the presidential election. It does not seem as though that can be, strictly speaking, true if racial skepticism is correct.

The racial skeptic need not deny that there is such a thing as racial discrimination — after all, people can discriminate against people whom they take to be members of a group even if there really are no members of a group. One can oppose the Salem witch trials without thinking that there are any witches.

We'll come back to racial skepticism later. But it is reasonable to wonder if the traditional theory should be revised, rather than thrown out wholesale. Perhaps there is some more sophisticated understanding of race which can validate the idea that race is a biologically real category.

One way to try to defend this idea is to give up on the traditional theory's idea that people can all be sorted into one of a few distinct races. Instead, we might try a more sophisticated way of defining race in terms of ancestry.

This effort runs into an immediate problem. The first human beings were in East Africa around 100,000 years ago and, for roughly the first 50,000 years of human existence, all human beings were in Africa. That means that at least half of the ancestry of every human being is African. So it would make little sense to define the Black race in terms of African ancestry unless one is willing to hold that everyone is a member of this race.

An interesting attempt to get around this kind of problem and come up with a respectable biological definition of race is given by the contemporary philosopher Quayshawn Spencer.



Spencer is a philosopher of biology, and develops his theory by drawing upon the resources of population genetics.

One aim in population genetics is to discover genetic structures, which are patterns in the genetic makeup of individuals in the population being studied.

One pattern in the distribution of human genetic makeup divides humanity into five groups, which correspond to a historic geographic distribution of human beings across the following five regions: Africa, East Asia, Oceania, America, and Eurasia.

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Spencer calls these human continental populations. His theory of race can then be laid out simply as follows:

### **Biological racial realism**

Races are human continental populations. People are members of a race just in case ancestors who contributed to their genome are from the relevant human continental population.

This, unlike the traditional theory, promises to make races scientifically respectable.

Let's look at a few interesting consequences of Spencer's view.

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One way in which it obvious diverges from the traditional theory is that it gets rid of the idea that one's race is an all or nothing matter. On the one hand, this looks like a good feature of the view, since the idea that people can be neatly fit into a small number of biologically significant races was one of the things that made that view implausible.

But, arguably, this does not fit with at least some of the ways we talk about race. People who think of themselves as of a certain race don't typically think of themselves as being of that race to a certain degree. For example, I think of myself as White. But it would not be very surprising if it turned out that some of my genomic ancestors were African. If that were true, would that be enough to make me (to some degree) Black?

On this view, it will also turn out that siblings will typically differ racially. After all they will differ genetically, and that is likely to lead to differences in the degree to which they are members of different races.

Another consequence of Spencer's view is that it leads to some surprising results about how many races there are.

One example is the use of the terms "Hispanic" or "Latinx." These are often used as terms for races. But, on a theory like Spencer's, these are not genuine races. People who self-identify as falling in these categories often will have a genomic ancestry which makes them to some degree Eurasian and to some degree American.

The category of "Eurasian" is also more broad than at least some racial taxonomies would lead us to expect. It includes not just Europe, but also north Africa, the Middle East, and south Asia (including India).

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If you find this convincing, then you may begin to think that the very attempt to identify races with biological entities is misguided.

Another possibility is that races are not biological at all; perhaps they are just things that we have invented. This is the sentiment behind the following quote from Michael Root:

“Race does not travel. Some men who are black in New Orleans now would have been octoroons there some years ago or would be white in Brazil today. Socrates had no race in ancient Athens, though he would be a white man in Minnesota.”



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It is important to see that this is not the same thing as racial skepticism. On this view, people really do have races; it's just that what race a person has is not just a matter of their biological properties. Compare: certain slips of paper really are worth a dollar in America; but this is explainable in terms of social facts, not in terms of the physical properties of those slips of paper.

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One way to construct a view of this kind takes its cue from Anthony Appiah:



“Once the racial label is applied to people, ideas about what it refers to ... come to have their social effects. But they have not only social effects but psychological effects as well: and they shape the ways people conceive of themselves and their projects. In particular, the labels can operate to shape what I want to call identification: the process through which an individual intentionally shapes her projects and her conception of the good available identities.”





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On one way of thinking about this view, membership in a race has more to do with the experience of being categorized as a member of that race than it does with anything biological.

Here’s one way to state a view like this. We might say that a **racial term** is a term used to group people by ancestry and superficial physical features (like skin or hair color or hair texture) often linked with that ancestry.

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Here's one way to state a view like this. We might say that a **racial categorization** is a grouping of people by ancestry and superficial physical features (like skin or hair color or hair texture) often linked with that ancestry.

Then we might say:

### Racial constructivism

Someone is a member of a race just in case they are categorized as belonging to that race.

This view promises to improve upon biological racial realism in a few ways. For one thing, it explains how someone might (e.g.) fully identify as Black despite having some non-African genomic ancestors. It also might explain why “Latinx” is often treated as a name for a race.

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It also may better fit some political discussions of race. For example, many think that racial discrimination should be combatted with affirmative action policies. Should someone be less eligible for the benefits of these policies if their genomic ancestry is mixed, if they have been categorized as belonging to that race their entire lives?

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More difficult cases for the constructivist are ones in which there is a mismatch between someone's actual ancestry and how they are categorized.

One well-known real world case of this kind is the case of Rachel Dolezal, who is of Eurasian ancestry but self-identified, and was categorized by others, as Black. According to Racial Constructivism, this means that she was Black. Is that correct?

Or consider the opposite kind of case, in which someone discovers new facts about their ancestry. It seems that they might discover that they are of a race which they have never been categorized as belonging to. But that seems impossible, if Racial Constructivism is true.



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These kinds of cases might make it seem as though we should want some kind of middle ground between Racial Constructivism and Biological Racial Realism.

On the one hand, Constructivism seems to get right the sense in which races are social constructed rather than biologically important categories. On the other hand, Biological Realism seems to get right the fact that whether one is a member of a race should not depend on whether people categorize you as belonging to that race.

But it is hard to know how to formulate this middle ground. Our thinking about race seems to be confused. In some cases, we seem to make judgements based on ancestry. In other cases, we seem to rely more on how someone is categorized.

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This, in a roundabout way, leads us back to racial skepticism. Perhaps our thinking about race is so confused that we should treat talk about race in the same way that we treat the use of other terms from failed scientific theories — we should abandon them.

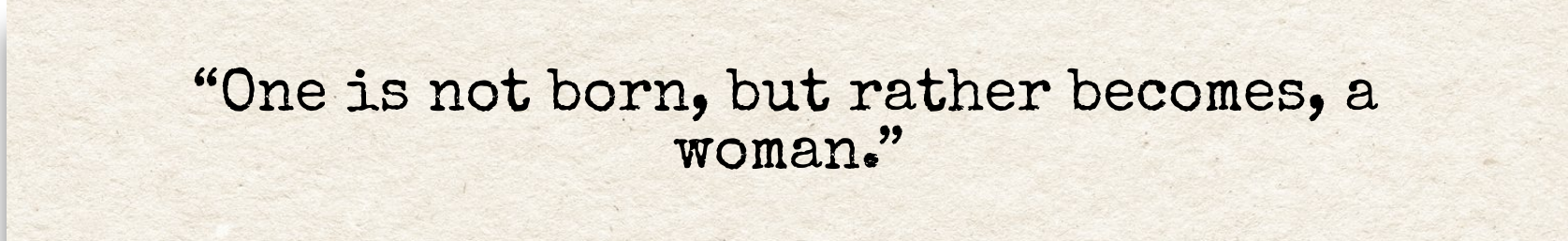
One might think this while thinking that there are important commonalities in the lives of people who are categorized as belonging to certain racial groups.



Let's turn to our second question for today: what is gender?

The space of available views here is similar to the space of available views about the nature of race. But, as we will see, the issues which arise are importantly different.

One way to introduce our topic is a famous quote from Simone de Beauvoir:



“One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.”

Here de Beauvoir is contrasting one's biological sex — something which, in her view, one is born with — with one's gender.

What is gender? In slogan form, gender is the social meaning of sex. Genders are the roles that societies expect people to play in virtue of having a certain biological sex.

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This raises two philosophical questions. First, can we get more clarity about what genders are? Second, in virtue of what does someone have one gender rather than another?

These questions are obviously parallel in certain ways to questions we raised about race. There we asked: What are races? And in virtue of what does someone belong to one race rather than another?

In asking these questions about gender, I'll be assuming that sex is biologically fixed. But it is worth noting that this is not a universally held view, and that there are real issues with taking sex to be biologically determined.

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One simple answer to these questions — and one which seems to be assumed by many in our society — is that gender either is, or is determined by, biological sex.

**Biological determinism about gender**  
One’s gender is, or is fixed by, one’s biological sex.

While this view seems to be widely assumed, it is hard to defend.

The roles played by men and women in our society, and the expectations people have of men and women in our society, are very different. It is hard to believe that those differences are determined by biological differences between male and female humans.

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That is of course consistent with there being some genuine biological differences of this sort.

A much more common position on gender is related to the social constructivist views about race we have already discussed. On this view, gender is a kind of social position or social role, and one has a gender in virtue of being placed in or expected to play this social role by others in a society.

### **Social constructivism about gender**

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This is the view expressed in the following quote from Ásta in the book *Categories We Live By*:

“a social property of an individual is ... a property that is conferred on them by others. This property is a social status consisting in constraints on and enablements to the individual's behavior in a context.”

On this view, gender is a social property of this sort. This is just a sketch of the view. We could go on to ask questions about what exactly the “constraints and enablements” constitutive of the social property of being a woman or being a man consist of in our society.

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One could also question whether there is such a thing as **the** social property of being a woman. Is it so clear that the same system of constraints and enablements is placed on male and female people from different parts of society?

Rather than explore this further, I want to turn to an objection to the views of gender we have discussed so far.

## Social constructivism about gender

Genders are social roles. One has a gender in virtue of being expected to play this role because of one's perceived biological sex.

This objection comes from the experience of transgender people.

Many transgender people report their experience as one in which their gender does not match their biological sex.

On the surface, this seems to fit well with a social constructivist view of gender. After all, on that view sex and gender are two different things, and there is no necessary connection between the two.

But, on closer inspection, it does not fit so well. Consider a male human being who claims to have the gender "woman." When they make this claim, are they saying that they are expected to play a certain role because of their perceived biological sex? Surely not.

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Notice that the objection does not even depend on the claims of transgender people being **true**. It only relies on the assumption that those claims are minimally coherent. For if social constructivism about gender is true, transgender people are making a mistake which is barely comprehensible.

Some transgender people report **always** having had the gender they report having. Does this push back in the direction of a biological determinist view, on which gender is fixed at birth?

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If one thinks that the claims of transgender people are minimally coherent, that seems to pose a problem equally for our two theories of gender.

Interestingly, this is a point of difference between the way that many people think about gender and the way they think about race. Many are inclined to think that the claims made by transgender people are coherent, while they would doubt the coherence of the claims of a person of Eurasian descent who was always recognized as such who nonetheless claimed to be Black.

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One could have this view while endorsing something like the social constructivist view of what gender is; one would just have a different view of what it takes to **have** a certain gender.

### **Identificationism about gender**

Genders are social roles. One has a gender by identifying oneself with that social role.

What is it to identify oneself with a certain role?

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To be sure, puzzles remain for the Identificationist. As stated, the view seems to imply that one has whatever gender one believes oneself to have.

This does make room for the coherence (and truth) of the views of transgender people. But, intuitively, one can have a gender even if one does not believe oneself to have that gender.

Again, think about the claims of a transgender person who is biologically male but comes to believe that they have always been a woman.

Presumably then they believe that they were a woman before they self-identified as a woman.

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That would seem to be a problem, not just for Biological Determinism and Social Constructivism, but also for Identificationism.

An interesting and difficult problem is how the Identificationist might modify their view to make this kind of thought about oneself coherent.