the traditional theory of race

race as biological kind

race as social kind

race eliminativism

What is race?

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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 (and the laws of other countries). 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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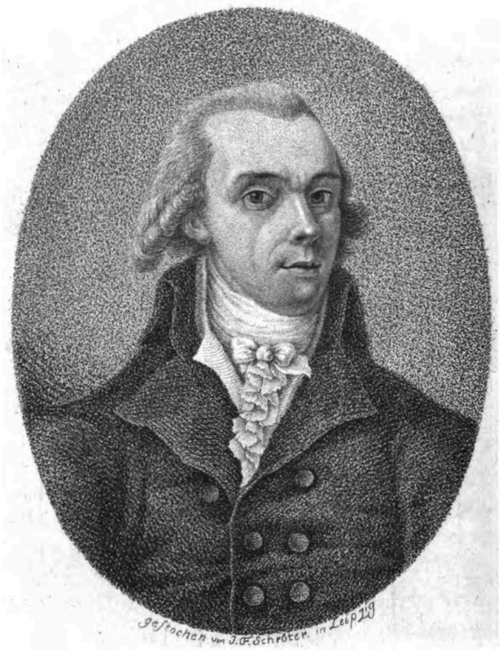
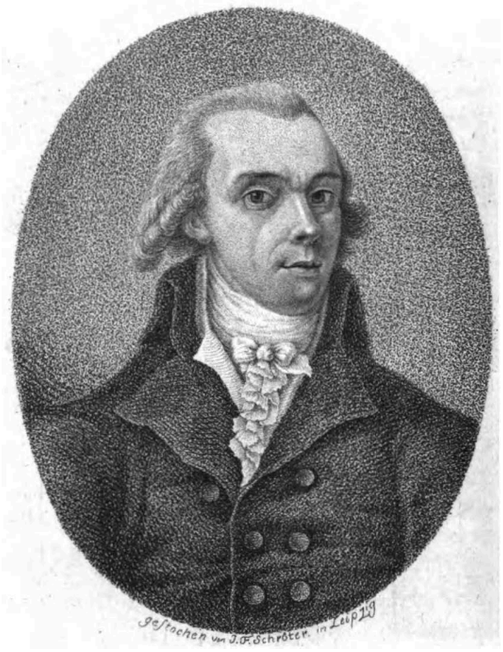
Interestingly, the concept of race is a relatively recent invention. People have always distinguished between members of different groups — e.g., members of different religions or different nation-states. But the consensus is that anything resembling our modern conception of race is only a few centuries old.

On this view, racial categories emerged alongside the growth of modern science's interest in categorizing aspects of the natural world.



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.



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What did he mean when he said that the world could be divided into five races? Roughly this:

The traditional theory of race

There is an important biological distinction between five types of human beings. These biological types are such that (1) they determine much about one's appearance and physical properties, (2) they determine much about one's psychological properties and abilities (and therefore explain much about the societies composed of human beings of this biological type), and (3) every human being (other than some unusual exceptions) belongs to exactly one of these biological types.

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It will (I hope) not surprise you to learn that what I am calling the traditional theory of race is false. The most obvious reasons why it is false are that no biological categorization of human beings into five categories can satisfy all of (1)-(3). Indeed, none can satisfy even two of these three conditions.

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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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?

Here it is useful to compare race to Vulcan. In the 19th century, perturbations in the orbit of Mercury could not be explained by current astronomy. So it was hypothesized that these could be explained by an as yet unobserved planet, Vulcan. That turns out to be false. So we don't talk about Vulcan any more. Why are we still talking about race?

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Here is one answer to that question. The answer is that our concept of race has changed. It has stopped being a term for a sort of biological kind and has now become a term for a **social kind**.

What does this mean? Consider the example of money. A dollar bill has a certain value. But the fact that it has that value is not due to anything intrinsic to the piece of paper which it is; it is due to the fact that we have agreed to treat pieces of paper looking like that produced by the US Mint as having a certain value.

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One theory is that race is like this. Just as dollar bills really have value, some people really do belong to particular races. But, just as the fact that dollar bills have value is explained by social facts, so the fact that certain individuals belong to certain races is explained by certain social facts.

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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The idea that races are social kinds is called **social constructivism about race**.

There are obviously a family of views of this kind. For we can ask the question: given that something about society (rather than something about biology or genetic history) determines what race someone is, exactly what does determine this?

If race is determined by society, then it seems plausible that race is determined by something that someone, or some group of people, believes or does.

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People in different societies have different ways of categorizing people based on perceived physical and/or hereditary differences. Given this, one natural thought is that your race is determined by how members of a society categorize you.

Here is one way to state that view:

Social constructivism about race
Someone belongs to a race just in case members of their society categorize them as belonging to that group based on their perceived physical and/or hereditary traits.

This view differs from the traditional conception of race. On this view, what matters are not the facts about your ancestry or physical traits; what matters is how members of your society categorize you based on their perception of those traits.

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For example, it may well be that someone of predominantly Eurasian ancestry has outward physical traits which cause most members of contemporary American society to categorize them as Black. If social constructivism is true, that fact suffices for them to be Black.

Not just any social categorization qualifies as a racial categorization. For example, people categorize me as a professor. But this categorization is made on the basis of observed facts about my job, rather than on the basis of perceived physical or hereditary traits. So being a professor is not a race.

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One answer is that we care about race because those categorizations — whether or not they have any physical or genetic basis — can have profound effects.

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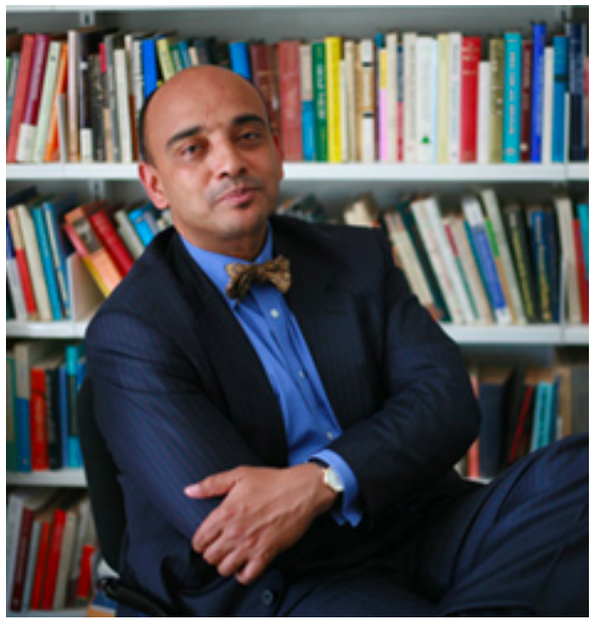

"Once the racial label is applied to people, ideas about what it refers to ... come to have their social effects. But they have not only social effects but psychological effects as well: and they shape the ways people conceive of themselves and their projects. In particular, the labels can operate to 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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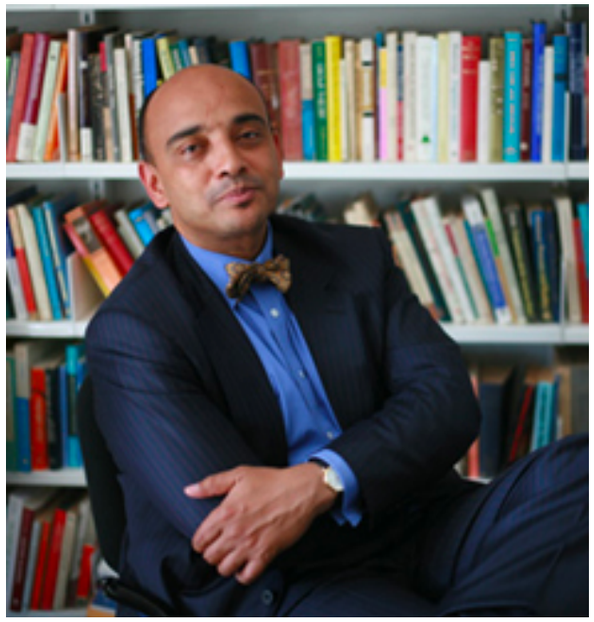

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Appiah mentions two kinds of effects here. First, there are social effects — effects on the way that the categorized individual is treated by others in society. But there are also what he calls psychological effects — effects on the way that the individual categorized thinks of themselves.

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Social constructivism fits well with 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? It seems not; it seems like the facts about how they are categorized, and the effects of those categorizations, are what matters.

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It also fits well with many peoples' understanding of what races there are, and what races people belong to.

It explains how someone might correctly 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, despite the fact that many people categorized using this label are of primarily Eurasian ancestry.

However, the social constructivist view is not without its problems. One problem is posed by the phenomenon of people who are (intuitively) members of one race **passing** as members of another.

This was not infrequent, especially during times in American when racial distinctions played a greater role in the law than the do now. The most extreme example of this, of course, was slavery. Escaped slaves would sometimes try to pass as White to escape capture. Similarly, people of primarily African ancestry would sometimes try to pass as White to avoid laws against interracial marriage.

The 20th century civil rights leader Walter Francis White had ancestry that (at the time) would have caused him to be categorized as Black, and that is how he self-identified. But he was very fair skinned, and use this fact to "pass" as White in order to gather information about racially motivated hate crimes.

The problem is that the social constructivist account seems to imply that these people, in virtue of passing as White, were White. After all, that is how members of their society categorized them. But this can seem implausible, especially if those people thought of themselves as Black.

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That fits at least some of the diagnostics used in the US Census and by the Office of Management & Budget in the US government.

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But Identificationism too has its problems. One problematic type of case is one in which someone discovers facts about their ancestry that they did not previously know. Imagine a fair-skinned child of mainly African ancestry who was adopted by a White family at birth. She might discover her ancestry later in life, and might further discover that both of her birth parents self-identified as Black. It seems that she might express the result of these discoveries by saying that she discovered that she is Black. But the most straightforward identificationist view would seem to imply that she **became** Black at the time of the discovery.

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One well-known real world case of this kind is the case of Rachel Dolezal, an American college professor. Both of Dolezal's parents were White (and she knew this). Despite this, she self-identified as Black. Did this suffice to make her Black? (There are obvious parallels here to the case of gender identification, though also important differences.)

The example of Dolezal is also problematic for the social constructivist, because others also categorized Dolezal as Black.

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If you have this view, that might push you in the direction of a theory of race which defines it in physical or hereditary terms rather than as the social constructivist or identificationist defines it. To go in this direction is to opt for a **biological** theory of race. The traditional theory of race is a biological theory — just an obviously false one. Could another biological theory fare better?

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.

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Spencer's theory would give a different result in the case of Rachel Dolezal. Because she was of primarily Eurasian ancestry, she would, on Spencer's theory, be counted as White. That seems to many like the right result.

Spencer's theory also promises to make sense of the use of racial categorizations in medicine. Race has often been badly mis-used in medicine. But in some cases it can seem legitimate, if members of a certain race are more susceptible to certain medical conditions. This would seem hard to explain on a social constructivist or identificationist view of race.

It turns out, however, that Spencer's view has significant revisionary consequences for our thinking about race.

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 at all 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.

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Spencer's theory gives what might seem like a plausible result in the case of the adopted child discovering her African ancestry. But there are other cases in which it seems to give less plausible results. Imagine someone whose parents self-identified as Black, who self-identifies as Black, and who has been categorized by others as Black throughout her life. She may discover that her ancestry is primarily Eurasian. Would it be a mistake for her to continue thinking of herself as Black? Many think not.

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).

Some object to Spencer's theory that the mismatch between our ordinary conception of race and continental populations is enough to show that when we are talking about race we are are not talking about the kinds of biological properties Spencer identifies.

The kinds of cases we have discussed so far are deeply puzzling. All of our accounts of race seem to lead to results which are, to one degree or another, implausible.

One response to this is to try to improve upon those accounts. But another response is to say that our discussion so far shows that our ordinary thought about race is so deeply confused that there is no coherent account of race. On this view, there are, in reality, no 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 be a member of). Nor can you truly use racial categories in explaining anything.

This view can, in light of the cases we have discussed, seem tempting. But it is also open to an objection. The objection is that, if racial skepticism is true, it seems that we should stop using race terms. After all, if there are, in reality, no races, why should we use race terms?

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But some uses of race terms seem legitimate and important. One example would be the use of race terms in defining hate crimes, one category of which is often defined as crimes committed on the basis of the victim's race. If people have no races (as the racial skeptic maintains) does that mean that there are no hate crimes?

Here the racial skeptic is likely to reply that even if there are, in reality, no races, people still have beliefs about race. One might then think that race crimes should be defined in terms of the criminal's beliefs about the victim's race rather than in terms of the victim's actual race. Racial identification can be real even if races are not.

More generally, there is nothing to stop the racial skeptic from saying that we need certain concepts which are related to, but not the same as, race concepts. Spencer's genetic categories might be one example.

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But racial skepticism has important consequences. Race terms figure prominently in the law and in ordinary thought and speech. If there are no races, then every attribution of a race to someone is false. So, for each such use of a race term, we need — to the degree that we want to respect the original claim — some replacement notion.

The problem is that the replacement notions to which we will turn will likely be very much like the conceptions of race which we have already canvassed. And then the problematic examples — like the cases of passing, or racial discovery, or problematic self-identification — will simply recur.

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The racial skeptic then faces a kind of dilemma. Either we come up with a replacement notion, or we do not.

If we do, then we face exactly the same problems which our previous theories faced.

If we do not, then we have to reject the original claims which were expressed using race terms. But many of those claims seem to express important facts about the identities of individuals who self-identify as belonging to a racial group, and so are not easily rejected.