

22 Why There Are No Human Races

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

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

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

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

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

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).

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 of 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 nineteen-twenties to make this an explicit definition: Something is a race just in case all the criterial beliefs are true of it.² 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 I want to skirt, you won't get many philosophers of language to buy into this strict criterial theory today; but you don't need high-falutin' semantic arguments to be lead to wonder whether we could in fact write a Ramsey-style definition of the word "race." Consider one of the two claims I gave a little while ago. *Your race is determined by the race of your parents.*

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"

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 Georg doesn'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.³ 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 there are some that are plainly not held by everybody who uses the word "race." These, 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 races of their parents nor of some separate race and deny that everybody has *a* race for that reason.⁴ 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 makes it, correspondingly, harder to argue against the existence of races. But the vague criterial theory does suggest a route to understanding the race concept: namely 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 race in predicting what their thoughts and their talk about race⁵ will lead them to do; we could use it, too, to predict what thoughts about races various experiences would lead them to have.

Now, 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 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 an 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 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 century 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. 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 basic 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 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.

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 last three things are required for us to allow that a past theorist who spoke of “Ys” and was badly mistaken was nevertheless talking about something, call it “X”:

first—*the existence condition*—we must acknowledge the existence of X; and, second—*the adequacy condition*—some of what was thought to be true of what “Y” denoted must be at least approximately true of X; and third—*the uniqueness condition*—X must be the best candidate for the job of “Ys” 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 “Ys” referent in the speech of a community, is for X to be the thing that best causally explains their talk about “Ys.” So what we need to do, on this view, is to 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 we should 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. Semantic considerations thus steer us towards historical enquiry. (Checking whether a past term meets the existence, adequacy and uniqueness conditions will also require us to draw on current science.)

The history I am going to sketch is the history of the ideas of intellectuals in 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 it being used in every day 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 institutes 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.

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.

So let's look at Query XIV of the *Notes on the State of Virginia*, published in the seventeen-eighties. The emancipation of black slaves is inevitable Jefferson has argued; and it is right. But blacks, once emancipated, will have to be sent elsewhere. Jefferson anticipates that we may wonder why, especially given "the expence of supplying, by importation of white settlers, the vacancies they will leave."

Deep rooted prejudices entertained by the whites; ten thousand recollections, by the blacks, of the injuries they have sustained; new provocations; the real distinctions which nature has made; and many other circumstances, will divide us into parties, and produce convulsions which will probably never end but in the extermination of the one or the other race.—To these objections, which are political, may be added others, which are physical and moral. The first difference which strikes us is that of colour. Whether the black of the negro resides in the reticular membrane between the skin and scarf-skin, or in the scarf-skin itself; whether it proceeds from the colour of the blood, the colour of the bile, or from that of some other secretion, the difference is fixed in nature, and is as real as if its seat and cause were better known to us. And is this difference of no importance? Is it not the foundation of a greater or less share of beauty in the two races? Are not the fine mixtures of red and white, the expressions of every passion by greater or less suffusions of colour in the one, preferable to that eternal monotony, which reigns in the countenances, that immoveable veil of black which covers all the emotions of the other race? Add to these, flowing hair, a more elegant

symmetry of form, their own judgment in favour of the whites, declared by their preference for them, as uniformly as is the preference of the Oranootan for the black woman over those of his own species. The circumstance of superior beauty, is thought worthy attention in the propagation of our horses, dogs, and other domestic animals; why not in that of man?⁶

Apart from this difference of color with its attendant aesthetic consequences, Jefferson observes that there are other relevant differences: blacks have less hair on their face and bodies; "they secrete less by the kidneys, and more by the glands of the skin, which gives them a very strong and disagreeable odour"; "[t]hey seem to require less sleep."⁷

Comparing them by their faculties of memory, reason, and imagination, it appears to me, that in memory they are equal to the whites; in reason much inferior, as I think one could scarcely be found capable of tracing and comprehending the investigations of Euclid; and that in imagination they are dull, tasteless, and anomalous.... [Among African-Americans] [s]ome have been liberally educated, and all have lived in countries where the arts and sciences are cultivated to a considerable degree, and have had before their eyes samples of the best works from abroad.... never yet could I find that a black had uttered a thought above the level of plain narration; never see even an elementary trait of painting or sculpture. In music they are more generally gifted than the whites with accurate ears for tune and time, and they have been found capable of imagining a small catch.... Misery is often the parent of the most affecting touches in poetry.—Among the blacks is misery enough, God knows, but no poetry.⁸

Though he tells us that "[t]he opinion, that they are inferior in the faculties of reason and imagination, must be hazarded with great diffidence,"⁹ he nevertheless concludes

I advance it as a suspicion only, that the blacks whether originally a distinct race, or made distinct by time and circumstances, are inferior to the whites in the endowments both of body and mind. It is not against experience to suppose, that different species of the same genus, or varieties of the same species, may possess different qualifications. Will not a lover of natural history then, one who views gradations in all the races of animals with the eye of philosophy, excuse an effort to keep those in the department of man as distinct as nature has formed them. This unfortunate difference of colour, and perhaps of faculty, is a powerful obstacle to the emancipation of these people.¹⁰

After so conspicuously fair and balanced a discussion, it would have been hard not to share Jefferson's "suspicion." His very caution here adds to rather than detracting from the force of his conclusions; and after so much attention to the "difference...of faculty," it is easy to miss the fact that Jefferson believes that Negroes and whites must be kept apart, even if his "suspicion" is mistaken. For Jefferson the political significance of race begins and ends with color.

Jefferson's claims here about the Negro's faculties went neither unnoticed nor unanswered. And we can find, in his letters as in the *Notes*, evidence that he remained willing to entertain the possibility that his skepticism about the capacities of the Negro was unwarranted. Thanking the Abbé Grégoire for sending him a copy of his *De la littérature des Nègres*¹¹ Jefferson writes:

Be assured that no person living wishes more sincerely than I do, to see a complete refutation of the doubts I have myself entertained and expressed on the grade of understanding allotted to them by nature, and to find that in that respect they are on a par with ourselves. My doubts were the results of personal observation [one wonders, a little, about the Orangutan here] on the limited sphere of my own State, where the opportunities for the development of their genius were not favorable, and those of exercising it still less so. I expressed them therefore with great hesitation; but whatever be their degree of talent it is no measure of their rights. Because Sir Isaac Newton was superior to others in understanding, he was not therefore lord of the person or property of others.¹²

I have quoted so much of Jefferson in part, of course, because Jefferson is an important figure in the history of American debates about racial politics; but mostly because in these passages I have cited we see something entirely representative of the best thinking of his day: the running together of biology and politics, science and morals, fact and value, ethics and aesthetics. Jefferson is an intelligent, sensitive, educated American shaped by the Western intellectual currents we call the Enlightenment. Race, for Jefferson and his peers, was *a concept they invoked to explain cultural and social phenomena*, it was also grounded in the physical and the psychological natures of the different races; it was, in other words, what we would call a *biological concept*.

I say that it was what we would call a biological concept, because the science of biology (even the word "biology") did not exist when Jefferson was writing the *Notes*.¹³ What did exist was Natural History; and Jefferson would have agreed that race was a Natural Historical notion, as much as was the idea of species that Linnaeus had developed and which Buffon had popularized.¹⁴ To think of race as a biological concept is to pull out of the Natural History of humans a focus on the body—its structure and function—and to separate it both from mental life—the province of psychology—and from the broader world of behavior and of social and moral life. If Jefferson's discussion, with its movement from questions of the morphology of the skin, to discussions of sexual desire, to music and poetry, strikes us as a hodge-podge, it is because we live at on the other side of a great intellectual chasm, which opens up with increasing speed through the nineteenth century. For we live now with a new configuration of the sciences; and, more especially, with the differentiation from the broad field of natural history, of anatomy, physiology, psychology, philology (i.e., historical linguistics), sociology, anthropology, and a whole host of even more specialized fields that gradually divided between them the task of describing and understanding human nature.

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.

Jefferson conceives of racial difference as both physical and moral, but he is not committed to the view that race explains all the rest of the moral and social and political matter that is drawn into the portrait of the Negro in the *Notes*. The letter to Grégoire reveals a man who leaves open—at least in theory—the possibility “that nature has given to our black brethren, talents equal to those of the other colors of men”; and throughout the *Notes* Jefferson writes with real affection and respect about Indians, who “astonish you with strokes of the most sublime oratory; such as prove their reason and sentiment strong, their imagination glowing and elevated.” The differences between whites and Indians, for Jefferson, hardly constitute a difference of essential natures.

If we move on another century or so from Jefferson’s *Notes*, we enter once more a new intellectual landscape: one in which there is no longer any doubt as to the connection between race and what Jefferson calls “talent”: and here, of course, the word “talent”—deriving from the New Testament parable of the talents—refers to inherited—to “native”—capacities.

Let me turn, then, from Jefferson, and move on into the second half of the nineteenth century, to the work of a poet and critic who, like Jefferson, uses the concept of race to explain the moral and the literary, but unlike him, is convinced that biological inheritance helps determine every aspect of racial capacity; namely Matthew Arnold.

Arnold was the greatest English critic of the nineteenth-century. He was also a central Victorian poet, an influential essayist, and lecturer: in short, a very public intellectual, whose influence was extended into the United States, not least by his lecture tour here in 1883 to 1884 (in his early sixties) which lead to the publication, in 1885, of *Discourses in America*.

In 1857 Matthew Arnold was elected to the Professorship of Poetry at Oxford, a position he held for about a decade. Ten years later, he published a series of lectures he had given as Professor of Poetry *On the Study of Celtic Literature*. In these lectures he argues that the ancient literature of the Celts—of Ireland and Wales, in particular—is part of the literary heritage of Britain; even of those Britons in England who by then conceived of themselves as heirs to a Saxon heritage and were inclined, by and large, to hold the Irish Celts, in particular, in less than high regard.

Here is how Arnold makes his case:

...here in our country, in historic times, long after the Celtic embryo had crystallised into the Celt proper, long after the Germanic embryo had crystallised into the German proper, there was an important contact between the two peoples; the Saxons invaded the Britons and settled themselves in the Britons’ country. Well, then, here was a contact which one might expect would leave

its traces; if the Saxons got the upper hand, as we all know they did, and made our country be England and us be English, there must yet, one would think, be some trace of the Saxon having met the Briton; there must be some Celtic vein or other running through us.

...though, as I have said, even as a matter of science, the Celt has a claim to be known, and we have an interest in knowing him, yet this interest is wonderfully enhanced if we find him to have actually a part in us. The question is to be tried by external and internal evidence; the language and physical type of our race afford certain data for trying it, and other data are afforded by our literature, genius, and spiritual production generally. Data of this second kind belong to the province of the literary critic; data of this first kind to the province of the philologist and the physiologist.

The province of the philologist and the physiologist is not mine; but this whole question as to the mixture of Celt with Saxon in us has been so little explored, people have been so prone to settle it off-hand according to their prepossessions, that even on the philological and physiological side of it I must say a few words in passing.¹⁵

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—i.e., 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."¹⁶ 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 ancestry, 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.¹⁷

But he is also convinced, as I say, that it can be a guide to racial character.

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 each other 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 counter-examples to claims about the members of the race could simply be ruled out. It was acknowledged that there were, to 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 towards 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.¹⁸

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 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 racialist, then, to say someone is "Negro" is not just to say that they have inherited a black skin or curly hair: it is to say that their 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.

Arnold represents, then, a 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. (In 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 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."¹⁹ 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 years 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 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, given sufficient time.

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 on 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 ones 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. 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;²⁰ he was interested in how 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—like animal and plant species could 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.

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 each other 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 their appearance one could then make inferences about their moral or literary dispositions. It makes sense that Darwin, whose whole analysis depends on the recognition 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 each other and 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 each other; and characteristics may drift from one neighboring population into another over time by intermarriage (or, to speak less euphemistically, inter-breeding). 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.

Even limiting oneself to the range of morphological criteria available to 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.²¹

"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 climates, 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—melanin blocks the sun's rays, which make vitamins in the skin; so the less sun you see, the less melanin is good for you—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.²² And we may as well mention a third possibility here, one which 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.²³ 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.²⁴ 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.

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 view, 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.²⁵

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.²⁶

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 each other 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 which corresponds, for example, to the majority populations of each continent or sub-continent. 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.²⁷

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."²⁸ 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 geographical 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 a populations that are overlapping.

I have no problem with people who want to use the word "race" in population genetics.²⁹ 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 each other, 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 all plausible to claim that any social sub-group 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, since 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 sub-continental regions: Europe, Africa, East and South Asia, Australasia, the Americas, and, perhaps, the Pacific Islands. This grouping would encompass many human beings quite adequately 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.³⁰ 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.

Notes

1. This essay is substantially abbreviated and slightly altered from the essay "Race, Culture, Identity: Misunderstood Connections," which appears in *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values*, Vol. 17 (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1996), pp. 51–136. (Another slightly different version of the longer argument appears in *Color Conscious: The Political Morality of Race* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996] with Amy Gutmann.)

2. See "Theories," in Frank Ramsey, *Foundations: Essays in Philosophy, Logic, Mathematics and Economics*, D. H. Mellor (ed.) (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), pp. 101–125.
3. See P. F. Strawson, "Wittgenstein's conception of a criterion," in *Wittgenstein and the Problem of Other Minds*, Harold Morick (ed.) (Brighton, Sussex: Harvester Press, 1981.)
4. See Naomi Zack, *Race and Mixed Race* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993).
5. 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."
6. *Notes of the State of Virginia* (1781–82) in Thomas Jefferson, *Writings* (New York: Library of America, 1984), p. 264.
7. Jefferson, *Notes*, op. cit., p. 265.
8. Jefferson, *Notes*, op. cit., p. 206.
9. Jefferson, *Notes*, op. cit., p. 269.
10. Jefferson, *Notes*, op. cit., p. 270.
11. H. Grégoire, *De la littérature des Nègres: ou, recherches sur leurs facultés intellectuelles, leurs qualités morales et leur littérature: suivies des notices sur la vie et les ouvrages des Nègres qui se sont distingués dans les sciences, les lettres et les arts* (Paris: Maradan, 1808). Grégoire's full title displays the relevance of this work to Jefferson's theme in the *Notes*.
12. February 25, 1806, to Henri Grégoire, *Letters in Writings*, op. cit., p. 1202.
13. "The term 'biology' first appeared in a footnote in an obscure German medical publication of 1800. Two years later it again appeared, apparently independently, and was given ample publicity in treatises by a German naturalist (Gottfried Treviranus) and a French botanist turned zoologist (Jean-Baptiste de Lamarck)." William Coleman, *Biology in the Nineteenth Century: Problems of Form, Function and Transformation*, Cambridge History of Science Series (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), p. 1.
14. Carolus Linnaeus, *Systema Naturae*, in which people are classified as *Homo sapiens*, appears in 1735.
15. Arnold, *Celtic Literature*, op. cit., pp. 66–67.
16. Arnold, *Celtic Literature*, op. cit., p. 72. Arnold never explicitly discusses sex, of course; and so we are left with the possibility of interpreting this as meaning that there are Englishmen who are of wholly British (i.e., Celtic) descent or thinking that there are some of partially British (i.e., Celtic) descent. Given, however, that some of the former have "passed" many centuries ago, the existence of the latter can be assumed.
17. Arnold, *Celtic Literature*, op. cit., p. 69.
18. 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 and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), Chapter 2, Section 4.

19. My account here is based on William Coleman, *Biology in the Nineteenth Century*, op. cit.
20. See George W. Stocking, *Race, Culture and Evolution* (New York: Free Press, 1968): "Darwin's own position on the question of human races was 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.'" p. 46.
21. "On average there's 0.2 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 0.2 percent. In other words, race accounts for only a minuscule 0.012 percent difference in our genetic material." Paul Hoffman, "The Science of Race," *Discover*, November 1994, p. 4.
22. See Bernard R. Ortiz de Montellano, "Melanin, Afrocentricity and Pseudoscience," *Yearbook of Physical Anthropology*, Vol. 36, 1993, pp. 33–57.
23. Ernst Mayr, *Populations, Species and Evolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970), p. 300.
24. James Shreeve, "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 census survey in two consecutive years changed racial groups from one year to the next," loc. cit.
25. That is, *not* produced by the fact that people who have certain physical appearances are treated in ways that produce differences.
26. 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 high. There is, too, a significant difference in average height between Indians (in India) and Americans (in America). But this inter-populational difference is almost entirely due to differences in nutrition. High heritability is quite consistent with most of the difference between populations being environmental.
27. Herrnstein and Murray, authors of *The Bell Curve* (New York: The Free Press, 1994), are aware of this fact and so seek to offer some rather unconvincing arguments for the suspicion that inter-racial average differences are in fact significantly genetic in origin. For arguments that they are *not* see Chapter 6 of Thomas Sowell's *Race and Culture: A World View* (New York: Basic Books, 1994).
28. This is essentially the point of Jared Diamond's essay "Race Without Color" in *Discover*, November 1994, pp. 82–89.

28. Mayr *Populations, Species and Evolution*, op. cit., p. 82.
29. 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 to 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.
30. Where a boundary is vague, profound consequences for which side of the boundary you fall on are bound to seem arbitrary. (Consider abortion, where it seems right to think that the burden of proof against the fetus diminishes with age, not that it suddenly disappears at the start, say, of the second trimester.) So those who take racial identity to have deep moral or political significance would be argumentatively better off if they could draw sharp lines between races.