

Handout 20

Appiah and Spencer on Race

1. A Rough View of the Landscape

Biological Realism – Races exist and are biological categories

Was the widely accepted view back in the day and was used to justify racism. The view has been mostly rejected on the basis of the idea that races don't actually carve out any natural categories, but it is making a *bit* of a comeback.

Social Constructivism – Races exist and are social categories

A widely accepted view according to which races are defined primarily by the social role they play. (Analogy: dimes)

Race Eliminativism – Races don't exist

The main idea (I think) is that there is no interesting natural or significant category carved out by race terminology.

2. Spencer: In Defense of Biological Races

1. Human continental populations are real biological entities.
2. Human continental populations are folk races.
3. Folk races are real biological entities

Definitions:

A *race* is a group of people called a 'race' in some language.

A *folk race* – a race that is talked about in ordinary language

Essence – That which makes something what it is

Biological Entity – a thing whose essence consists of biological qualities in whole or in part (Spencer will count a biological entity as real if careful biology has determined that the entity actually exists).

Defense of P1

Structure program: A program that divides individuals into a specified number of clusters based on genetic similarity. (The program may declare that no single best clustering is found.

Rosenberg et al reported that humans can be divided into five continent-level biological populations that are called "human-continental" population: Africans, East Asians, Eurasians, Native Americans and Oceanians.

Note: there is still some controversy about the upshot of these results. One thing worth noting is that the number 5 was input by the research group. Other choice points include number of loci, sample size, geographic dispersion of the samples, etc... (In one version for $K=6$, the Kalash people of Northern Pakistan count as a

distinct cluster). However, Spencer points out that the largest study on human population subdivision has since confirmed Rosenberg's result, using a population of heavily mixed people. Furthermore, Spencer says, ~70% of samples studied since 2002 confirmed the result despite using very different genomic data, ethnic group samples, and structure-like programs.

(Rosenberg et al confirm that only ~5% of genetic variation can be explained by variation in continental clusters).

Defense of P2

US government's OMB racial scheme: American Indians, Asians, Blacks, Pacific Islanders and Whites correspond closely to the continental clusters.

3. Appiah In Defense of Eliminativism

In Appiah's article on DuBois, he claims that races don't exist. He considers and rules out various ways of understanding races:

- Biological – Appiah claims this conception has been debunked
- Cultural – There is huge cultural variation amongst so called 'races'
- Historical – Appiah thinks this is circular. Whether two races count as having a "shared history" will depend on what makes two groups of people's history count as shared.
- Social/Oppression – Many so called distinct races have experienced similar patterns of oppression.

In other work Appiah ("Race, Culture Identity" goes into greater detail:

Ideational view – to understand what 'race' means requires understanding what people take to be the central truths about races; On this view: The critical beliefs define the concept. (Example: you are the same race as your parents, people with very different skin colors are of different races).

Strict critical theory: To know what race means you should believe all of the critical beliefs. (Something is a race only if all the critical beliefs are true of it).

Vague critical theory: To know what race means you should believe most of the critical beliefs. (Something is a race only if most of the critical beliefs are true of it).

To argue that races don't exist: argue that there is nothing in the world that matches most of the central beliefs people have about 'race.'

Referential view – to understand what 'race' means is to be able to identify the things to which it refers. To figure this out, we look at what things in the world give the best causal explanation of the way the word has been used. Appiah thinks that three things (at least)

Appiah, Anthony. "The Uncompleted Argument: DuBois and the Illusion of Race." *Critical Inquiry* 12, no. 1 (1985): 21–37. © University of Chicago Press. All rights reserved. This content is excluded from our Creative Commons license. For more information, see <https://ocw.mit.edu/help/faq-fair-use/>.

Spencer, Quayshawn. "Are Folk Races like Dingoes, Dimes or Dodos?" In *The Norton Introduction to Philosophy*. 2nd ed. Edited by Gideon Rosen, Alex Byrne, Joshua Cohen, et al. W.W. Norton & Company, 2018. © W.W. Norton & Company. All rights reserved. This content is excluded from our Creative Commons license. For more information, see <https://ocw.mit.edu/help/faq-fair-use/>.

are required for us to allow that a certain pattern of usage concerning the word “Y” results in “Y” referring to a thing X:

- (1) Existence – X must exist
- (2) Adequacy – *Some* of what was said to be true of Y must be approximately true of X.
- (3) Uniqueness – X must be the *best* candidate for the job of being Y’s referent – no other thing that satisfies the existence condition satisfies the adequacy condition.

4. Why there are no races

On the ideational view –

Appiah says that idea of race has been used in a way to required “significant correlations between the biological and the moral, literary or psychological characters of human beings; and these be explained by the intrinsic nature of the members of the race”. Nothing meets these criteria so there are no races.

- But is it still used that way today?

On the referential view –

There are many ways of classifying people, but to satisfy Uniqueness we need there to be one way that is the “best.”

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