

A Philosophically Serious Comparison of the Ontologies of Race and Gender

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I want to examine several failures among our colleagues to treat ontologies of race and gender with the seriousness they deserve. Some philosophers approach race as though they have the expertise to invent new scientific theories of race. Some philosophers approach gender as a project in philosophical idealism that is unrelated to the problems of existing women, or else they ignore what women have in common. Such approaches block the possibility of fruitful thought about social and political change at this time, and they do not have much to offer adult thinkers who are concerned about the world in a practical historical sense. In this paper, I will first address recent articles published in the *Journal of Philosophy (JP)*, which unsuccessfully try to resurrect biological notions of human race. I then present brief critiques of intersectionality and idealism in (so-called) French feminism. My criticism of these current approaches to race and gender is offered as a cautionary tale about theory in philosophy, and I conclude with a positive thesis based on a universal definition of women, which could ground new political ideas and practice.

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In recent articles published in *The Journal of Philosophy*, Michael Hardimon and Robin Andreasen have presented biological taxonomies of human races, while neglecting this crucial philosophy of science question. (Hardimon, 2003; Andreasen, 2005). Is a taxonomy of human biological races scientifically justified at this time? Also in *JP* Joshua Glasgow criticizes "the new biology of race," as previously proposed elsewhere by Philip Kitcher and Andreasen, without asking if it is biology. (Glasgow, 2003; Andreasen, 2000, 1998; Kitcher, 1999). Hardimon, Kitcher and Andreasen simply assert that their biological notions of race are compatible with science, in cases where the current data and conclusions of relevant scientists

indicate otherwise. (Zack, 2002; Relethford, 1997; American Anthropological Association, 1998). Hardimon is aware that the ordinary concept of race entered history as a racist concept (positing a moral hierarchy of races), with links to scientific theories held in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but he claims that it has a coherent core, which is independent of and compatible with both a scientific concept of race and racism. (Hardimon, 2003, p.449-51) His ‘conception’ or reconstruction of our ordinary concept is this: (1) human groups have distinguishing “visible physical features of a relevant kind”; (2) human races are linked by common ancestry; (3) racial groups originate from distinctive geographical locations, usually continents . (Hardimon, 2003, pp. 451-2)

These are the current scientific problems with Hardimon’s conception. The distinguishing “visible physical features of a relevant kind” presupposes a social system of racial attribution that has not always existed historically in human societies and that first originated during the modern period of European exploration and colonization (Zack, 2005, pp. 9-40; Zack, 1996). It is not timelessly the case, independently of history and culture, that those visible differences that count as racial differences are, as Hardimon claims, naturally “striking.” Hardimon writes:

It is undeniable that these visible features are striking—from a *human* point of view. The proof being that human beings *find them* striking. . . It seems to me likely that they would still be striking—*physically* striking—in a world free of racism. (italics in text).

(Hardimon, 2003, pp 454-455).

The 19th century anthropometric attempts to correlate quantitative physical differences with differences in social races, were later repudiated by biological anthropologists and shown by historians and scientists, such as Stephen Jay Gould, to have been biased, with some data outright falsified. (Gould, 1996, Zack, 1996.) But 19th century anthropometry probably contributes as much to the present ordinary concept of race---and its resultant perceptions---as it suggests the falseness of that concept for educated people at this time. What we find striking in our perceptions of other human beings is not necessarily natural, unlearned, or independent of culture. That we find those physical traits of others that we take to be racial differences

“striking” is an important sociological and psychological fact but it is not a justification for those beliefs that are themselves causes of our finding what we understand to be racial differences “striking.”

Haridmon’s (2) and (3) are inter-related. Both the common ancestry link and the geographical origins hypothesis rely on discarded scientific foundations of race. The consensus of biological anthropologists at this time (now frequently and conspicuously broadcast by popularizers of science in publications such as the *New York Times*. (Wade, 2005, 2002; Wilfred, 2000.)) is the Out-of-Africa thesis that all modern *Homo sapiens* originated from the same common ancestors in Africa, no more than 100,000 years ago.(Cavalli-Sforza, 2000; Blackburn, 2000.) There is evidence that this original population may not have had the characteristics of skin, hair and bone structure that came to be associated with Africans during the modern period, insofar as there is evidence that they had very fair skin hues and were hirsute.(Jablonski and Chaplin, 2000.) There is furthermore widespread doubt among evolutionary theorists that what have come to be considered distinctive racial traits of skin, hair and bone were necessarily adaptive to distinctive environments, because the remains of ancient people with varieties of distinctive racial traits have not been exclusively found on the continents with which those distinctive racial traits are associated.(Zack, 2001; Zack, 2002, p.39; Corcos, 1997, Robins, 1991, Brace, 1965, p. 107.) Furthermore, in tracking the migration of the original African ancestral population, non-protein coding genetic material (which has no relation to bodily traits), such as mitochondrial DNA is used, so there is no empirical evidence to support the claim that there is a correlation between what we now consider to be physical racial traits, or phenotypes, and any continental location.(Cavalli-Sforza, 2000, pp. 61-66.)

Hardimon states that the case for “eliminativism” pertaining to our ordinary concept of race rests in part on the simple idea that “without *race* there would be no *racism*.”(Hardimon, 2003, p.455.) He goes on to say that racism does have a “toehold” in reality and to argue that preservation of the core idea of race, via his conception of it, is necessary in order to address racism.(Hardimon, 2003, p. 455) This is debatable once we distinguish between justified belief

and unjustified belief. On the level of justified belief we can mention unjustified beliefs without ourselves holding or using them. Consider religion. One does not have to believe that Jesus is her personal savior to talk about born-again Christians or the intolerance of homosexuality evinced by some of them. Similarly, one does not have to believe that an ordinary concept of race that depends in its core on now-falsified scientific ideas, is a justified concept, in order to talk about that ordinary concept of race or about the racist beliefs and behavior of some of those who think that the ordinary concept of race is perfectly fine.

Although Kitcher's 1999 anthology article was not published in *JP*, it is cited as an authority in all if the recent *JP* pieces. (Kitcher 1999) Kitcher has two sets of claims about race. First, he believes that the geographical isolation of human populations in the past was sufficient to establish the existence of ancient races that were, he says (more or less) "pure." These "pure races" were closed breeding groups of individuals descended from ancestors of the same race. Thus, Kitcher advances (R1) below as a necessary condition for a concept of race, with (R2) stipulating heredity of racial characteristics:

(R1) A racial division consists of a set of subsets of the species *Homo sapiens*. These subsets are the pure races. Individuals who do not belong to any pure race are of mixed race.

(R2) With respect to any racial division, the pure races are closed under reproduction.

That is, the offspring of parents both of whom are of race R are also of race R. (Kitcher, 1999, pp.92-3.)

To accommodate what is known about racial mixture among groups such as African Americans, Kitcher further notes, "Socially disadvantaged races may consist of a pure core together with people any of whose ancestors belong to that core." (Kitcher, 1999, p.93) (I haven't time here to comment on Kitcher's association of social disadvantage with mixed race.)

Kitcher offers two important qualifications to this first set of claims. First, he carefully disavows all associations between his proposed concept of race and human worth or intellectual abilities. (Kitcher, 1999, pp. 187-190.) And second, he accepts that in-breeding inter-

generational groups not otherwise considered races, such as the English aristocracy, would qualify as races according to his concept. (Kitcher, 1999, p.103-4.)

In his second set of claims Kitcher proposes that his concept of biological race is useful to explain high rates of intraracial breeding among descendants of races in physical proximity in American society. He claims that relatively low rates of intermarriage between descendants of different pure or relatively pure races, particularly blacks and whites in the US, may be evidence of “incipient racial division.” Kitcher supports his notion of “incipient races” with what he relates as Ernst Mayr’s “non-dimensional” notion of species:

“Populations at a given place at a given time belong to different species if they are not exchanging genes. In exactly parallel fashion, we could recognize “non-dimensional” races, groups at a particular time that are not exchanging genes at substantial rates.”

(Kitcher 1999, p. 102.)

Kitcher’s notion of “incipient racialization” multiplies entities in unpredictable ways and does not match present anthropological notions of human races or possible human races, as I will soon show. Kitcher is of course aware that social factors such as slavery, segregation and class structures may be an important cause of what he calls “incipient racialization,” but he maintains that nonetheless, the results of social strictures are biological in a way that justifies a biological concept of race.

Neither set of Kitcher’s claims is compatible with contemporary biology. If we begin with the modern common sense notion of three major human races, the scientific task is to find some independent evidence for this taxonomy. It is debatable that there ever were pure genealogical groups corresponding to the three major races, which had the phenotypic traits associated with those races in the modern period. At best a taxonomy of pure ancient races is a hypothesis, and Kitcher seems to begin with it as a premise. There is also the problem of evidence that the traits now associated with races were present in the ancestral populations of those groups, and implications of the two current accounts of human history, the *out-of-Africa* thesis, and *multiregionalism*.

As noted above, the out-of-Africa thesis holds that all modern humans originated in Africa. Some of their descendants left for Asia and Europe. Insofar as traits associated with modern races may not have been present in the original African population, but may have developed after migrations, and not necessarily as adaptations to geographical conditions (some may have been adaptively-neutral mutations) (Corcos, 1997, pp.83-88.), at best one can hypothesize a basis for racial purity based on time spent by an in-breeding population in a particular place. This is not sufficient to ground the ordinary racial taxonomy that posits the three main races as stable natural kinds, because it leaves vague the amount of time necessary to form a race. Although any amount of time spent by a group in reproductive isolation, could be massaged by Kitcher's application of [what he presents as] Mayr's dictum to justify calling that group a race, or even a species, the result would be a large, indeterminate number of relatively temporary human races. While few anthropologists doubt that there is a large, indeterminate number of relatively temporary human populations, nothing empirical is added by calling these populations "races," and to do so would be misleading given the more essentialist connotations of "race" in ordinary language.

The multiregional thesis holds that *Homo sapiens* originated in Africa but spent at least one million years in multiple geographical locations, and that from the beginning, the different groups inter-bred. Inter-breeding as a scientific concept in this context has a far lower threshold to establish population mixture and maintain a common species (as well as block scientific ideas of racial purity) than does what Kitcher would call "impurity" or inter-breeding as a social concept. The multiregionalists require evidence of only one exogamous mating per generation in small populations—and modern human populations were small in the beginning, numbering in the tens of thousands. (Relethford, 1999; Wolpoff, Hawks and Caspari, 2000.) So, again, there is no scientific support for Kitcher's notion of pure ancestral populations corresponding to ordinary notions of race. Also, contemporary researchers believe that *Homo sapiens* share all but .2 percent of their genes, and of that .2 percent, 6-15 percent, or about 1/5000 of the total number of human genes has been assigned to differences that line up with social racial

designations.(Relthford, 1997, pp. 357-8; Templeton, 1998.) (It should be noted that a common error in reporting this information is to skip the first number of overall human variation and then state the variation that lines up with social race as though there were 6-15 percent variation in *total* human genes that line up with social races.)

As for Kitcher's claim about incipient racial formation, it is unlikely that population geneticists would accept it because there is less in the present situation to support the existence of pure races than there is in the historical record, and the historical record is not taken by them to support the existence of pure races. Even on a demographic level, according to the 2000 census, 7 million Americans self-identified as multi-racial. If one adds to this the incidence of mixed race among existing self-identified African Americans, which some sources place as high as 90%, and also evidence that a significant percentage of whites have non-white ancestry, even a non-scientific case for roughly pure races in the US is very weak (Zack, 2001). The present mixture in the black and white populations, and also within Hispanic, Native American and Asian groups, guarantees continued genetic mixture even without inter-marriage.

Andreasen's "new biology of race" is related to Kitcher's genealogical account, as she states.(Andreasen, 2005, p.94) She explains that the term *clade* in systematic biology means a *monophyletic group*, which is a group composed of an ancestor and all of its descendants. The concept of clades is traditionally used for defining higher taxa and not for intraspecific divisions, but Andreasen simply asserts, "Nonetheless it is possible to apply these ideas to race." (Andreasen, 2005, p.95.) This begs the question of whether evolutionary scientists who have provided the data for human evolutionary branching believe that it supports the ordinary ideas about racial taxonomy. Indeed, Luigi Cavalli-Sforza, from whom Andreasen derives her notion of clades, has said the following about his own data, which makes it clear that genealogy itself cannot ground race:

The classification into races has proved to be a futile exercise for reasons that were already clear to Darwin. Human races are still extremely unstable entities in the hands of modern taxonomists, who define from 3 to 60 or more races. To some extent, this latitude

depends on the personal preference of taxonomists, who may choose to be “lumpers” or “splitters.” Although there is no doubt that there is only one human species, there are clearly no objective reasons for stopping at any particular level of taxonomic splitting. In fact, the analysis we carry out. . .for the purposes of evolutionary study shows that the level at which we stop our classification is completely arbitrary.(Cavalli-Sforza, Menozzi, and Piazza,1994, p. 19.)

Of course these philosophers are not unique. There is a long history of attempts to defend ideas of race with biology, in philosophy, science, phenomenology, liberation studies and most recently the war on terrorism. The belief after September 11, 2001 that Saudi Arabians, Iranians, Afghans, Iraqis, Palestinians, Moroccans, Jordanians, Syrians, and many others from suspect geographical locations could be racially identified, crept into the media unchallenged. I don't think that even the most wildly speculative pseudo-scientists of race and their followers have hazzarded a biological foundation for this group, and I would suggest that if this group began to assert its rights, it would be a mistake for them to identify as a “race.” To do so would be to commit the *fallacy of ontological obligation*, which appears to be based on reasoning like this: Because both ordinary ideas of race and racism are based on an assumption that race has a biological basis, to talk about those ideas and combat racism, it is necessary to posit a biological basis. Clearly, this is a failure to distinguish between first order and second order discourse. Second order discourse is about first order discourse, and it need not regard the claims of first order discourse as true.

Idealism and Intersectionality in Feminism and New Political Directions

Even if we could rescue the ordinary concept of race by resurrecting its biological underpinnings, there are two reasons why this might not be useful politically. First, a biological concept of race leads to objective racial identities and one can only go so far toward the accumulation of power and autonomy based on the subaltern status which is the default mode of non-white racial identities. Also, given strong white privilege on the grounds of what is falsely believed to be biological race, even apparently neutral biological notions of race have the

potential to reinscribe white supremacy in ways that falsely appear to be neutral vis a vis racism. Second, it's not clear that the great ills of our times---war, terror, social inequality and the increasing morbidity of our planet---could be corrected by a better concept of nonwhite race or races, because no matter their race, men rule on the highest levels of government in all societies and they rule over other men and natural environments, as well as women. Not only do men rule but the men they rule over or contend with seem unable to repudiate those aggressive constructions of masculinity on the basis of which men construct their leadership qualities and virtues as rulers. Women may be better able to resist those constructions of masculinity insofar as they have been historically determined in certain ways, as precisely not having those constructions, that is, as not being men. But I am here getting ahead of even this compressed half-hour story.

If philosophers of race have been prone to the fallacy of ontological obligation, some second wave feminists have made a virtue of the *fallacy of ontological abrogation*. This has happened through both *intersectionality* and *idealism*.

I will address idealism first, because the problems posed by intersectionality are better grounded and lead into practical issues in feminist politics. Allow me to 'channel' George Berkeley: "All we know are our ideas, and we can only know our ideas. If we knew anything outside of our ideas, it would have to be an idea. Therefore, existence and the reality of things that exist are simply ideas." It is a short step from this to the Lacanian foundation of much so-called French feminism. Lacan in his revision of Freud moved everything of importance about gender and gender relations into language and 'the symbolic order'. This results in a huge gap, both intellectually and referentially between a feminist subject that is taken to be representations or ideas of women, and existing women. Not only is much of that Lacanian feminism inaccessible to the vast majority of existing women but it is unsurprisingly a discipline of texts rather than practical life. (Zack, 2005, pp.61-120.) This is not so much a theory—praxis division as a matter of whether real life or texts are the preferred subject for feminists.

The inequalities of gender that persist despite the gains of formal equality secured during

the second wave of feminism are fairly obvious: continued violence against women, leveraged exploitation of women of color on a global basis, glass ceilings and exclusions from top leadership positions for privileged women, a second shift in which women who work outside their homes--- now the majority worldwide--- nonetheless continue to reproduce and fulfill traditional roles and obligations of female gender in private life. Of course women are very different and their differences in kinds and degrees of oppression led to late 1970s criticism of second wave US feminists speaking for all women. At the same time, the case against biological determinants of social gender was unraveling, on both theoretical and scientific grounds. The result of both these anti-essentialisms was abandonment of any attempt at a universal definition of women and with it, a sense of women's commonality as a ideological basis for continued feminist politics as such. In the academy, the result of intersectionality or the view that multiple oppressions of race and gender necessitate incommensurable feminisms, has been multiple segregations of women based on racial and ethnic identities. This separatism would not be pernicious if the different feminisms and womenisms were equal in power and privilege, but they are not. The academy is still overwhelmingly white, as is the field of philosophy, despite the relative success of individual feminist philosophers, who are often isolated in their departments.

Although there have been biased universalisms in both philosophy and feminism, it does not follow that a universalism, which both captures what women have in common and does not exclude their differences, need be biased. Women are those human beings who are assigned to, or identify with, the disjunctive category of : female birth designees, or biological mothers, or men's heterosexual choices. Category FMP. To belong to FMP, it is not necessary that an individual be either a mother or man's heterosexual choice and she might have been born a man. I offer FMP as an essentialist definition of women but not a *substantialist* one. That is, there is no substance, no stuff, no thing in each and every woman that makes her a member of FMP.

Why might we think this way? One need only reflect for a second on the wild west motif used by President Dubya at the beginning of the wars in Afganistan and Iraq, or the pride in weight lifting as preparation for political success evinced by Governor Arnold.(Bruk, 2004;

Goldstein, 2003) The recent hyper-masculinization of high politics makes it evident that while women have become androgynes in the workplace, men have become more masculine. And this effectively relegates women to the status of lesser or imperfect men (once again).

Women as members of the same historical group through assignment or identification do not have the same constructions of gender that male leaders do. The women's movement in the US has not yet developed into viable women's political parties, but that could happen, not only in this country but in all democracies. Such parties would be important because women have at least 50% of the vote. In Norway, since the 1970s, it has been legally required that parliament be 40% composed of women. Norwegian political elites view the interests of women as distinctive on the grounds of their traditional gender. They think that women are interested in pensions, childcare, education and so forth, and they recognize that these interests merit serious attention in high politics, for the good of society as a whole.(Skjeie, 1998, 2005)

Rule by women on the highest levels of government in all democratic countries would require something like a global nonviolent revolution. More than that, in order to go beyond a mere switching of players without change in the system, there would have to be a revaluation of values. It goes something like this. Much has already been made of Marxist failure to calculate the economic value of women's domestic labor toward the reproduction of the labor of others, as well as literal biological reproduction. Therefore, women could be paid for this work that is still provided free to capitalist economies through their "second shifts."(Hochsfield and Machung, 1989.) However, if women were paid for their reproductive labor, not only would it disrupt the economies in which their work was unpaid before, but activities that ought not to have prices would become commodities, activities such as mothering, elder care, and psychic support for family life. Moreover, these activities are often one-to-one projects, tied to the concrete individuality of participants. Therefore, paying women for their reproductive labor does not solve the problem and neither would it check the ongoing violent and exploitative technological projects of men and female androgynes who rule. So, what is needed is a revaluation of things that are and should remain unpriced, in comparison to the system of priced commodities. This

reevaluation should result in a contraction or at least a limit on the expansion of the entire system of commodification. And I suggest that feminists, as advocates for the well being women, ought to initiate such reevaluation, with the understanding that men, children and natural beings, as well as women, would benefit from it.

Returning to the issue of ontological comparison, race and gender are not symmetrical. Ontologies of human races are more recent historical ideas than male-female taxonomies of gender, although ontologies of gender that include intersexuals, trans-sexuals and non-sexuals are new. Within these new ontologies of gender, women are the traditional contraries of men, although not their opposite and not their only contraries in the logical sense. (Zack, 2005, pp.23-40.) Taxonomies of race rely on justification from the physical sciences, which is now lacking, while taxonomies of gender have been more dependent on ordinary life, which continues to support them. This means that ontologies of gender are more concrete, insofar as their referents are existing individuals—the ultimate subjects of history.

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