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Is the Concept of Race Illegitimate?

◆

MAX HOCUTT

Americans are obsessed with race—or, at any rate, academic Americans are. Is disproportionate representation evidence of discrimination by race, or is it evidence of natural differences between the races? Should we abandon standardized tests, such as the SAT and ACT, on which some races do poorly? Why, despite nearly four decades of racial integration, do some races continue to lag behind others? Is the lag owing to the inherent racism of our institutions—our schools, courts, unions, and businesses? Are even the most enlightened and liberal Americans unconscious bigots? Is the United States the most racist country in the world? Should we have preferential admissions and hiring to correct the evils produced by racial discrimination? Such questions preoccupy us, absorb our energies, and disturb our equanimity. Try as we might to avoid the topic of race, it confronts us everywhere. Race talk is ubiquitous.

Remarkably, however, many behavioral and biological scientists assure us that races do not exist. If these scientists are right, the concept of race is a mental construct without a counterpart in reality; races are as fictitious as unicorns. Contrary to popular presumption, we have made up, not discovered, the distinctions that figure so prominently in thinking about race and bolster the myth of racial superiority. Because this myth is evil, it ought to be stamped out and, with it, the very idea of race. Eliminate this idea, it is said, and we will eliminate the belief in racial superiority, thereby solving the problems and dissolving the injustices caused by racial discrimination.

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Early expressions of this view came from leading physical anthropologists, three of whom are considered in this article, and were endorsed recently by important population geneticists, two of whom are considered here. All five scientists agree that, as one puts it, “the idea of race in the human species serves no purpose” except that of fostering an unfounded belief in racial superiority (Cavalli-Sforza and Cavalli-Sforza 1995, 237). The arguments our scientists advance, however, do not justify their claim. If race is a myth, they have failed to prove that it is. Furthermore, the claim is not true. Races are as real as nations and social classes.

To allay misunderstanding of my arguments in this article, some caveats are in order. To say that racial differences are real is not to say either that they are important or that they should determine public policy. Whether races are real is a question of objective fact to which, presumably, we can give a single determinate answer. In fact, the skins of blacks are usually more darkly pigmented than the skins of whites, and, in this regard, personal preference and opinion are irrelevant. Whether such differences should be considered important is, however, a question regarding the purposes for which racial distinctions are to be used, and those purposes will depend on personal preferences. That A’s spouse or employee be of the same race will matter to A but not to B, just as it will matter to A but not to B that her spouse or employee be of the same religion, political persuasion, or social standing.

When individual preferences do not harm others, they should not be matters of general, much less political interest. You should be allowed to marry or to hire whomever you wish. Governmentally sanctioned preferences, however, concern everybody because they affect everybody. Thus, the worst excesses of racism—for example, the Nazi crimes against Jews, the South African apartheid system, and the Jim Crow regime in the U.S. South—were all government policies that left individuals no choice in the matter. Harsh penalties might be imposed on people who married outside their race or hired a person of a disapproved race.

Despite this experience, people on the political left have for four decades now tried to justify government preferences on the grounds that because racial distinctions are artificial, disparities in achievement must be the result of unjust discrimination. To correct this injustice, they have urged, government must both forbid individuals to discriminate by race and itself do what it forbids others to do. As even some federal courts have belatedly begun to recognize, however, official discrimination in favor of a particular race is as un-American as official discrimination against it.

Furthermore, as those on the other side of the political divide have recently noticed, the premise of the argument does not support—indeed, it undermines—the conclusion. You contradict yourself if you say both that racial distinctions have no validity and that government should favor some races over others. If races cannot be distinguished, then governments cannot distinguish them. At least one opponent of racial preferences has welcomed arguments for the unreality of races (Wood 2001). Unfortunately, no such argument is likely to persuade Jesse Jackson to refrain from demanding special favors for his Rainbow Coalition.

Nor should it. Although the logic of the argument is impeccable and its conclusion is true as well, its premise is too outlandish to be believed. If official preferences are wrong, the reason is not that races are figments of our imagination.

Montagu

Consider first anthropologist Ashley Montagu's classic critique of the concept of race. Unlike the other four writers I consider here, Montagu does not deny the reality of race. On the contrary, he affirms it in the following plain words: "At the outset it should perhaps be made clear that I believe, with most biologists, that evolutionary factors, similar to those that have been operative in producing raiation in other animal species, have also been operative in the human species" ([1962] 1982, 58). Why, then, does Montagu object to the concept of race? Because

the layman's conception of race is so confused and emotionally muddled that any attempt to modify it would seem to be met by the greatest obstacle of all—the term "race" itself. It is a trigger word. Utter it, and a whole series of emotionally conditioned responses follow. If we are to clarify the minds of those who think in terms of "race" we must cease to use the word, because by continuing to use it we sanction whatever meaning anyone chooses to bestow upon it, and because in the layman's mind the term refers to conditions which do not apply. (59)

In short, although it has a denotation, the word *race* ought to be rejected because it has irrelevant or false connotations.

This argument is less than convincing. To see why, consider an analogy. The ancient Pythagoreans, who believed that all things have numbers, preferred even to odd numbers. Hence, in Pythagorean cosmology, the word *even* connoted *good* and the word *odd* connoted *bad*. Thus, the sane were even, the insane odd; men were even, women odd; and so forth. We now regard this view as an odd way of thinking. It would, however, be even more odd—indeed, it would be wrong—to conclude that we therefore should give up arithmetic. The right conclusion to draw is that the connotations of a word are irrelevant. The serious question is whether the word has a denotation.

This principle holds no matter what the topic. Grant that no clear meaning can be given to the belief that one race is superior to another. It does not follow that there are no differences of race. Apples differ from oranges, and men differ from women, even if it makes no sense to declare one of them better than the other. Cannot races differ from one another even if there is no saying which is superior? Recognition of difference does not necessarily entail invidious comparison.

Anxious to avoid both irrelevant connotations and invidious comparisons, Montagu proposes to replace *race* with the terms *ethnic group* and *breeding population*. Apparently, he has forgotten Shakespeare's famous line, "A rose by any other name would smell as sweet." Someone who hates the Irish will continue to hate them even

if he must quit calling them a race and start thinking of them as an ethnic group or a breeding population. The sting of the old label may not attach to the new one at once, but it will do so eventually. If racial consciousness is rooted in reality, it will not be stamped out by a mere change in labels.

That difficulty no doubt explains why our remaining four authors go further than Montagu, questioning not just the word *race* but also the reality it is supposed to denote. If we may take their statements at face value, they hold that there is no such thing as race; the word is a *flatus voci* that refers to nothing. Because this claim is stronger than Montagu's, it requires stronger support. With what arguments do our four authorities support it?

Fried

Let us begin with Morton Fried's 1978 essay "Race: A Four Letter Word That Hurts." In this truculent piece, Fried writes: "The white race is not a real, hard fact of nature; it is an idea . . . there is no white race. To make this just as true and outrageous as I can, let me immediately add that there never *was* a white race. While at it, I might as well go on to deny the existence of a red race. . . . Also, there is not now and never has been either a black race or a yellow race. . . . [T]he word 'race' is a nonsense term" (312).

In support of this emphatic proposition, Fried offers a stunningly simple argument: people called white are not white but pink; people called black are not black but brown; and so on. He admits that one group may be darker than another, but, he jauntily explains, this difference is owing to skin pigmentation that allows "a continuous grading from light to dark" (312), and because no sharp breaks exist, no divisions of race exist either.

This is an embarrassingly bad argument. One might as well deny the existence of cottonmouth moccasins on the grounds that the mouths of the snakes popularly so called are not made of cotton. Such argument suffers from two defects. First, that it is inaccurate to describe members of the "white [Caucasian] race" as white does not mean that no such race exists. In this context, *white* just means "lightly pigmented." Second, that pigmentation is a continuous variable does not change the fact that a randomly chosen member of some "black" race is more likely to be dark than a randomly chosen member of some "white" race. So, although Fried's premises are true, his conclusion does not follow.

Furthermore, that conclusion seems plainly contrary to fact, as Fried is well aware. Therefore, having denied that any races exist, he immediately reverses himself:

To deny that there are differences between individuals and between populations is ridiculous. The New Guineans spotted Dr. Newman as an off-beat intruder as soon as they clapped eyes on him. . . . I was spotted as an alien the first time I showed up in the small city of Ch'uhsien, in Anhwei province, China, back in 1947. . . . Even after more than a year in that place, there was no question about my standing out as a strange physical type. (312)

Fried is here calling attention to what would normally and rightly be regarded as racial differences. As his observations confirm, these differences are too obvious to be denied; everybody can see them. Therefore, he acknowledges, “Most laymen of my acquaintance, whether tolerant or bigoted, are frankly puzzled when told that race is an idea. It seems to them that it is something very real, that they experience every day; one might as well deny the existence of different makes and models of automobiles”(313).

Undeterred by this commonsense attitude, Fried replies, “The answer to that analogy is easy: *cars don't breed*” (313, emphasis added). But although this reply is indubitably true, it is also wildly irrelevant. Inability to breed may distinguish two species, but everybody knows that oppositely sexed members of different races can breed with each other. How is that fact supposed to obliterate the differences between them? Does an Oriental cease to differ from a Caucasian because he breeds with her?

Having raised the issue of racial cross-breeding, Fried goes on to base another bad argument on it: he contends that there are no *races* because there are no *pure* races. Reminding us that human beings have always been mobile, and observing that wherever people move they also breed, he declares that the history of humankind is a story of continuous “hybridization.” The result, as one of my students once put it, is that we are all mongrels. (I show later how the two Cavalli-Sforzas and Bryan Sykes rest much of their case on the same line of thought.) Grant the premise—that there are no pure races. The conclusion—that there are no races—is a non sequitur. One might as well argue that because the water in our lakes and rivers is not sufficiently devoid of minerals or germs to be considered pure water for laboratory purposes, none of it can be considered water for any purpose.

If this analogy seems stretched, consider another. All dogs share genes with other dogs because they have descended from the same distant ancestors and because some breeds have been mixed with others along the way. This fact does not tell against the differences between Chihuahuas and Great Danes. No breeder supposes that distinguishable breeds must have been distinct forever. Your sheltie counts as pure bred if all his recent ancestors were shelties. That the first sheltie resulted from the accidental breeding of a collie with the king's spaniel does nothing to invalidate your pet's pedigree.

Cross-breeding invalidates the question “To which of the two, three, or more races does the resulting offspring belong?” Having been the progeny of a collie and a spaniel, the original sheltie could not be counted without arbitrariness as an example of either. A mulatto resulting from the mating of a Negroid with a Caucasoid human being is still a human being, but she is neither fully Negroid nor fully Caucasoid. That she would count as Negroid under a “one drop” rule proves nothing to the contrary. Such rules are indeed indefensible, especially when they are enforced by governments.

Also indefensible is government insistence that every citizen must be counted, or count himself, as a member of one race only—no matter that his ancestry, like Tiger Woods's, may be in part Negroid, in part Caucasoid, and in part Mongoloid. Because attempts to create neatly exclusive racial categories by government fiat cannot be

squared with reality, they indeed can be nothing but a cause of trouble.¹ This difficulty, however, does not demonstrate that all racial distinctions are baseless. The predominant racial ancestry of many people is reasonably clear.

If the two arguments just considered, on which Fried places his greatest emphasis, are clearly fallacious, he has a third: that the word *race* lacks meaning because race is sometimes confused with nationality and culture. Again, the premise is true. People often fail to distinguish *races* (groups with a common lineage) from *societies* (groups with a common culture), and many people identify societies with *nations* (groups with a common government).² These tendencies are indeed errors, as Fried insists, but they will not make Fried's case. Some people confuse geese with ducks, but that confusion does not establish that no geese exist.

Fried's arguments are so bad that it is difficult to take them seriously, perhaps because Fried himself does not take them seriously. In his own blustery opinion, the concept of race is sufficiently discredited by the existence of racism to make serious argument superfluous; instead, dogmatic declamation will suffice. So it is worth repeating: maybe you cannot be a racist without believing in the reality of race, but you certainly can believe in the reality of race without being a racist. Grant, then, that racism is wicked, especially when institutionalized by government. Still, it does not follow that all distinctions of race—the question at issue here—are in error.

Livingstone

Frank Livingstone's 1964 essay "On the Nonexistence of Human Races" must be taken more seriously, although its thesis is more ambiguous and its arguments more obscure. Livingstone argues not for the unreality (as he thinks) of races but for the more defensible proposition that classification by *race* is inferior to other taxonomy for the purposes of molecular biologists.

Livingstone begins his defense of this proposition by defining *race* as a local breeding population characterized by a greater or lesser frequency of certain genes together with the resulting traits. He then makes three points against the concept so defined. First, a genetically based trait or traits might occur with similar frequency in separate breeding groups as a result not of common ancestry but of natural selection. Second, owing to a variety of causes, the same breeding group might be characterized by different gene frequencies and different traits at different times. Third, a given breeding group might migrate from one place to another ([1964] 1982, 97).

These observations are all correct, but they do not discredit the concept of race. They merely affirm that race cannot be identified with geographical location, group gene frequencies, or group characteristics.

1. This problem is not solved, but merely exacerbated, by letting people choose the race to which they wish to be counted as belonging.

2. One of the problems with the term *ethnic group* is that it blurs the distinction between culture and race. *Breeding population* does not suffer this defect.

Take location first. You belong to “the Irish [Celtic] race” even if your Irish parents immigrated to Australia; their change of locale does not alter your racial identity. What some call the Irish race is not the group of people who *live* in Ireland, but the group that *originated* there. This group will retain its identity even if most or all of its members move elsewhere.

Next, consider gene frequencies and group features. It is certainly true that they can change with time and circumstance under the press of natural or artificial selection, but such changes show once again only that gene frequencies and associated features are not definitive of race. Although they may serve to mark differences, they do not constitute them. As we normally use the word, *race* is roughly equivalent to *subspecies*; or, to make a slightly different comparison, *race* is the counterpart in human beings of *breed* in animals. Thus, distinguishable races (blacks, whites, and so on) of human beings are analogous to distinguishable subspecies (wolves, coyotes, and so on) of the canine species or to different breeds (dachshund, shepherd, and so on) of domestic dogs (Levin 1997). Briefly, a race is a more or less closed breeding group having a more or less well-identified place of origin. So understood, races can breed with each other, but so long as they remain distinct, they do not do so with great frequency.

What makes an individual human being a member of a particular race? The same thing that makes an individual dog belong to a given subspecies or breed of dog—namely, *ancestry*. Roughly defined, a member of race R is an individual whose forebears were members of race R. Thus, an animal is a coyote if it is descended from coyotes, or it is a dachshund if it is descended from dachshunds. A human being is an Afro-American if she is descended from Americans whose forebears were Africans.³ In other words, race is a matter of *heredity*. Roughly defined, a member of race R is someone who has inherited most or all of her genes from members of race R.

Because genes often manifest themselves in visible differences, members of a race can sometimes be identified by their salient features. The typical dachshund has a characteristic wiener shape, and the typical Afro-American has a broad nose. Such features, however, are often unreliable signs of racial identity. Because they are neither necessary nor sufficient to establish that identity, race cannot be identified with reference to them.

This lack of entailment is evident in two facts. First, two randomly chosen members of the same race might differ from each other more than they differ from many of the members of a distinct race. Thus, some whites are dark-skinned, and some blacks are light-skinned. Second, two separate and distinct groups of people might conceivably resemble each other in all or most discernible respects. Knowing the difference in their origins, though, we still count them as members of distinct races even if we have no other way to tell them apart.

3. The isolation and distinctness of the breeding group might have resulted from geography, racial preference, or any number of other factors.

The explanation for all of this is simple and obvious: contrary to Livingstone's presumption, we do not think of races as abstract classes—such as numbers or molecules—having timeless essences that can be captured in precise formulas. Instead, we conceive of races as historical entities, like societies and social classes, that have to be identified ostensibly by being tied to times and places.

If Livingstone dislikes the concept of race as thus understood, he does so in part because he believes that it is too vague for the purposes of biological science. He has a point. We cannot say with precision how big, how cohesive, or how closed a breeding group must be or even how long it must last to count as a distinct race. Such is the flexibility of our workaday concept of race. That imprecision no doubt explains why the great geneticist T. Dobzhansky held that *race* is a term of convenience with a variable denotation (Livingstone [1964] 1982, 98). Livingstone complains that this looseness leaves us unable to decide how many races exist. Instead, we may recognize as few or as many as suits us. This observation is also correct, but, again, it is not damaging. The word *society* is equally vague. No one can say exactly how many societies exist; a count that serves one purpose might not serve another. This looseness, however, does not render worthless the concept of society. Indeed, cultural anthropologists can scarcely do without it.

Vagueness is only one aspect of racial thinking that Livingstone faults, and it is not the most serious. Ultimately, what really troubles him is the impotence of racial distinctions to explain individual or group differences:

In addition to being a concept used to classify human variability, race has also been overworked as an explanation of this variability. When a particular blood group gene or hair form is found to be characteristic of the populations of a particular region, it is frequently “explained” as a racial character. . . . In this way race or common ancestry and migration have been used to explain much of the genetic variability among human populations. Unfortunately such explanations neither accord with our knowledge of the population structure and movements of hunters and gatherers, nor take into consideration the basic cause of biological variation, natural selection. ([1964] 1982, 97)

Livingstone concludes that we can explain “human variability” better by referring to genes.

Here Livingstone has a point, although it may not be quite the one he thinks. Racial analysis records and documents differences, but it does little to explain them. For explanation, we need the deeper analysis of genes that molecular biology provides. Still, this need does not prove that racial analysis is meaningless or devoid of value. Ancient talk of the four basic substances—earth, air, fire, and water—did not cut very deep or go very far in explaining the physical world. For better explanations,

physicists needed the concept of atoms. It does not follow, however, that there are no such things as earth, air, fire, and water.⁴

Grant, then, that for the specialized purposes of molecular biology, racial taxonomy is inferior to classification in terms of genes or DNA. This inferiority does not prove that it is inferior for all purposes—including, for example, those of the historian or the sociologist. The contrary is clearly demonstrated in *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, Jared Diamond's (1997) justly celebrated attempt to explain human migration and progress in terms of geography and climate. As Diamond demonstrates, it is impossible to make sense of either the story or the present condition of humankind without mentioning races (378). The concept of race also figures in an essential way in Thomas Sowell's *Race and Culture* (1994). Maybe population geneticists can do without it; social scientists and the rest of us cannot.⁵

Perhaps suspecting that his arguments had failed, Livingstone ends with a claim that is even worse: the concept of race is an idea without a counterpart in reality because *all* concepts, including those he favors, are without counterparts in reality. "Just as races do not exist but are only part of a general theory concocted by human beings to explain or render intelligible their observations, so the concepts and theorems of the mathematical theory of population genetics do not exist in the same sense" ([1964] 1982, 104). This attempt at philosophizing throws the baby out with the bath water. What makes one theory preferable to another other than that it conforms better to reality? If not only the concept of race but also the mathematics of population genetics lacks correspondence to reality, why should either one be preferred?

Cavalli-Sforza

Nearly a quarter century passed between the publication of the three essays in physical anthropology that I have just criticized and the publication of *The Great Human Diasporas* by the population biologist Luigi Luca Cavalli-Sforza and his son Francesco (1995). Yet this recent book offers few new arguments. Instead, it repeats the old ones.

The authors begin the chapter "Race and Racism" by mentioning the evil of racism and by condemning research that they regard as racist.⁶ They observe that *race*

4. For a more thorough and more technical discussion of the scientific issues involved in the question of racial taxonomy, see Levin (forthcoming).

5. *Editor's note:* Twenty-five years ago, I encountered this issue and dealt with it in what still seems to me to be a defensible way. See Robert Higgs, "'Race' and 'Racial Discrimination': A Prefatory Note on Usage," in *Competition and Coercion: Blacks in the American Economy, 1865-1914* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 1-2.

6. Characteristically, Cavalli-Sforza uses the term loosely, describing as racist all research that draws attention to racial differences, even if its authors endorse no declaration of superiority and inferiority. Thus, Arthur Jensen's work on IQ counts as racist by Cavalli-Sforza's tendentious definition—a slick but not an admirable way to poison the wells of scientific research and to beg the question of whether its conclusions are sound.

is often confused with *nation* or *culture* and complain that, given the looseness of the concept, no one can say how many races exist. They attribute the difficulty of making a count to the fact that many genetically related features of human beings vary continuously, leaving no breaks that provide clear demarcations between races.

After making these now familiar points, the Cavalli-Sforzas dilate on the difficulties that confront attempts to distinguish one race from another. They illustrate these difficulties by explaining, with a map, how interbreeding has obliterated once-obvious differences between the Etruscans who settled northern Italy and the Greek peoples who colonized the southern half of the boot. This blending of two formerly distinguishable races into one, the authors claim, shows that it never makes sense to talk of distinguishable races. Yet they also note that various European “peoples,” such as the Basques of Spain and the Celts from Breton, differ not only culturally but also genetically (like races!). In this same “I can’t say ‘breakfast’” fashion, the Cavalli-Sforzas go on to aver that because Jews are a “heterogeneous people” from many parts of the world, there is no Jewish race. They admit, however, that “endogamy (marriage between individuals from the same group) was sufficiently widespread among the forebears of today’s Jews for them to continue to have a not insignificant level of genes in common and a certain resemblance” (236) (like members of the same race!).

Showing no awareness that they are giving back with one hand what they took with the other, the Cavalli-Sforzas go on to conclude, “The idea of race in the human species serves no purpose” (237). With the usual reflex, they attribute belief in race to the Nazi myth of racial purity and to an irrational but innate tribalism.⁷ They then cite the mistreatment of Pygmies by their larger and more aggressive neighbors as a regrettable example of our human tendency to divide the world up into *them* and *us*.

Clearly, there is nothing new here, just the now-familiar arguments: that a belief in racial distinctions is wrong because it encourages racism; that no distinctions exist between races because the distinctions that do exist are not sharp and clear; that although racial differences may be real, it would be better to describe them as differences between “peoples”; that there are no races because there are no pure races; and so on. Having already refuted these arguments—or, rather, having shown how they refute themselves—I will not go over them again.

Instead, I will examine the only new argument to be found in the Cavalli-Sforza book. In the preface, the authors casually remark that racial distinctions are unimportant because they are limited to such trivial matters as skin color and bodily conformation. They return to this theme in chapter 8, claiming that although physical differences can be explained in genetic terms, no mental differences can be explained in this way. They declare, “The biological differences [between Pygmies and other groups] are obviously striking, and equally obviously superficial. . . . [T]he explanation [of the Pygmy economy] must lie in a radically different cultural legacy” (204);

7. With consummate wit, a friend of mine calls this pseudoreasoning the *argumentum ad nazium*.

“[n]othing, however, is truly or solely innate in child or adult intelligence. On the contrary, intelligence is the product of personal experience, which is complex and differs from person to person” (219).

Here we have one more example of faulty reasoning. Reduced to its essence, the argument is: racial distinctions are *unreal* because they are *unimportant*.⁸ For the sake of discussion, let us grant for the moment the premise that racial differences are superficial and inconsequential because they are physical. Still, the conclusion—that racial differences are fictitious, imaginary, or mythical—does not follow. On the contrary, what follows is that racial differences must be real, for how else can they be trivial or superficial? The Cavalli-Sforzas have shot themselves in the foot.

Nor is that the worst of it: the gun was illegally obtained. That a certain difference between persons is unimportant is not a scientific judgment; it is an evaluation. The Cavalli-Sforzas are speaking here as moralists who seek cover for their egalitarian political views by presenting them as well-established science. Furthermore, whether any differences of temperament and intellect are related to genes cannot be settled a priori. The question is an empirical one still very much in dispute (Herrnstein and Murray 1994; Levin 1997; Rushton 1995). Hence, as the Cavalli-Sforzas are forced to admit when they get down to particulars, “We cannot exclude the possibility that there is a genetic component to behavioral characteristics” (1995, 205), and “[t]his [environmental influence on IQ] does not mean that heredity has no bearing on intelligence quotient” (221). Here, at last, they speak in the voice of science.

As moralists, the Cavalli-Sforzas have no authority. It is as scientists that they must appeal to us, but when we examine their science, we find little support for their unguarded dicta about race. On the contrary, we find evidence to refute those dicta. The first chapter of *The Great Human Diasporas* has to do with Pygmies. This material is significant because it seems beyond dispute that the Pygmies constitute a distinctive race that differs from others in both genotype and phenotype. If you were looking for a prototype of the sort of breeding group that is meant by the word *race*, it would be difficult to find a better one than the Pygmies. How can a man who has spent much of his life studying this unique group of people, as the elder Cavalli-Sforza has, deny the reality of racial distinctions? Only, I suspect, by letting his feelings color his scientific judgment.

Sykes

Finally, we come to the arguments made by Bryan Sykes, the population geneticist who appears to have displaced Luca Cavalli-Sforza as the dominant figure in the field (Sykes 2001, 42). In a pleasantly written book called *The Seven Daughters of Eve* that

8. I am aware that what is important for purposes of biology might be unimportant for other purposes, but the Cavalli-Sforzas neither make nor observe this distinction. Instead, they blur it by running the two kinds of importance together.

is part science, part self-congratulation, and part fiction, Sykes tells us how he compared the mitochondrial DNA of ancient skeletons with modern subjects to discover that 95 percent of the present European population of 650 million have descended from just seven prehistoric women, 45 percent from just one.⁹ Occasionally, Sykes pauses in this fascinating tale to express his belief that “objectively defined races simply do not exist” (46).

It is instructive to see why he thinks so. Taking Japan and Tibet as examples, Sykes states that although there are certainly *people* in Japan and Tibet, “there is no genetic meaning to *the population of Japan or Tibet*” (46, emphasis in original). Why not? Because only individuals, not populations, have genes and because the attempt to find genetic markers for groups perpetuates racial classifications. On this basis, Sykes condemns as regrettable the efforts made earlier by Cavalli-Sforza and others to determine gene frequencies. Ironically, given Cavalli-Sforza’s own frequently expressed antipathy to the concept of race, Sykes complains that Cavalli-Sforza’s efforts reinforced racial distinctions.

One does not need to be a geneticist to see the many errors in Sykes’s argument. The first mistake is an instance of what we logicians call a *fallacy of composition*—confusion of wholes with parts. Unless I misunderstand him utterly, Sykes is saying that you cannot distinguish races using gene frequencies because you cannot distinguish individual human beings in that way. To see the error in this claim, suppose someone were to argue that a quantity of water cannot be described as cool or wet because it makes no sense to say that individual molecules of water are cool or wet. That argument would be just as good. Sykes’s second error is equally crude. It begs the question to argue that the evidence for gene-frequency differences between the races is no good because it encourages belief in the wicked idea of race. One might as well deny the value of fossil evidence for evolution on the grounds that it encourages people to believe in the pernicious theory of evolution. The evidence shows what it shows, even if you do not like it.

The faulty argumentation just scouted occurs near the beginning of Sykes’s book. Near the end, he offers another defective argument. Having shown that signature patterns of mitochondrial DNA occur with greater frequency in some regions of the world than others, he denies that this difference gives aid and comfort to believers in distinguishable races. Why not? Because mitochondrial DNA often can be found where you might least expect it. Thus, Korean DNA has been discovered in a Norwegian fisherman. Also, modern Japanese are the result of blending two groups, the Jomon and the Yayoi, which shows “that there is no such thing as a genetically pure classification into different races”(284). But doesn’t the existence of watered whisky prove the reality of whiskey? And doesn’t the existence of blended scotch prove the reality of the single malts that go into the blend?

9. Mitochondrial DNA is the tell-tale DNA mothers pass on to their offspring.

Conclusion

The usual arguments against the reality of race are full of fallacies. These logical defects may betoken a lack of clarity about what is in dispute. Consider the following seven hypotheses.

- The word *race* has irrelevant connotations of superiority and inferiority.
- For many scientific purposes, the concept of race is poorly defined.
- Racial distinctions do not cut very deep in explaining human variability.
- Racial distinctions are limited to unimportant physical characteristics.
- Racial distinctions have no use except to foster racism.
- Racial distinctions are unreal; races are as mythical as fairy godmothers.
- The concept of race is without meaning; it is gibberish mixed with falsehood.

The five authors whose work I have considered here all blur the distinctions among these statements. Each of them argues that because one of the first three statements is true, so must be one or more of the last four. However, although the first three can be defended, the fourth is disputable and the last three are plainly false.

Yes, the workaday concept of race is too crude either to have much value for the science of molecular biology or to serve as the basis of preferential government policies, which are unjust in any case, but it does not follow and it is not true that the concept of race is either meaningless or devoid of objective basis. Tempting though the stratagem may appear, to deny the reality of races will not solve the social problem of race. I do not know how to solve that problem. I do not even know whether it can be solved, but I am sure that making race the basis of official policy will cause more trouble. Because preferential government policies affect everybody but are premised on attitudes and beliefs that are not shared by everybody, they should be abandoned; but because the concept of race is rooted in objective reality, it is probably here to stay.

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