

Against the Philosophical-Scientific Racial Project of Biologizing Race

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Abstract : The concept of race has recently come prominently back into discussion in the context of medicine and medical science, along with renewed effort to biologize racial concepts. This paper argues that this renewed effort to biologize race by way of medicine and population genetics fail on their own terms, and more importantly, that the philosophical project of biologizing race ought to be recognized for what it is—a retrograde racial project—and abandoned. There is clear agreement that standard racial categories and concepts cannot be grounded in the old way of racial naturalism, which understand race as a real, interest-independent biological/metaphysical category in which its members share “physical, moral, intellectual, and cultural characteristics.” But equally clear is the very real and pervasive presence of racial concepts in individual and collective consciousness and behavior, and so it remains a pressing area in which to seek deeper understanding. Recent philosophical work has endeavored to reconcile these two observations by developing a “thin” conception of race, grounded in scientific concepts but without the moral and metaphysical content. Such “thin,” science-based analyses take the “commonsense” or “folk” sense of race as it functions in contemporary society as the starting point for their philosophic-scientific projects to biologize racial concepts. A “philosophic-scientific analysis” is a special case of the cornerstone of analytic philosophy: a conceptual analysis. That is, a rendering of a concept into the more perspicuous concepts that constitute it. Thus a philosophic-scientific account of a concept is an attempt to work out an analysis of a concept that makes use of empirical science's insights to ground, legitimate and explicate the target concept in terms of clearer concepts informed by empirical results. The focus in this paper is on three recent philosophic-scientific cases for retaining “race” that all share this general analytic schema, but that make use of “medical necessity,” population genetics, and human genetic clustering, respectively. After arguing that each of these three approaches suffers from internal difficulties, the paper considers the general analytic schema employed by such biologizations of race. While such endeavors are inevitably prefaced with the disclaimer that the theory to follow is non-essentialist and non-racialist, the case will be made that such efforts are not neutral scientific or philosophical projects but rather are what sociologists call a racial project, that is, one of many competing efforts that conjoin a representation of what race means to specific efforts to determine social and institutional arrangements of power, resources, authority, etc. Accordingly, philosophic-scientific biologizations of race, since they begin from and condition their analyses on “folk” conceptions, cannot pretend to be “prior to” other disciplinary insights, nor to transcend the social-political dynamics involved in formulating theories of race. As a result, such traditional philosophical efforts can be seen to be disciplinarily parochial and to address only a caricature of a large and important human problem—and thereby further contributing to the unfortunate isolation of philosophical thinking about race from other disciplines.

Keywords : population genetics, ontology of race, race-based medicine, racial formation theory, racial projects, racism, social construction

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