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Response to Prompt #7:

Kwame Anthony Appiah argues that a proper understanding of “race” concepts, combined with a proper understanding of modern science (biology in particular), should lead us to conclude that there are no such things as human races. In contrast, Sally Haslanger advocates an “ameliorative analysis” of race that seems to favor the conclusion that there are races, but that we may need to revise our understanding of what they are in order to pursue the goal of social justice. Explain the arguments of both philosophers.

Which (if either) is right, and why?

The concept of race has been a source of controversy and frustration for centuries, not only because of its typically destructive application, but also because of its complicated and elusive definition. Throughout history, racial groups have been divided along the lines of physical attributes, cultural practices, and geographical locations, as well as overlapped with gender, class, and religious identities. In the context of an expanding global society still grappling with the systems of oppression that have been both the springboard and the straightjacket of progress since the beginning of civilization, it is vital that we re-examine our concept of race and determine its validity (and utility) moving forward. To that end, philosophers Kwame Anthony Appiah and Sally Haslanger have each taken it upon themselves to dissect and revise modern and traditional racial concepts. In his article titled “Why There Are No Human Races”, Appiah argues that because racial concepts are rooted in biological concepts and modern biology has rejected the existence of biological races, we are compelled to conclude that races do not exist.¹ If everyone would realize and accept this, he seems to think we would find ourselves

¹ Appiah, “Why There Are No Human Races”

living in a post-racial world (though he is not so naive as to claim we are already there now). While Haslanger agrees that biological foundations for racial concepts are not valid, in her “Gender and Race: (What) Are They? (What) Do We Want Them To Be?”, she extracts a definition of race that hinges on social position rather than biological characteristics; she goes on to argue that altering our understanding of race in this way is both valid and necessary to carry on the fight for social justice (and racial equality).² Ultimately, Appiah and Haslanger are on the same side, which is that of universal equality among people. However, Haslanger’s discussion of race is a more practical and constructive project than Appiah’s, and thus her definition strikes me as more beneficial to the primary cause: improving common perceptions of race.

As compared to Haslanger, Appiah takes a hard line on race. Once he determines that there are no human races, he seems to assert in a later publication (“Race in the Modern World: The Problem of the Color Line”) that only through the erasure of our flawed racial concepts will we achieve equality among all members of the single human race.³ His basic claim in the former is that the science of genetics has proven that biological races do not exist, and since the commonality between most vague and shifting concepts of race is a biological foundation, logic demands that all of those concepts be rejected as incoherent. In the latter, he suggests that this realization would do the same work that Haslanger attempts with a very different technique. That is to say, if we are forced to agree that there are no races, then Appiah thinks we must dissolve the social categories and liberate the groups of people oppressed on the basis of traditional ideas about race. One race cannot be sensibly deemed superior to another if there are no races to begin with.

² Haslanger, “Gender and Race: (What) Are They? (What) Do We Want Them To Be?”

³ Appiah, “Race in the Modern World: The Problem of the Color Line”

Appiah builds his argument on analyses of how “race” ought to be defined and how it has been historically applied. He begins by differentiating between a “strict criterial theory” (which requires adherence to all necessary and sufficient conditions for a concept/object to fit into a specific category) and a “vague criterial theory” (which merely requires the satisfaction of a significant number of the necessary and sufficient conditions for a concept/object to fit into a specific category). Because of how often and clearly people seem to disagree about the precise set of necessary and sufficient conditions for defining a “race”, Appiah rejects the “strict criterial theory”. He also rejects the “vague criterial theory” on the grounds that it is inherently incoherent because it leaves too much room for broad interpretations of race and a wide range of contradictory opinions about the way racial concepts map onto the real world.⁴

Discontented with these approaches to definition, Appiah continues his quest for an ideational meaning of “race” through a reflection on historically popular rhetoric about race. Though he does not accept the “vague criterial theory” as a clear enough definition to defend the existence of races, he does recognize the usefulness of understanding the vague criteria that have often been (and continue to be) used to talk about race, by those who do believe in it and act on those beliefs.⁵

Thus, he examines the writing of such influential minds as Thomas Jefferson and Matthew Arnold, and observes again the biological concepts at the root of their racial concepts. In light of modern science, Appiah reminds us that these traditional ideas falter. While he does concede that a discussion of “race” in the realm of population genetics may very well be supported by modern biology and therefore valid, he insists that even these scientifically sound

⁴ Appiah, “Why There Are No Human Races”, 456-58

⁵ Appiah, “Why There Are No Human Races”, 458

racial divisions would not map onto the modern world in the same way as our social distinctions between racial groups. If racial concepts cannot be separated from outdated biological concepts, then it is fair to claim, as Appiah does, that there are no human races.⁶

Haslanger, however, does separate racial concepts from biological concepts. Like Appiah, she assumes as fact that there is no scientific justification for racial distinctions. She also shares Appiah's concern that racial lines are drawn very differently in different contexts by different people, but rather than conclude from this that all vague concepts of race are incoherent and therefore races do not exist, she takes a more modified approach. Rather than boil racial concepts down to their faulty biological roots, she emphasizes the manifestations of traditional racial concepts and includes those problematic outgrowths as critical to the overarching definition of "race". While Haslanger recognizes the absurdity of pseudoscientific racial concepts, she deems it more important to respond to the consequences of those enduring concepts and take them into account when trying to understand (and change) how "race" functions in the modern world. She decides that it is most beneficial to consider race as more than perceived physical differences, but as "a position within a broad social network".

In other words, Haslanger associates race so strongly with social behavior that she considers relative social power (or lack thereof) a necessary and sufficient condition of racial categorization. In her own words, "races are those groups demarcated by the geographical associations accompanying perceived body type, when those associations take on evaluative significance concerning how members of the group should be viewed and treated."⁷

⁶ Appiah, "Why There Are No Human Races", 460-67

⁷ Haslanger, "Gender and Race: (What) Are They? (What) Do We Want Them To Be?", 44

Given this definition, Haslanger opposes Appiah in that she *does* believe in the existence of races. However, she crafts this definition not by observing how “race” is used currently in the real world, but specifically with the intent of establishing an altered definition that will better serve the progressive movement towards the same universal equality that Appiah seeks. Her analysis is designed to provide a framework within which productive discourse can be held and positive change pursued.⁸ In order to change the way people divide themselves from one another, one must first acknowledge why and how those divisions are traditionally and currently made. Then, the divisive concepts must be re-defined to help make that change. While Appiah takes the first step in this direction, Haslanger carries the matter forward with an active attempt to reorganize racial concepts in such a way that global society can be guided towards the future that both she and Appiah desire.

It is this differentiation in the approach of these authors that is most worth noting. If the end game is improving the general public’s understanding of race, then the argument provided must do more than ask its audience to be colorblind. It must also replace the concepts that it rejects, because leaving a vacancy just stalls the conversation that must happen in order to create real change. While it is true that biology does not support the existence of races, a more effective argument provides the public with a new way to discuss the differences and similarities that they *do* see between themselves and other human beings. Appiah is not wrong in his conclusion, but he is not serving his cause to the fullest.

As many modern activists and spokespersons for racial equality movements around the world have continued to point out, it is very nearly a step backwards to assert the claim that “we

⁸ Haslanger, “Gender and Race: (What) Are They? (What) Do We Want Them To Be?”, 34-6

are all the same”. We are not all the same. We do not all look, think, feel, speak, worship, or exist in the same ways. We are not interchangeable, but we are all equally valid in all our natural shapes, sizes, and colors.

It is progress to recognize that traditional ideas about race are flawed, and that we are all part of the same humanity; but it is stagnation to close one’s eyes and declare that the reason for us all being equal is that we are all identical. Such a concept of race leaves no room for the very real differences between people around the world (even just around the block) that make the spectrum of human experience so vibrant and powerful. It also handicaps progressive thinkers by removing, without replacing, the language they need to hold the conversations that will push the world towards equality. Not only is the concept of race unlikely to be smoothly erased if we can just get everyone on board, but the goal is not to convince the world that differences between people in different parts of the world, from different backgrounds, do not exist. Even if we cease to draw biological lines between groups, cultural divisions are inevitable and likely to overlap largely with traditional racial divisions.

So, the real goal is to convince the world that these existing differences cannot be assigned social values in a way that translates to a scale of superiority and the oppression of those arbitrarily deemed inferior. If we can achieve this, then we have done our work as philosophers and conscientious citizens of the world by truly improving upon existing systems of social, philosophical, and political thought. Haslanger’s analysis of race makes a stronger effort to accomplish this task than does Appiah’s, and therefore is a more useful theory.

References:

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