

# The Philosophical Roots of Racial Essentialism and Its Legacy

## *Abstract*

Racial essentialism or the idea of unchanging racial substances that support human social hierarchy, was introduced into philosophy by David Hume and expanded upon by Immanuel Kant. These strong influences continued into W. E. B. Du Bois' moral and spiritual idea of a black race, as a destiny to be fulfilled past a world of racism and inequality. In the twenty-first century, »the race debates« between »eliminativists« and »retentionists« swirl around the lack of independent biological scientific foundation for physical human races and the ongoing importance of race as a social ordering principle and source of identity. Analyses of the idea of race are of philosophical concern for historical and conceptual reasons, as well as ongoing issues of contemporary identity and social injustice.

## *Keywords*

essentialism, race debates, racial retention, W. E. B. Du Bois, David Hume, Immanuel Kant, science and race, racial eliminativism.

## I Introduction

Racial essentialism is widely repudiated by that name, but aspects of the concept nonetheless persist in contemporary ideas of racial identity and social justice. This is a paradox, if not an outright contradiction.

Racial essentialism is a bona fide philosophical subject, not only as a matter of »applied philosophy,« but insofar as Western philosophers helped to create the idea of racial essences, based on core metaphysical concepts in their tradition. The idea of racial essences, as the source of racial hierarchies, emerged in the intellectual communities of modernity during the early days of modern anthropology and biology. Dif-

ferent versions of that idea were promulgated by David Hume and Immanuel Kant, in ways that would be considered racist today.<sup>1</sup> The unchanging essence posit in the idea of racial essence goes back further to Aristotelian ideas of essence and can be found later on in analogies to metallurgical notions of purity in the nineteenth century.<sup>2</sup> A number of twenty-first century academic philosophers in the United States and United Kingdom (and perhaps more broadly) wrangle with ideas of racial essentialism in what are called »The Race Debates.«<sup>3</sup> The retention of essentialist ideas of race also has advocates committed to racial egalitarianism in contemporary political, moral, and legal contexts, who are often not aware of its philosophical lineage.

Part I of this paper is a discussion of racial essentialism of Hume and Kant. Part II is an interpretation of their influence through the opposition between the twentieth century heirs of W. E. B. Du Bois on the one hand and of Franz Boas (especially in the biological sciences) on the other. Part III concludes with a reflection on what may be an incommensurability in thought about the foundations of what we know as »race.«

## II The Philosophical Roots of Racial Essentialism

As a conceptual answer to the question of what race is, racial essentialism is a vague hybrid of racial taxonomy and Aristotelian ideas of biological essence. Biological essences, as determinative of both species and racial identities, have been supposed to be inherited, and unchan-

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<sup>1</sup> See H. Kimmerle, »Hegel's Eurocentric Concept of Philosophy,« pp. 99–117 in this journal.

<sup>2</sup> Nineteenth century metaphysical ideas of race used the analogy of metals to apply ideas of racial essences, such that mixed race individuals were instances of »amalgamation.« See: N. Zack, *Race and Mixed Race* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), pp. 78–85. Contemporary discussions of reference and natural kinds typically restrict notions of essences to chemistry, e.g. the discussion of »water« as literally referring to H<sub>2</sub>O rather than something »in the head;« and indeed, chemistry is probably the best candidate for real scientific essentialism, although not in any way that has anything to do with human races. See H. Putnam's classic »Meaning and Reference,« *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 70, No. 19, Seventieth Annual Meeting of the American Philosophical Association Eastern Division, 1973, pp. 699–711.

<sup>3</sup> An April 2014 conference at the University of San Francisco bore this title: »The Race Debates: From Philosophy to Biomedical Research,« (URL: <https://sites.google.com/site/theracedebates2014/>, last accessed on 20 May 2014).

ging.<sup>4</sup> The core components of racial essentialism are at least the following: There are human races; each race is distinct from all other races in important ways; members of each distinct race have either a general trait that causes all of their other racial characteristics or a set of racial traits that is the »essence« of their racial identities. Racial essences may be limited to physical traits, or, as prevalent over much of modern western intellectual history, include cultural, moral, and aesthetic traits. Furthermore, racial essentialism can be understood as a type of thinking about human difference that labels people in ways that apply to whole persons. For instance, while shortness or thinness are traits understood to co-exist alongside other traits, an essentialist view of a white, black, or Asian person categorizes the entire human being.<sup>5</sup>

Historically, racial essentialism was a convenient tool for creating doctrines of white racial superiority and non-white inferiority during the Age of Discovery when Europeans began commercial projects of resource extraction, appropriation, domination, and slavery.<sup>6</sup> The lands and peoples of Africa, Asia, and the Americas were taken as the »raw materials« for these projects; and moral racial hierarchies rationalized the contradiction between Enlightenment egalitarian ideals and how non-whites were treated by whites. By the mid-eighteenth century, the existence of biological human races, ranked according to worth and status, could be taken for granted by philosophers and other intellectuals. Thus, in his 1754 edition of *Essays Moral, Political and Literary*, Hume wrote in a footnote:

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<sup>4</sup> The unchanging nature of essences is an ontological presupposition and may not be reflected in the epistemology of categorizing living things. For recent experimental findings, see: J. Hampton, Z. Estes, and S. Simmons, »Metamorphosis: Essence, Appearance, and Behavior in the Categorization of Natural Kinds,« *Memory & Cognition*, Vol. 35, No. 7, 2007, pp. 1785–1800.

<sup>5</sup> On the idea of totalistic labeling that is historically contingent, see I. Hacking, »Making Up People,« *London Review of Books*, Vol. 28, No. 16, 2006.

<sup>6</sup> See, for instance »The American Anthropological Association's 1998 Statement on Race,« (URL: <http://www.aaanet.org/stmts/racepp.htm>; last accessed on 20 May 2014). For a discussion of the Statement's philosophical innocence, see N. Zack, »Philosophical Aspects of the 1998 AAA [American Anthropological Association] Statement on Race,« *Anthropological Theory*, Vol. 1, No. 4, 2001, pp. 445–465.

I am apt to suspect the negroes and in general all the other species of men (for there are four or five different kinds) to be naturally inferior to the whites [...] There are Negroe slaves dispersed all over Europe, of which none ever discovered any symptoms of ingenuity, tho' low people, without education, will start up among us, and distinguish themselves in every profession.<sup>7</sup>

When Hume wrote, as now, species were viewed as the smallest group of a biological kind capable of reproducing fertile offspring and races were groups within species that could interbreed – a species difference was and is held to be greater than a racial difference.<sup>8</sup> However, Hume did not take care to distinguish between races and species, perhaps in keeping with his *polygenicism*, the doctrine that human races had evolved separately. When his contemporary James Beattie objected to his generalization because it lacked empirical support, Hume casually rewrote the footnote for the 1776 edition: »I am apt to suspect the negroes to be naturally inferior to the whites. There scarcely was a civilized nation of that complexion, not even of individual eminent in action or speculation.«<sup>9</sup>

The shift in Hume's footnotes from a focus on individual aptitudes to group cultural taxonomy set the stage for Kant's more explicitly essentialist taxonomy of races. Kant, as a monogenist, believed that all humans descended from the same *stem*. Anticipating Darwin, he insisted on an explanation of human difference in terms of heredity:

Among the deviations – i. e., the hereditary differences of animals belonging to a single stock – those which, when transplanted (displaced to other areas), maintain themselves over protracted generation, and which also generate hybrid young whenever they interbreed with other deviations of the same stock, are called *races* [...] In this way Negroes and whites are not different species of humans (for they belong presumably to one stock), but they are different races, for each perpetuates itself in every area, and they generate between them children that are necessarily hybrid, or blendings (mulattoes).<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> D. Hume, »Of National Characters,« in T. H. Greene, and T. H. Grose (eds.), *Essays Moral, Political and Literary* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1875), 2 vols., Essay XXI, p. 249.

<sup>8</sup> There are a number of different species concepts at this time and debate over whether the concept is useful or necessary in biology. See: R. A. Richards (ed.), *The Species Problem: A Philosophical Analysis*, Cambridge Studies in Philosophy and Biology, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

<sup>9</sup> For a discussion of this controversy between Hume and Beattie, see: R. H. Popkin, »Hume's Racism,« *Philosophical Forum*, Vol. 9/2, Nos. 2–3, 1977–1978, pp. 211–226.

<sup>10</sup> I. Kant, »On the Different Races of Man,« in Earl W. Count (ed.), *This Is Race: An*

Kant included Hindustanis and Kalmuks in his taxonomy of races and simply asserted, »The reason for assuming the Negroes and Whites to be fundamental races is self-evident.«<sup>11</sup> Thus, Kant's monogenicism, as based on the knowledge that different races could interbreed, did not otherwise lead him to minimize differences among races.

According to Kant, the important characteristics distinguishing one race from another were moral, aesthetic, and intellectual: Man had a distinctive human essence that permitted him to develop civilization, but that ability varied among (what Kant referred to as) nations, because talent was unevenly distributed.<sup>12</sup> Race, for Kant, was conflated with nationality and geographic origin, with the result that the only race that could develop the arts and sciences were white Europeans. The differences in national characters resulting from »unseen formative causes« and geographical differences were evident in »the distinctive feeling of the beautiful and the sublime« – Germans were superior to all other Europeans, but the greatest difference was between Europe and Africa. In discussing Africans, Kant deferred to Hume as an authority, reiterating:

The Negroes of Africa have by nature no feeling that rises above the *trifling*. Mr. Hume challenges anyone to cite a single example in which a Negro has shown talents [...] So fundamental is the difference [between Negroes and Whites] and it appears to be as great in regard to mental capacities as in color.<sup>13</sup>

Thus, Kant reasoned that there must be races because there were evident mixed-race individuals – ironic for us insofar as contemporary discussion of mixed race often zeroes in on how the existence of mixed-race individuals dispels notions of races.<sup>14</sup> And, Kant posited a human essence in an ability to develop civilization, but only among those humans who were racially white Europeans. His metaphysical speculations about formative causes and national characters were em-

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*Anthology Selected from the International Literature on the Races of Man*, New York: Henry Shuman, 1950, p. 17.

<sup>11</sup> (*Ibid.*: 19).

<sup>12</sup> I. Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, H. H. Rudnick (ed.), V. Lyle Dowdell (trans.), Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1996, p. 3.

<sup>13</sup> I. Kant, »On National Characters,« in E. C. Eze (ed.), *Race and the Enlightenment: A Reader*, Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1997, pp. 55–56.

<sup>14</sup> See: Zack (1993); N. Zack, »American Mixed Race: Theoretical and Legal Issues,« *Harvard Black Letter Law Journal*, Vol. 17, 2001, pp. 33–46.

pirically empty. The influence of Kant's views on race was carried along with the influence of the rest of German idealism until the early twentieth century, when the sciences of biological heredity and anthropology developed independent empirical criteria for theories of human difference.<sup>15</sup>

### III Twentieth Century Essentialism versus Biological Science

In considering twentieth-century racial essentialism, it is important to start with Du Bois, because many contemporary theorists of race continue to give him the last word. W. E. B. Du Bois (1868–1963) was a mixed-race African-American sociologist, historian, and activist, who founded the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in 1909 and edited its journal, *The Crisis*, for decades. As a deeply insightful proponent of the perspective of African-Americans, most famously in *Black Reconstruction in America*, Du Bois remains well known for his idea of double consciousness, his combination of literary and analytic writing, and his lifelong dedication to progress against oppression for American blacks and racial »uplift« within the African-American community.<sup>16</sup> But here, the focus is on Du Bois's racial essentialism, insofar as he repudiated late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century scientific thought that focused on physical studies of racial difference, often in fraudulent ways and from a white supremacist perspective.<sup>17</sup> However, it was not the white supremacist motivation behind such research that motivated Du Bois to repudiate it, but its failure to address cultural differences and »strivings.« In »The Conservation of Races,« his 1897 address to the American Negro Academy (an organization dedicated to higher education and achievement in the arts and sciences for African Americans, of which Du Bois was one of the founders), Du Bois specifically disagreed with the scientific attempt of his time to use anthropomorphic data to measure racial difference,

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<sup>15</sup> Kant was not alone in constructing a philosophical metaphysics of race. For further discussion of his views and Hegel's, see N. Zack, *Philosophy of Science and Race* (New York: Routledge, 2002), Chapters 1 and 2, pp. 9–41.

<sup>16</sup> For a brief general discussion of Du Bois's importance for philosophy, see, »William Edward Burghardt Du Bois,« *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, (URL: <http://www.iep.utm.edu/dubois/>, last accessed on 26 May 2014).

<sup>17</sup> See S. J. Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man*, New York: Norton, 1996.

claiming that races »while they perhaps transcend scientific definition, nevertheless are clearly defined to the eye of the Historian and Sociologist.«<sup>18</sup> What he wanted race to mean for African-Americans was a combination of deference to the ascendance of Euro-American culture – that is, he accepted the achievements of white-dominated culture as human ideals – and aspirations for their collective future:

We are Negroes, members of a vast historic race that from the very dawn of creation has slept, but half awakening in the dark forests of its African fatherland [...] It is our duty to conserve our physical powers, our intellectual endowments, our spiritual ideas; as a race we must strive by race organizations, by race solidarity, by race unity to the realization of that broader humanity which freely recognizes differences in men, but sternly deprecates inequality in their opportunities for development.<sup>19</sup>

Du Bois's idea of race is implicitly metaphysical in its moral and spiritual dimensions and dismissive of empirical biological science in that it is not social science. That is, Du Bois did not believe that the physical sciences could be the ultimate authority on what race was, because he viewed race as primarily a psychic matter, directly intuited or experienced, and perhaps best expressed in literature and art. And yet, Du Bois does not dismiss a physical aspect to what he means by race. The sense in which Du Bois echoes and appropriates for Africans and African Americans Kant's essentialist notion of race was buttressed by his studies with leading economists and political and cultural theorists at the University of Berlin in the early 1890s. At its core, Du Bois' idea of race was shot through with German romanticism, especially the legacy of Johann Gottfried Herder which imbued each nation with its own distinct spiritual life or soul.<sup>20</sup> Although his ideas about race changed through the years, he described his own life as »the autobiography of a race concept« and at no time did he relinquish a spiritual, lyrical, and aspirational idea of race that went beyond biology but was at the same time physically hereditary.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, »The Conservation of Races,« reprinted in R. Bernasconi, and T. L. Lott (eds.), *The Idea of Race* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2000), p. 110.

<sup>19</sup> (*Ibid.*: 114).

<sup>20</sup> For a recent account and discussion of Du Bois's intellectual history that emphasizes this period of his life, see K. A. Appiah, *Lines of Descent: W. E. B. Du Bois and the Emergence of Identity*, Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2014.

<sup>21</sup> (*Ibid.*: 8–9ff.).

Long after Du Bois, African American thinkers have continued to appropriate the most essentialist and racialist Germanic thought (like the belief in the existence of races), together with struggles against racist oppression. Consider for instance the uncanny similarity between the pronouncements of chief Nazi theorist Alfred Rosenberg, famous for holding that »soul means race seen from within« (and also that »[physical] race is the external side of a soul«)<sup>22</sup> and the importance of the trope of »soul« in the Black Power movement of the 1950s–70s.<sup>23</sup>

There was another twentieth-century approach to race and racial liberation, beginning with Franz Boas, the anthropologist who awakened Du Bois's own interest in black history with his 1906 *Commencement Address* at Atlanta University.<sup>24</sup> Boas both emphasized the value and importance of the culture and history of non-white racial groups and took care to separate them from essentialist ideas of biological determinism and contemporary scientific studies of physical race. With the publication of his 1911 *The Mind of Primitive Man*, a foundation was created for subsequent anthropologists to approach the cultures associated with distinct races as contingent historical developments. Boas' insistence that differences in mental aptitude were as great within races as between them was a telling blow to essentialist hereditary racial determinism.<sup>25</sup> Claude Lévi-Strauss went on in the following decades to argue that all cultures shared psychic similarities,

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<sup>22</sup> See, »The Racial and Religious Theories of Alfred Rosenberg,« (URL: <http://archive.org/stream/TheRacialAndReligiousTheoriesOfAlfredRosenberg/RacialAndReligiousTheoriesOfAlfredRosenberg>, last accessed on 10 June 2014).

<sup>23</sup> W. L. Weber, »Soul: Black Power, Politics, and Pleasure (review),« *Symploke*, Vol. 6, Nos. 1–2, 1998, pp. 207–208.

<sup>24</sup> F. Boas, »Commencement Address at Atlanta University, May 31, 1906,« *Atlanta University Leaflet*, No. 19 (S.l.: s.n.) (URL: <http://www.webdubois.org/BoasAtlantaCommencement.html>, last accessed on 10 June 2014). In his 1939 *Black Folk Now and Then*, Du Bois described his experience as an awakening. He recounted the history of the black kingdoms south of the Sahara for a thousand years, concluding, »I was too astonished to speak.« From W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Folk Then and Now: An Essay in the History and Sociology of the Negro Race* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 84.

<sup>25</sup> The question of racial difference and IQ nonetheless continued to haunt the twentieth century. For a discussion on IQ and environmental influences, see: N. Block, »How Heredity Misleads about Race,« in A. Montagu (ed.), *Race and IQ*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1999, pp. 444–481.



with the differences wholly accountable through the effects of historical events and material conditions.<sup>26</sup>

Not only did such distinctions between race and culture free twentieth-century biological scientists from a requirement to discover physical cultural determinants in racial distinctions, but first the idea of physical racial essences ceased to be useful to them, and then the idea of physical race itself was »retired.« A (very) short account of that scientific revision would highlight the following. Nothing has been found in human blood, physiology, or genes that can, independently of social ideas of race, support a scientific taxonomy of human races. Racial phenotypes are determined by genotypes that do not get inherited together but disperse and recombine at conception. There is more variation of those traits within social races, that is, the groups that are considered races within society, than between or among social races and it should perhaps be emphasized that this fact in itself precludes the possibility of scientific race, *a priori*. Some phenotypes are more frequent in some human populations than others, but populations are not well-defined groups and vary in number from under ten to hundreds of thousands, depending on the scientific interests of taxonomists. The geographical location of ancestors also fails to ground race because it bears no verified causal connection to those phenotypical traits considered racial in society. There is a consensus that all modern humans originated in Africa, but multiple-origin hypotheses assume too much travel and mixture among early populations to support the evolution of races. And finally, the mapping of the human genome yielded no information about general genetic material that is relevant to race. Of course, the traits considered racial in society, such as skin color or skeletal proportion are both physical and hereditary, but it adds no more information to physical scientific description and analysis of those traits, to consider them »racial« in physical biological terms.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> See C. Lévi-Strauss, »Race and History,« in L. Kuper (ed.), *Race, Science, and Society*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1965.

<sup>27</sup> For extended discussion, analysis, and sources concerning this summary, see relevant chapters in Zack (2002).

#### IV Incommensurable Paradigms

One explanation for why racial essentialism is widely repudiated, but just as widely presumed, is a semantic difference. Those who repudiate racial essentialism in non-philosophical discourse are often opposing stereotypical racial thinking or the assumption that general racial identity determines specific racial traits. The racist stereotypical form of essentialism was evident in Kant's notorious remark, »This fellow was quite black from head to foot, a clear proof that what he said was stupid.«<sup>28</sup> However, the kind of racial essentialism at issue in this paper has not been essentialism as associated with racial stereotypes – as important as that is – but essentialism as a subject of metaphysics and/or philosophy of science.

There are two competing paradigms in contemporary thought about the metaphysics and/or philosophy of science of race: Retentionism and Eliminativism.<sup>29</sup> Retentionists seek to retain ideas of race in one or both of two senses: (1) Distinct cultures associated with distinct races should be preserved – for cultural, moral, or political reasons<sup>30</sup> and (2) Social ideas of race have a foundation in the biological sciences. Eliminativists insist on a recognition of the factual independence of two things: (1) ideas of physical human races that are common within so-

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<sup>28</sup> For a wider discussion of this remark and what we would call racist ideas of race in the Enlightenment, see E. C. Eze, »The Color of Reason: The Idea of ›Race‹ in Kant's Anthropology,« (in K. M. Faull, ed., *The Bucknell Review, Anthropology and the German Enlightenment*, London: Associated University Presses, 1995, pp. 201–241, [Special issue]), pp. 218 ff.

<sup>29</sup> To say that there are just two paradigms is very likely an over-simplification. For instance, some might believe that culture is separate from biological race as a matter of fact, but that culture should or should not be connected to it to preserve racial identities. Or, some may believe that the lack of a foundation in biology for race makes the preservation of cultures associated with ordinary ideas of race a low priority or a high priority. There are many possible logical combinations and nuances possible.

<sup>30</sup> The African-American pragmatist and chief intellectual sponsor of the Harlem Renaissance worked from the premise that regardless of its scientific underpinnings, »race« as a set of ideas and practices should be supported for American blacks, so as to preserve their culture. Leonard Harris sums up Alain Locke's position, thus: »The Negro race and the Negro culture were for Locke two distinct phenomena that by dint of history were identified as synonymous. Loyalty to the uplift of the race for Locke was thus, *mutatis mutandis*, loyalty to the uplift of the culture« (L. Harris (ed.), *The Philosophy of Alain Locke*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989, p. 20).

ciety and may line up with how society is organized and (2) scientific accounts of human physical difference. Both sides agree that human society has been hierarchically organized into distinct human groups that are regarded as »races« – by the members of distinct racial groups with respect to their own racial groups and in the perceptions of race by other distinct racial groups. In other words, people view themselves as belonging to a race and they recognize that others belong to races different from their own.

The interesting philosophical difference between eliminativists and retentionists turns on whether or not races are biologically real, and also, perhaps, what such reality or its lack would normatively require, which is to say, how we *should* think and speak about that reality, what we *should* do about it, and what educational, social, and/or legal changes we *should* aim to bring about. The reality of race is philosophically important, not because of issues related to biological determinism, but because the ordinary concept of race in society carries with it some belief in the physical biological reality of race. That is, the average person may not be able to say exactly what it is in science that independently establishes physical racial reality, but she believes that the relevant scientists know what that is. We have noted that no racial essence has ever been empirically identified and that within the human biological sciences, those who study human difference no longer find the notion of race useful. Moreover, the widely acknowledged greater differences within, rather than between, social races of exactly those physical traits considered racial, precludes the possibility that a physical race concept will ever be scientifically useful. The eliminativist takes these facts as indicative of embedded falsehood in the ordinary concept of race. As the term »eliminativism« suggests, addressing that falsehood may support a normative conclusion that social racial distinctions ought to be eschewed or »eliminated.« The retentionist seeks to retain the ordinary concept of race on one or both of two grounds: those differences linked to human evolution on different continents are sufficient to serve as a physical foundation for the ordinary concept;<sup>31</sup> at least some minimal and non-racist form of the ordinary concept can be preserved if separate ideas of heredity and appearance are related to

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<sup>31</sup> R. O. Andreason, »The Meaning of »Race«: Folk Conceptions and the New Biology of Race,« *Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 102, 2005, pp. 94–106.

biological studies of human difference that do not in themselves independently support an idea of race.<sup>32</sup>

The eliminativist is more willing than the retentionist to defer to the findings of biological science on physical matters – in this case, race – and may insist that all members of the educated community do the same. The retentionist will not allow science to have the last word in this way and in that sense retains a metaphysical notion of race, that very posit of biological race that does not require independent scientific confirmation, even when the very premise implies that there is a foundation for race in the biological sciences. Indeed, insofar as the human biological sciences no longer find a concept of human race useful or informative, the retentionist's position is more »metaphysical« – that is, in going beyond what is physical – than it was when biological scientists believed that their research did support ideas in society about racial differences and divisions. Now, as then, this position may shade into myth and allegory. If the retentionist seeks to retain social ideas of race only, and to give up even a minimal foundation in the biological sciences, then her position becomes indistinguishable from that of the eliminativist, in terms of acceptance of the conclusions of the biological sciences.

As a cognitive or intellectual matter, the endurance of racial metaphysics can probably best be understood as part of the legacy of racial essentialism – not in Kant's clearly flawed detailed analysis, but in Hume's comfort with what is obvious.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, the eliminativist would see no physical scientific grounds for using racial categories as labels applying to entire persons, while the retentionist, in retaining ordinary usage, would also be committed to the quasi-biological taxonomy that lingers in ordinary usage. However, the heart of the incommensurability between these views remains a yes or no answer to this question, »Should we accept the findings of the physical sciences as the ultimate authority for what is physically real?« This incommensurabil-

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<sup>32</sup> M. O. Hardimon, »The Ordinary Concept of Race,« *Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 102, 2003, pp. 437–455.

<sup>33</sup> When the retentionist is engaged in a richer form of identity theory, cultural analysis, or liberatory inspiration than bare metaphysics or philosophy of science, he or she may be expressing loyalty to the cultural group mores of their racial group. Eliminativists who are not being disingenuous in seeking to eliminate racial categories while racial discrimination continues without redress would generally respect such affiliative expression, as a moral or ethical matter – or a form of recognition.

ity rests on each side having radically different ideas of what is meant by something being physical. For the retentionist, the ordinary idea of race refers to things that are fully physical in human experience, so that any scientific meaning of physicality would have to begin with that experience, making it perfectly reasonable to relax the demand for an independent scientific foundation for racial taxonomy. The eliminativist is likely to take the history of modern ideas of race into account and point to the fact that these ideas have always connoted a semantic deference to the biological sciences.

To conclude with a general question – Why should the concept of race be considered relevant in philosophy today? First, there is the historical interest in the concept within our discipline, although that is an issue of intellectual history, mainly. Second, the concept of race remains fraught with myriad confusions and continues to be discussed at cross-purposes, both within and without the academy. Philosophers have well-developed methods for analyzing how concepts are used, which can reconcile positions that are not incommensurable. Here are some examples: in US society, when people bring up what they call »race,« they are often talking about racism, prejudice, or discrimination based on beliefs about racial identities; throughout the world, racial categories are applied in different ways, such that someone from Southeast Asia may be considered white in the United States but black in the United Kingdom; sometimes, when people think the subject is racial difference, they are referring to ethnic or cultural differences. Moreover, insofar as race does not have the biological foundation it is presumed to have, racial distinctions can be analyzed as matters of history and culture. Also, new projects of »racialization« or designation of a group as »racial,« when it was not previously considered a race, can be studied as effects of differences in economic and political power. Finally, within wealthy nations and internationally, members of those groups identified as non-white are the majority of the poor and disadvantaged. That is more clearly an ethical issue, once released from a false (deterministic) biological foundation, and ethics is an important subfield of philosophy – although in the case of race, the force of its influence on political goals is somewhat weak. As well, and to return to the specific subject of this paper, clarification of what it means to say that race is real or not can ultimately only be accomplished with reference to whether or not race has the foundation in the biological sciences it purports to have in common sense. Persistence in assuming the reality

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of race, based on beliefs that it has a biological scientific foundation that it is known to lack, is accurately termed »racial essentialism« and/or »racial retentionism,« whereas rejection of the reality of race given knowledge of that same lack of foundation is the referent of »racial eliminativism.« However, it should be understood that this last philosophical clarification has no direct implications for politics or public policy. Human groups to whom nonexistent biological causes are attributed for their differences from others may be in as much or greater need of social affirmation and assistance than groups without such attributions – in large part because of what people continue to believe about those groups. Nevertheless, the philosophical clarification may be of use in ameliorating exaggerated ideas of difference between human groups.

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