

Comments on Clanton Dawson's "A Thing Called Race"

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I would like to begin by saying that after Clanton's talk I am reminded why he was such a formidable debater in our seminars in graduate school. And his talk reminded me how much I miss those debates. Clanton has researched every aspect of race thoroughly, and his presentation raises several important ontological, epistemological and ethical concerns. While I in no way claim to be an expert on the philosophy of race, I would like to comment on at least one interpretive remark that Clanton makes in his criticism of the eliminativist position. My remarks will not pose an argument against Clanton's overarching concern about the position but are, rather, an internal criticism of one of his objections.

Clanton states that one of the key points of the eliminativist position is the ethical-historical objection that "racial thinking and talking is too often accompanied by racist thinking and talking. The very concepts employed in discussing race have been drawn on in the past to legitimate the denigration and subjugation of racialized communities." Clanton then indicates that the eliminativist infers that "if we stop talking about each other in racial terms, we will stop thinking racist thoughts...". Clanton's second objection is to point out "that not talking about race will not make racism disappear." He then compares the mentality of the eliminativist to people refusing to talk about an elephant in a room, when the creature is clearly standing before them.

I have two concerns about this objection. The first is that the key premises of the eliminativist argument seem to be empirical claims with good sociological evidence behind them. The ethical concern of racism remains the same regardless of whether or not there are ontological differences of race – what I take the ethical concern of the eliminativist position to

be, is that we have taken racial differences (i.e. secondary characteristics) to be ethically important historically, and that is the problem. In order to combat racism this kind of talk must end. Talking now, and in the future about the mere genetic component of race would not undermine their concerns; rather it would underscore the moral irrelevance of the concept.

The second problem that I have is that I don't believe an eliminativist must make the inference that Clanton attributes to them. The problem is not that we continue to speak about race, but how we have done so, that is, in such a manner that treats the notion as morally relevant to distinctions between human beings. The conclusion that an eliminativist could easily accept, and one that would not be missing the point of their own premises, is that people need to be reeducated about race and that future generations are taught that secondary physiological characteristics have no bearing on moral worth because "race" is an ontic, biological feature and not an ontologically (human) *differentium*.

As I have already stated, I am not an expert in this area, so I would welcome Clanton's response to my remarks, and some further discussion of the eliminativist position which I do not pretend to fully understand.