

Keynote Address: A Thing Called Race

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To President Dr. Carolyn Mahoney, Dr. Ann Harris, Dean of the School of Arts and Letters, Dr. Bruce Ballard, Dr. Laurence Rohrer, Dr. Jeffery Freelin, distinguished guest presenters, other members of the faculty and staff, and of course students—good morning. Thank you for the invitation to attend and present the keynote address for this 3rd Annual Philosophy Conference. I am honored that you have given me this opportunity to discuss a central part of my work.

I begin this address by telling a racist joke. It is a joke that sets the context of what I wish to discuss with you. The joke is by Whoopi Goldberg. Question: Do you know why so many black and brown soldiers were killed during the Vietnam War? Answer: Because every time someone would shout, “Get Down!” black and Latino soldiers would bust a move (dance!).

Many people find the joke funny—or do we? Should we laugh given the imbedded stereotypes in the joke? A greater question to ask is, what is it about race that causes us to be hesitant and reluctant, or openly defiant when speaking about race? The fact is that we who make up this great democratic experiment are constantly race thinking or talking about race. Therefore since the focus of this conference is on the analysis of race and philosophy, I can think of no better way to begin than to ask, what is this thing called race?

Let me be clear: this is not a discussion about racism *per se*. All serious conversation about race will include a discussion of racism, how racism is or is not deeply ingrained in the very institutions and systems that operate in this country, how racism still determines who has access to privilege and power and who does and does not have access, etc. However, *this presentation wants to examine racism another way. Racism, etymologically, is a body of*

knowledge concerning the nature of race. This presentation is an evaluation and examination of our epistemological commitments, our thinking, about race. This presentation will explore what mental images and/or paradigms best describe our conceptual framework for race talk and race thought. Because of the negative baggage associated with the term racism I will instead use racialism(s), a term used by Kwame Anthony Appiah, although I maintain that what we are really doing is engaging in a conversation about different notions regarding the nature of race.

Today, I suggest that there are four concepts of race operating and clashing in this society. Each one vies for dominance and all of them together create the chaotic state of race talk we experience in contemporary American society. The first concept is the concept of *race as a biological manifestation*. In the early days of racial thought and talk, classical racialism was believed to be the correct way of thinking about race. It suggested that every race had a racial essence and that every member of the racial group shared the same racial essence. That essence determined three things about the individuals within the racial group: their intellectual ability, their moral capacity, and their physiology. Under the classical racial conceptual framework one could know every important aspect of a person's character if the racial essence was taken into consideration. Take for example the 'one drop rule.' The one drop rule stated one drop of black blood made a person black. Why? Because, they claimed, that the racial essence of a racial group was contained in the blood of each member of the group. For example if a person is Asian, one can predict that the person is good in math, or if the individual is Black then she will be great at sports—but not in academics, if the person was Latino, then he carried a knife, etc. We are well versed in the stereotypes perpetuated by classical racialism. What is important here is to notice that for classical racialism one's racial essence determines intellectual ability, moral capacity, and physiology. The U.S. Census Bureau still operates by this principle in that it assumes that all

Americans can check their appropriate racial box during a national census. What is important here is to notice that for classical racialism a) everyone has a racial essence; b) a person is aware of her appropriate racial essence and thus her correct racial group; and c) the racial essence of each group determines the intellectual ability, moral capacity, and physiology of every member of the designated group.

The first problem with classical racialism is that if the anthropologists are correct (and I think they are) humanity began in Africa in and around the regions of Kenya. From Africa humans migrated to various parts of the world. You can imagine how disturbing this fact is for the classical racialist. If the first people were African then all of us are descendents of Africa. If we are all descendents of African, then all people share the same essence which makes the establishment of a racial hierarchical invalid. Thus, the hierarchical structures that classical racialism purports are obviously false. The second and perhaps the most important problem with classical racialism is that its history is one full of too many examples that defy racial types classical racialists maintain. George Washington Carver can easily be seen as the Michelangelo of our time. One needs only to watch Oprah Winfrey's attempt to keep time by clapping and the observer will soon realize that all Black people do not have rhythm.

A new form of classical racialism has emerged since the Human Genome Project of 2000. The research, performed primarily by Nei and Roychoudhury, has led some to believe that there may exist a significant genetic connection to race. What is clear from the research is that of our genetic make-up as human beings 98.1% of our genetic coding is the same. The research also demonstrates that 1.9% of our genetic make-up is different and the difference seems to follow racial groupings as we know them. As a result of the research race specific drugs have emerged as never before. Let me give three examples.

1. If I (as an African American male) have a heart attack the EMS personnel will not give me the usual bi-carbonate injection given to white males. Instead they will give me a solution called BiDil which has a history of being very effective with African American males.
2. Most women of African decent will never get osteoporosis. The early Bovina commercials use to state at the bottom of the advertisement, “This product is for women of Caucasian and Asian descent.”
3. The National Bone Marrow Transplant Network lists race as the first category of consideration for donor matches—even before alee count! The claim here is that the statistical chances of a successful match increase significantly when the race of the donor and recipient is taken into consideration.

These examples are just a few among many that have some arguing that there is a connection between race and genetics. Many in the intellectual community want to attribute these differences to diet, geography and other factors. However, it seems that an important link between race and genetic structure does exist, though the importance of the link is still very much up for debate.

The second concept of race operative in this society is that *race is a social construct and it is a construct with objective status*. This idea of race is the dominant concept of race in the intellectual community. While neither time nor space will allow a thorough examination of social constructionism and its relationship to race, let me suggest that social constructionists make a distinction between natural things like rock and quasars and things that are created by human enterprise. The things created by human societies are social constructs. A social construct can be weak (e.g. shaking hands when greeting another) or strong (e.g. money). Social constructs

are of two main kinds: real and therefore having objective status (either ontologically or epistemologically) like money, national flags, language; and, social constructs that are operative but do not have objective status like the Easter Bunny or the Tooth Fairy. The proponents of race as a social construct with objective status purport that race is a strong social construct and is real. Racial constructs with objective status determine for us how we think about ourselves as racialized populations. In other words, they tell us who we are and what to think thus having objective status.

Under this conceptual framework race is a) ontologically real and b) epistemologically real. Since the construct directs our thinking and sets the paradigms for identity, race as a social construct with objective status states for us what it means to be a racialized person in the same way the rules of the game determine how one thinks of the game. For example, the game of baseball has a body of rules that determine how the game is to be played. Because baseball is a relatively older game it has a historical perspective that informs our thinking of the game, and a set of established conventions that prescribes how one participates, codes of decorum, etc. By analogy race as a social construct serves our race talk and race thinking in like manner: what it means to play/perform in a particular position, team/group identity, proper and improper decorum as a racialized person, etc. The rules and conventions set out by race as a social construct with objective status determine what it means to be black, white, Asian, etc., as well as how I should think about what it means to be a member of said group.

One of the problems of race as a social construct with objective status is the problem of Passing. This is the social phenomenon where individuals of a socially constructed racialized group chose to willfully “pass” as a member of another racial group. African Americans and Latinos are familiar with this term and activity. In some circles it was a way of gaining social

benefits otherwise denied to them. Social constructionists will dismiss this action as simply an attempt to gratify a minority person's quest for access to privilege and power. But passing is a much more troubling concept considering the fact that the racial constructionists maintain that the *strong* social constructs of our lives tell us, without exception, 'who' we are and 'what' to think. Given that race is a strong social construct with objective status it would seem to be impossible for the passing phenomenon to exist given the power of the racial construct. After all, what lies outside of a social construct by which one could create an alternative identity? The answer is clear-nothing! Either we have to say that passing does not occur, which is blatantly false; or that considering race as a social construct with objective status is an insufficient model for telling us what race is or is not. I suggest that the passing problem causes major problems for race as a social construct with objective status.

The third concept of race which we should consider is the belief that *race is a social construct without objective status*, or as some thinkers in the field call it 'racial eliminativism'. The defenders of this position believe that to think that race is real is to have a naïve and unsophisticated belief like believing in the Easter Bunny or that the world is flat. The racial eliminativists maintain that once one matures and gains a sophisticated epistemic framework, one realizes that the Easter Bunny does not exist, the world is not flat, and there is no such thing as race. There is only one race and it is the human race.

They further claim that by thinking of race as real like rocks, quasars, and/or chipmunks is an absurd activity. Eliminativists point to the majority opinion within the biomedical community that points to the fact that all humans are 98.1% genetically the same. The very thinking about the human community in this fashion—as racialized groups—divides the human race against itself, disseminates the antiquated and erroneous thinking of the past, and perpetuates the

historical horrors of racism. If we quit thinking about race in this manner humanity can get on with the business of being 'human.'

There is something worth noting with the eliminativist position. The first part of their position is ontological in character. Isn't it a fact that there is more that we, as human beings, have in common as complex neuro-physiological organisms than we have dissimilarly? Again the Human Genome Project seems to say yes. In fact if pure physiology is the only criteria we employ in our racial categorizations, 21st Century citizens must acknowledge that many individuals are, strictly DNA speaking, 'White- looking Black people', and 'Black- looking White people', and every other combination one can think of in this context. Particularly with the presence of bi-racials, human beings have multiple classic racial characteristics. My physician, for example, refuses to call me an 'African-American' because he states, that I may have as much 'white' blood in me as the white looking person in the lobby. Of course, I remind him of the racial dissimilarities in things like, osteoporosis for example, and then he wants to change the subject. But I get his point: since we as human beings share so much in common why talk and think in racial terms at all?

Another point of the eliminativist position is an ethical-historical objection. They suggest 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 legitimize the denigration and subjugation of racialized communities. If we stop talking about each other in racial terms, we will stop thinking racist thoughts which cause certain groups to think they have a right to privilege and power and that other groups do not.

There are two problems for me with this objection. One problem is that racial eliminativism fails to acknowledge how deeply race is embedded in the very fabric of this society. Race

determines access to privilege and power regardless of class and/or economic status. If nothing else the phenomenon of President Barack Obama points to the reality of race. During the presidential primaries the media was obsessed with questions of whether Barack Obama was too black or too white. Once President Obama won the election, America has shown its real colors. The establishment of the Tea Party, the failure of the Republicans to work with the president, the onslaught of bumper stickers that proclaim '2012-America like is use to be;' or 'Never Again-Returning to the True America,' suggests that race and racism is real. If one speaks about this, one is charged with playing the race card. The point I am trying to make is that race and racism are real in everyday life and only with further open discussions about race can we start to make some sense out of nonsense.

The second problem is that not talking about race will not make racism disappear. There is a kind of wholesome naïveté in racial eliminativism. It is as if we do not look at the elephant in the room, or talk about the elephant, the elephant will go away. It seems to me that we need more conversation about race and racism if we are ever going to overcome the elephant once and for all. Rational discourse about race can move us toward some clarity of thought which hopefully will move us toward a post-racialized society in reality instead of the one we live in now.

The fourth and final concept of race is the idea that race is an existential choice grounded in 'lived' experience. Existentialists who support this conceptual framework maintain that there is no human essence: biological, religious, socially constructed ontological ousia, or of any other imaginative kind. They affirm that there is only existence, and that existence confronts us as both an ontological and ontic reality to which we may either live en soi, that is according to the prescribed racial mode; or, pour soi—for self. The individual therefore chooses each day what it means to be a black woman, a Latino man, Mung or whatever one chooses. The emphasis is

placed on the creative choice of existence rather than on facticities like skin color, tribal nuances, phenotypes, genotypes, etc.

The claims of racial existentialists further state that for people of color, in particular, attention to existence is paramount given the presence of bad faith experiences and structures of economic and political oppression, systemic racism, sexism, and xenophobia. These manifestations of bad faith constantly confront the individual with the possibility of annihilation and meaninglessness on the ontological level, and dread and anguish (to mention just two phenomenon) on the ontic level. It is the individual that must defiantly create and assert her racial existence over and against these threats. Each day is the creating and defining what it means to be (existence)—a process of identity and responsibility—that must precede the social racial prescriptions that attempt to annihilate the right of individual racial identity (essence). Therefore we create for ourselves what it means to be X. Take Dustin Hoffman in *Little Big Man* as a commercial example. He convinced us of the possibility of creating race. We were moved by his ability to be Native American and by the end of the movie were convinced that *he was Native American*.

This view of race has definite strengths. It places race at the individual level and maintains the integrity of race within the context of lived experiences. It must be admitted that a significant part of our racial self-reflection is shaped by the experiences of life. Indeed, at some point every individual must make a cognitive choice regarding who and what one is in relationship to the question of race. The problem, however, with the idea of race as purely an act of existential choice is the problem of creative imagination. Suppose one morning I wake up and due to positive relationships with Swedes, or my fascination with Swedish culture, I decide that I am Swedish. In spite of the facticities of being born of African American parents, reared in an

African American cultural context, having a bio-genetic African American phenotype, have African American offspring, etc., I continue to maintain vigorously that I am Swedish. For me to make a decision of this type would seem obviously ridiculous. Yet according to the concept of race as an existential choice such a leap of faith would be valid. We must ask: at what point is our self creating an exercise of imagination without substance and when is it a fearlessly active moment of identity creation? Until the rules are clear we are left with the impossible task of distinguishing between the racial knight of faith and the madman.

I am encouraged however with the new frontier that is emerging regarding race. The challenge posed by bi-racials urges us to think not in terms of the old paradigms but toward new frontiers in our thinking and talking about race. Perhaps race is the culmination of each, and yet not one. Perhaps the question of race is actually a call for new epistemological and metaphysical categories to adequately address the question. However, that is a discussion for another day. Until then I leave you with a question: What is this thing called race?