

Race and Ethnicity

Reading: Philip Kitcher, "Race, Ethnicity, Biology, Culture."

1. The reality of race revisited

A. *The concept of race*

Kitcher argues against the eliminativists about race and claims that there is a way to understand race as biologically real, drawing on claims about patterns of interbreeding within human sub-populations. He offers three conditions on what counts as a race (92-3), allowing that this is an idealized model (94):

- i) The species can be divided into mutually exclusive subsets of individuals that belong either to one of a number of pure races, or are of mixed race;
- ii) The pure races are closed under reproduction (if Adam and Eve are of one pure race, then so too are all of their offspring); and
- iii) The pure races are closed under ancestry (if their offspring are of a given pure race, then so too are Adam and Eve and all of their ancestors).

He allows, however, that

...while [these conditions] pick out important features of the concepts of race which we employ, they are by no means sufficient to reveal what is distinctive about racial divisions...Nevertheless, the construction...is helpful, for it makes explicit the idea of a historical lineage within which inbreeding occurs. I take this to be essential to any biologically significant racial concept: instead of trying to draw racial divisions on the basis of traits of the contemporary population, it is necessary to consider patterns of descent. *The concept of race is a historical concept.* (94)

To capture what is "distinctive" about race, he suggests:

- iv) The members of the pure races thus characterized have some distinctive phenotypic or genetic properties, and
- v) The residual mixedrace population is relatively small, at least during most of the generations between the time of origination and the present. (94)

Kitcher argues that in order for the mixedrace population to remain small, "interbreeding among the pure races has to be infrequent." (95) In other words, there must be some sort of reproductive isolation. Kitcher emphasizes that this may be due to cultural factors (even in nonhuman species). (96)

Questions:

- Is this an adequate definition of what races are? Can you think of counterexamples? (Cases that meet the conditions but aren't races. Races that don't meet the conditions.)

Rob Wilson argues, for example:

I suspect that the gene flow between Oxford professors and Broken Hill miners has been extremely limited for the 150 years that the two groups have coexisted, and that the two groups can be readily distinguished by many phenotypic characteristics. But these ingredients take us no distance to establishing a criterion for distinguishing the two as racial groups. Curiously, in my view, Kitcher considers a similar type of case—that of an affluent class of landowners and a class of peasants deriving, respectively, from the Normans and the Saxons shortly after the Norman conquest of England—embracing the view that these classes could be races on his view. [See p. 103] By contrast, I see this conclusion as a *reductio* of his approach to race.¹

¹ <http://human-nature.com/nibbs/04/rawilson.html>

B. The reality of human “races” in his sense

Kitcher goes on to argue that sub-populations of human beings satisfy the conditions he sets out for races. This, he suggests, is because there are cultural, not just geographical or biological, barriers to “inbreeding.” The idea is that race is partly biological, partly cultural, because the cultural differences enforce or encourage mating practices that keep groups genetically separated. As he says, “races are *both* socially constructed and biologically real.” (106)

However, Kitcher aims to capture the “Big Three” races in his analysis (Blacks, Whites, Asians), but it isn’t clear how he succeeds. He acknowledges that his analysis of the Hawaiian data may not divide Caucasians and Asians. But here may be many smallish regions of reproductive isolation due to cultural norms. He says, “my minimalist notion of race allows for the possibility that, within one geographic locale (say the United States, or even something narrower like the rural Midwest), two groups are racially divided even though elsewhere they are not.” (100) Does this yield a multiplicity of races? How many? If each region has its own racial breakdown, how does this map onto the “Big Three,” e.g., if Brazilian blacks and Nebraskan blacks are unlikely to “interbreed,” how could they count, on Kitcher’s view, as the same race?

2. Ethnicity and the preservation of races

What is an ethnicity? On Kitcher’s view,

The core of the view that there are ethnic groups is that distinct sets of cultural items, including lore, habits of interpersonal interaction, self-conceptions, and behavior, are transmitted across the generations by a process akin to biological inheritance. (107)

He goes on to characterize an ethnicity in terms of the same sorts of conditions offered for race (i-iii) above. He continues:

The main thought between the approach I have taken to the concept of race is that the two systems typically harmonize – indeed, that they reinforce one another. On the biological level, interracial mating is limited through the differences in cultural items acquired by members of different races, that is, because different ethnicities belong to different races. On the cultural level, patterns of culture are preserved because culture is usually primarily transmitted by parents and other family members....who belong to the same race and share the same ethnicity. (108-9)

He then considers:

- a) In a multicultural society will ethnicities disappear? Will that be a good thing? Would a world of ethnic hybrids be best? [But: if ethnicity = culture, how could ethnicities disappear?]
- b) In a multicultural society will races disappear? Will that be a good thing?
 - Will a “mismatch between race and ethnicity...leave people rootless and defenseless.”? (112)
 - Would “A society which made a radical divorce between ethnicity and biological ancestry...rub against the grain of human nature”? (113)

He suggests that the eliminativists envision a world in which “the concepts of race and ethnicity both become irrelevant.” (113) Kitcher, however, is worried about this. He says,

[According to the eliminativists] it is not enough to insist on the equality of races, and they propose that the most thorough way to combat racism is to discard the outworn concept of race....I have been arguing that this is wrong, and that the interconnections between biological and cultural concepts are intricate. Those interconnections raise numerous empirical and moral questions that must be addressed if we are to decide if the vision of a society that abandons practices of racial division is either realizable or desirable. (114)

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