

# The Metaphysics of Race

**1. Carving Nature At Its Joints:** Imagine two textbooks that classify animals as follows:

**Textbook #1**

- Ostriches
- Horses
- Sharks
- Bears
- Etc.

**Textbook #2**

- Animals that live in Canada
- Animals that live in the United States
- Animals that live in Mexico
- Animals that live in Brazil
- Etc.

Which textbook is better? Intuitively, Textbook #1 is better. It *gets things right*, while #2 does not. In short, Book #1 seems to “carve nature at its joints” while #2 does not.

But WHY is this? Answer: It seems more NATURAL to divide animals into the categories listed by Book #1. Categories like ‘in Canada’ seem artificial, because the borders between nations are just things that we “made up”. Meanwhile, categories like ‘horse’ and ‘bear’ really do seem to be “out there” in the world, objectively, independent of human thought. In short, the categories of #1 seem to be ‘**natural kinds**’, while the categories of #2 seem to be ‘**social constructs**’.

[**Digression:** *What makes something a natural kind rather than a social construct?*

Qualitative Similarities? Ostriches all LOOK the same, but animals that live in Canada do not. Perhaps, then, the former is a natural kind for this reason, while the latter is not.

Problem: By that reasoning, dolphins and whales would be very closely categorized with mahi-mahi fish (or ‘dolphinfish’):

And not giraffes:



In fact, dolphins and whales share not only the same class (mammalia) with the giraffe, but the same order too (artiodactyla). They share neither of these with the mahi-mahi.

Furthermore, morphological traits are not the ONLY sort of qualitatively discernible traits. For instance, ‘being in Canada’ IS a qualitatively discernible trait!

Qualitative similarities are not what differentiate natural kinds from social constructs.

Intrinsic Similarities? Nevertheless, categories like 'being in Canada' differentiate things based on **extrinsic** similarities. 'Being in Canada' is a RELATIONAL property that the animals in that category have with something outside of themselves (namely, Canada). Meanwhile, categories like 'ostrich' (surely) differentiate things based on **intrinsic** similarities. Perhaps kinds based on extrinsic similarities are all non-natural.

Problem: But, note that contemporary biological taxonomies are NOT based on intrinsic similarities. Rather they are based on these EXTRINSIC properties. For example:

- The criterion for kingdom *animalia* is based organism's main **food source**.
- Two main criteria for species membership are based on an organism's:
  - (a) **Ancestry** (which animals it is descended from)
  - (b) **Breeding ability** (which animals it can produce viable offspring with)

These properties are all extrinsic rather than intrinsic, because they refer to something OUTSIDE the organism. So, natural kinds are not grounded purely in intrinsic traits.

What Natural Kinds are NOT: It's not clear what makes a category a natural kind (if there even ARE such things!). It's controversial. But, it IS clear what makes something a social construct. Namely, a social construct is a category or kind that, at least in part, "depends on social practices, institutions, and conventions" (263) such that, were those things different, or absent, the category would cease to exist. And, no social construct is a natural kind. So, at least we can say what natural kinds are NOT!]

**2. Three Views About Race:** Perhaps if we focus in on ONE single type of category, we will better come to understand these issues. We will now examine three views of race.

(1) Realism: To most people, intuitively, **races** (e.g., black, white, Asian, Native American, Samoan, etc.) are **natural kinds**.

*[Note: Races are often thought to be like breeds or subspecies. Chihuahuas and great danes are two distinct breeds of the same species (yes, they can produce viable offspring—Ew!). The pumas of South America and the mountain lions of Colorado are two distinct subspecies of the same species. Yet, these subdivisions WITHIN species seem to be natural kinds too, don't they?]*



In short, the standard view of race among non-philosophers is:

**Biological Realism About Race:** Races are natural kinds. Racial categories are real, biological categories, akin to sub-species or breeds of a single species.

(2) Constructivism: Perhaps surprisingly, biological realism about race is not common among philosophers. Many philosophers believe that race is socially constructed.

Clearly, at least SOME divisions of human beings are merely social constructs, right? Consider some categories that are (probably) merely social constructs:

- husbands
- professors
- goths
- billionaires
- cool people
- Brahmins (the top tier of the caste system)

Surely these divisions are not “natural” ones which “carve nature at its joints”. Social kinds seem to be categories that are defined based on “*social practices, institutions and conventions*”. Perhaps race is like that too, as in the following:

**Social Constructivism About Race:** Races are social kinds. Racial categories are socially constructed kinds, akin to cool vs. uncool people, or the caste system.

(3) Eliminativism: There is actually a third stance. Both realism and constructivism believe that there ARE racial categories. That is, people really are black, white, etc. They merely disagree about whether these categories are objective or subjective. But others deny the existence of race altogether—or, if they are real categories, they have no members.

Surely, SOME categories are ones which have no members. We used to think that some humans belonged to the category ‘witch’—but it turned out that no one actually belonged in this category (not even those who were burnt at the stake). So too for categories like ‘vampire’, ‘werewolf’, etc. Perhaps race is like that. We THINK that these labels really apply to people, but we are wrong about that, as in the following view:

**Eliminativism About Race:** There are no races. To assign someone to a racial category is to make an error, or state a falsehood. In short, stating that someone is white is akin to stating that someone is a witch, or a werewolf.

**4. Against Realism:** As intuitive as it may be, there are many problems with realism.

1. Morphological Differences: How do we differentiate between races? The first answer that probably comes to mind is, “By the way people LOOK.” But, that can’t be right.

For starters, if the way people LOOKED entailed that they belonged to a distinct race, then GINGERS would be an individual race. After all, they are distinctly identifiable by their pale skin, freckles, and orange-red hair. But, gingers are not a distinct race. In short, “looking a certain (distinctive) way” is not a sufficient condition for being of a distinct race.



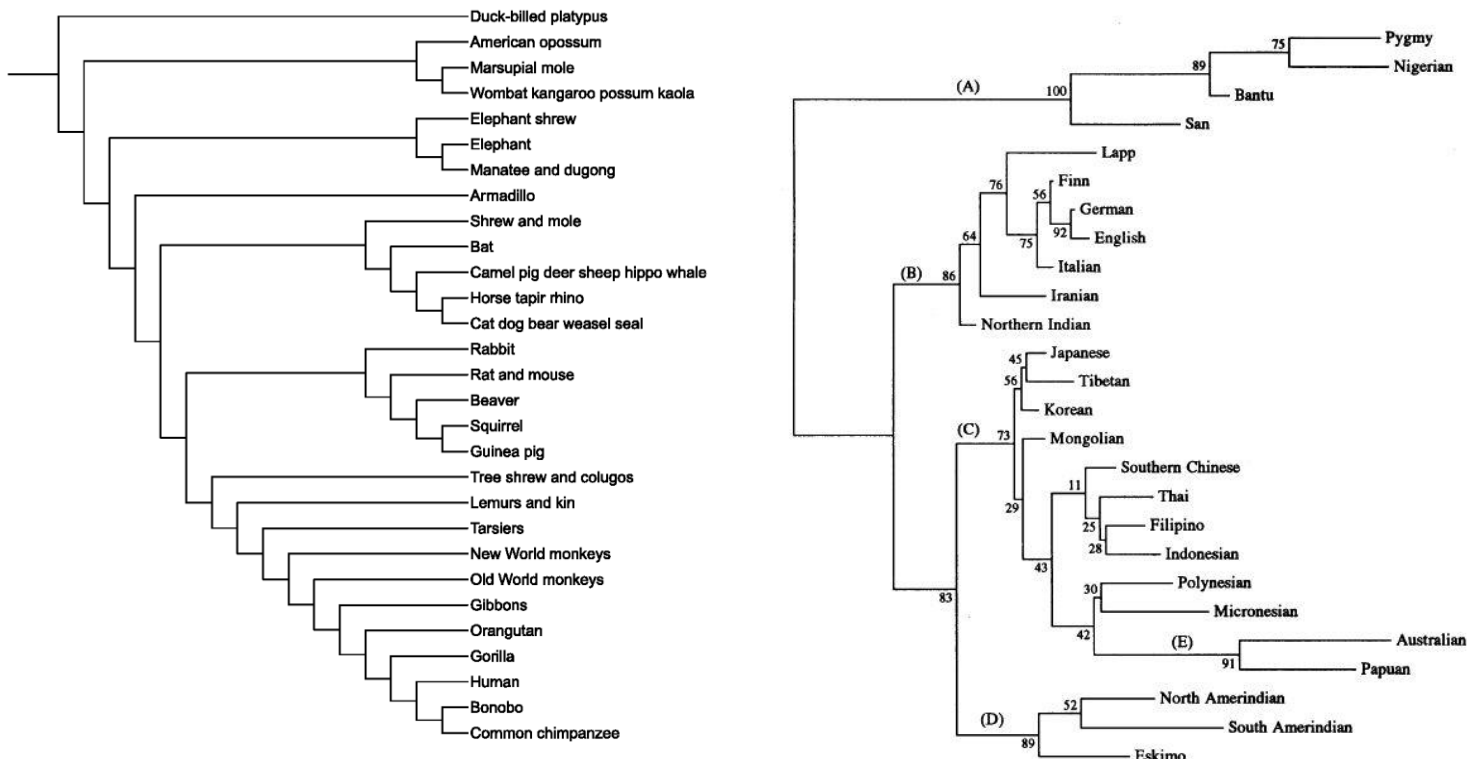


Additionally, not every member of the same race even looks the same. For instance, what race is the man on the right (Congressman G.K. Butterfield, of North Carolina)? Answer: He is black (for instance, see [here](#); interview with Stephen Colbert [here](#)).

In short, “looking a certain (distinctive) way” is not a necessary condition for being of a distinct race.

2. Genetic Variation: You may be surprised to learn that there is actually more genetic variation WITHIN each supposed race, than there is between races. There are actually no genetic markers that uniquely pick out any supposed “race” that are not also found in members of other supposed “races”. Indeed, the scientific consensus among geneticists is that there IS NO genetic basis for categories of race! (see [here](#))

3. The Cladistic Approach: Perhaps racial categories have little to do with appearance or genetic variation, but are rather based on lineage. For instance, when one group splits off from its main group to go live in another region, it becomes isolated and stops interbreeding with the main group. Note that MERE breeding isolation doesn’t seem to generate a new race—otherwise the Amish would be a distinct race. But, over time, it can (perhaps) generate a new human sub-species, or race. On this view, in the same way that evolutionary branches are seen as breaking away from the main group at various points in history, so too are races seen in terms of a branching tree:



Since the cladistic approach relies on historical lineage rather than genetics, similarities in external appearance and/or genes are irrelevant to the taxonomy of race. But, now, look at these races. Do they fit our “folk” conception of racial categories? Sometimes. But, often not. For instance, “Asian” turns out not to identify a race at all. For, Thai and Koreans are as remote of cousins as Germans and Iranians. Similarly, “black” is not a race either, but actually applies to several distinct “races” (i.e., clades); and, if (aboriginal) Australians are “black” then that label applies to some VERY distant cousins (it turns out that, cladistically, Aborigines are more closely related to the English than Nigerians!). Note also that other supposed races (e.g., Hispanic, Jewish, etc.) are entirely absent here.

Reply: Might it just be that, rather than give up the notion of race, the cladistic approach merely shows that we should REVISE it? After all, we once thought dolphins were FISH until biologists told us that we were mistaken. [*What do you think? Are there grounds for a biological realist view which underpins our racial concepts here? Or are these “clades” so far removed from our existing racial categories that it make nonsense of them?*]

4. Relativism: If racial categories are really “out there” in the world to be discovered, rather than invented or constructed by societies, then we would expect there to be ONE, correct list of races. (Just as there is ONE correct periodic table.) Yet, here are some of the categories from various recent census surveys. Which one is THE correct list (if any)?

<b>U.S. (2020 census)</b>	<b>U.K. (2011 census)</b>	<b>South Africa (2011 census)</b>	<b>Bulgaria (2011 census)</b>
White	English/Welsh/Scottish/N. Irish/British	Black/African	Bulgarian
Hispanic or Latino	Irish	White	Turk
Black or African American	Gypsy or Irish Traveller	Coloured (mixed race)	Roma
Asian	Indian	Indian/Asian	Russian
American Indian or Alaska Native	Pakistani		Armenian
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	Bangladeshi		Vlach
	Chinese		Sarakatsani
	African		Ukrainian
	Caribbean		Macedonian
	Arab		Greek
	Mixed/Multiple		Jew
			Romanian
			Tatar
			Gaugaz

5. The Social Aspect of Race: In Mark Twain’s *Pudd’nhead Wilson*, an enslaved woman has a child who is 1/32 black (and therefore will grow up as a slave), and then switches her child with that of her white master. This white child is then brought up as a slave, treated as a slave, believes himself to be black, and is perceived as black by everyone around him. The “black” child meanwhile believes himself to be white, grows up free, is treated as white, etc. What are we to make of this story? We might think that this story supports the position that race is—at least in part—a social construct, based primarily on how one perceives one’s self, and also on how one is perceived by others.

6. Racism: There is a moral argument against biological realism about race as well. Consider: Historically, racial categories have been used to promote racism. The labels themselves even seem to have a social hierarchical, or evaluative, component built in.

- At one time, to be black in the U.S. entailed being enslaved.
- When the categories 'white' and 'black' were first used (in the 18<sup>th</sup> century), the writers of the Constitution noted that each black person would be counted as 3/5 of a person for the purposes of determining how many members of the House of Representatives would be assigned to each district—in effect, implying that a black person was only 60% as much of a person as someone white.
- Of people of mixed race: For much of U.S. history, to be one-quarter black (or even have "[one drop](#)" of black blood) meant to be black. This makes no sense on a biological view—but it does once we recognize that this categorization allowed those in power to enslave, or apply Jim Crow laws to, or oppress, more people.
- Operating under the view that race is genetic, there could be (and have been) attempts to argue that some races are genetically *superior* to others.
- In short, racial labels are so laden with racist baggage, to place someone in the category of, say, 'black' is basically to place them in an "inferior" or "lower" ranking than, say, 'white' ; and it burdens them with certain "racializing" stereotypes and pre-suppositions (Ney's example: All Latino/a's are "passionate").

For these reasons, we should abandon the biological realist view.

Reply: We could accept all of this. Racial terms (e.g., white, black, etc.) ARE charged with potentially dangerous racialized assumptions. Yet, this doesn't entail that there ARE NO such categories in nature. Races might nevertheless be natural kinds.

**5. Against Eliminativism:** Suppose that we DO reject realism. We still have two options: Constructivism or Eliminativism. Why not Eliminativism? Here is a plausible principle:

**No Causation Without Existence:** If something has causal powers—that is, if it enters into a causal explanation of some effect or phenomenon—then it must exist.

But now imagine: Manager is racist against Samoans, and denies a job to Applicant, who is Samoan. Here, Applicant's being Samoan CAUSED Manager to deny her the job. Imagine further that Applicant views being Samoan as a part of her identity, and this belief also CAUSES her to behave in certain ways. It seems that 'being Samoan' has causal powers. Therefore, racial categories exist.

Reply: The eliminativist will insist that it's the BELIEF that's doing the causing here. But, beliefs can be about empty categories. For instance, the people of Salem's BELIEF that some of the women were witches caused them to burn the women. This doesn't entail that witches exist. The cause of these effects is not the existence of RACE but rather the (erroneous) BELIEFS about the existence of race.

**6. Conclusion:** Which view is the correct view?

(For more, see the first four videos of this excellent series on wi-phi: [here](#))

[Speculation: A Hybrid View? Could it be that there are really multiple, distinct ways in which we apply racial categories? Perhaps there is SOMETHING biologically grounded (e.g., cladisitic divisions). But, there are undoubtedly also facts about (a) how others perceive you, and (b) how you perceive yourself—and these may be partially or entirely ungrounded in the biological facts. Could there even be something akin to the sex vs. gender distinction here? What do you think?

Further food for thought: What should we make of the story of the people of the small town of [East Jackson, Ohio](#), who look white, but say they are black? (Great video [here](#))

Or, how about the case of [Rachel Dolezal](#), who sparked some controversy in 2015 when it was revealed that she is white, but that she (her words) “identifies as black” (leading to her resignation from her position as president of the Spokane, WA chapter of the NAACP)? (Video [here](#).)

What should we make of “race-based medicine”? For instance, In 2005, the U.S. FDA approved the drug BiDil specifically for African-Americans – the first drug ever approved for a single race. Clinical trials for this heart failure drug were inconclusive with a broad sample of subjects, but reduced mortality by 43% in African-Americans, it was said. The drug was thought to be more effective on this group, they claimed, because African-Americans have lower levels of nitric oxide (a compound that relaxes blood vessels and increases blood flow) on average than other races. Controversy [here](#).]