Human Genetic Clustering and Ontological Inference

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Abstract

Many scholars have expressed enthusiasm about various ontological inferences that can be made from recent human genetic clustering analyses done by population geneticists. Scholars have claimed that we can legitimately infer human genetic diversity, genetic structure, genetic distance, phylogenetic structure, migration history, population structure, and even subspecies and racial groups. Although there is a lot to say about each of the different sorts of ontological inferences scholars make from human genetic clustering analyses, for the sake of time, my talk will be limited to one, especially controversial, ontological inference: the inference to the existence of racial groups.

The purpose of my talk is twofold. First, I will disambiguate two different senses of what it could mean to "infer the existence of racial groups" from human genetic clustering results. Particularly, I will emphasize that one could be attempting to infer biological races or the biological existence of folk races. Second, I will clarify the sorts of auxiliary assumptions-semantic, metaphysical, mathematical, methodological, and biological-that one would need to adopt in order to legitimately infer the existence of racial groups from human genetic clustering results. I will use the current U.S. racial scheme as an example. The hope is that by making these clarifications, we will be in a better position to understand what one can and cannot legitimately infer about race from human genetic clustering results.

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