
Why the Usefulness of Race Is Useless

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Abstract

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The Pragmatist tradition holds, roughly speaking, that the meanings of scientific terms are cashed out through their use and that the reality of the entities labeled with such terms can be determined by the usefulness of employing them. This tradition, although once marginalized, has been making a comeback. For example, biologists and philosophers of biology are increasingly comfortable with pragmatic answers to metaphysical questions concerning taxonomic groups like various species and subspecies. To defend her claim that group X is a genuine subspecies, a biologist today might cite how the group is useful for conservation purposes. And, over the past decade, authors in a range of disciplines have claimed that the common sense human races must be real given that the corresponding racial categories (Asian, European, African, etc.) are useful for various purposes, including medical diagnosis, ancestry tracking, and forensics analysis. This paper aims to show that this Pragmatist tradition, at least in the case of the common sense races, is mistaken—the current usefulness of common sense racial categories is irrelevant to the metaphysical reality of the races. I show that biologists deal with similarly useful groups in the animal world all the time, and yet they don't treat those groups as genuine biological units. I then offer examples of useful groups that we would never believe are anything more than merely socially constructed groupings. I argue that biologists and philosophers have been making unwarranted exceptions for the human races.

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