



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/shpsc

Logical empiricists on race[☆]

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 16 June 2016

Received in revised form

3 July 2017

Available online 10 July 2017

Keywords:

Logical empiricists

Philosophy of race

Human racial taxonomy

Biology

Anti-fascism

ABSTRACT

The logical empiricists expressed a consistent attitude to racial categorisation in both the ethical and scientific spheres. Their attitude may be captured in the following slogan: human racial taxonomy is an empirically meaningful mode of classifying persons that we should refrain from deploying. I offer an interpretation of their position that would render coherent their remarks on race with positions they adopted on the scientific status of taxonomy in general, together with their potential moral or political motivations for adopting that position.

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1. Introduction

The logical empiricists developed a view of race that may be stated as such: human racial taxonomy is an empirically meaningful mode of classifying persons that we should refrain from deploying. To defend this claim I shall consider the works of a central European subset of the logical empiricist movement: Carnap, Neurath, Schlick, Reichenbach, Waismann, Hahn, Frank, and Lewin. One consequence of this is that, despite the warnings of Uebel (2013), I treat members of both the Vienna Circle and the Berlin Society together under the name 'logical empiricists'. What is more, the Berlin versus Vienna distinction is far from the only distinction between the various thinkers I cover that I am going to be glossing over – they were an ideologically and philosophically diverse set. Further, finally, I am going to consider these thinkers' views expressed throughout their careers without drawing particular attention to the time of writing of the various extracts I consider. I hence do not claim that the view I developed here was held by any actual logical positivist nor less that this was a

consensus or collectively held opinion; only that, based on what the logical empiricists whose work I review did say about race, somebody similar to the people listed on the epistemological and moral commitments regarding the issues actually surveyed could well have adopted the particular view I put forward for the particular reasons I suggest. This essay should not be taken as establishing, or attempting to establish, that there was a unified position on human racial taxonomy across the whole logical empiricist movement.

The logical empiricists surveyed very rarely wrote directly on human racial categorisation, and never did so at length. There is no logical empiricist treatise on human racial taxonomy. However, they often referred to what I shall call *racial explanations*. A racial explanation purports to explain phenomena in a way that involves either referring directly to the racial categorisation of those involved, or by claiming that certain features of those involved track racial categorisation. For instance, if one answered the question "Why does Rudson like the music of Bruce Springsteen?" with the response "Rudson is black, and all black people like the music of Bruce Springsteen" then one has offered a (spurious) racial explanation. This example also makes clear that I am using 'explanation' in a non-factive sense; some philosophers may prefer to think of these as 'attempted racial explanations', while I stick with the shorter phrase for ease of reading. In this paper I will see how much information about the logical empiricists' views of human racial taxonomy can be garnered from what they say about racial explanations. To do this I bring together and display many of the logical empiricists' remarks on race as they appear in those texts of theirs that have been translated into English. In addition, I offer a unifying

[☆] Thanks to Dan Malinsky, Haixin Dang, Hannes Leitgeb, Eric Schliesser, Chike Jeffers, Quayshawn Spencer, Teddy Groves, Gregory Frost-Arnold, Aaron Novick, and Anonymous Reviewers at Studies for the History and Philosophy of Science, Kevin Zollman, and Zina B. Ward. Special thanks to Dan Kaplan for translation of the Neurath's foreword to Galton. This work was supported by NSF grant SES 1254291.

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account of what the logical empiricists might have thought about racial categorisation which would unify these remarks by the logical empiricists and which I hope would be attractive to people with similar commitments as them.

2. The scientific status of racial categories

In the spirit of the logical empiricists' own split between factual and normative judgements, I separate out work on racial explanation which occurs in descriptive contexts from their ethical or political commentary on race. I begin with the descriptive uses of race. I have found six passing references to racial explanation and two sustained engagements with racial explanation. I will consider one of those sustained engagements, from Moritz Schlick, in the next section, since it occurs in the context of a work on ethics. The six passing references and the remaining sustained engagement with racial explanation will be dealt with in this section.

The first of the passing references to race is from Friedrich Waismann:

... the expression "causes of a war" may mean three different things: either the events, conditions, processes, inherited racial dispositions and other factors which, in actual fact, influenced the impulses of the masses ... In the first sense, what the causes have been, *may* be found by observation ... though it must be admitted that we are still very far from a real understanding of historical processes. (Waismann, 2011, 125)

Waismann does not return to this notion of explaining a rush to war by means of appealing to the 'inherited racial dispositions' of the masses, so it is difficult to know whether he thought that there were any true historical explanations which involved appeal to such entities. None the less, the passage is informative about Waismann's view of race. Firstly, Waismann thought that racial dispositions could be inherited. Second, racial dispositions are the sort of things that can at least potentially cause outcomes of interest. Relatedly, earlier on in the text (p.64) Waismann had said that the idea of a 'causal law' had 'absorbed into its meaning ideas and modes of thinking inherited from many different ages, races, and civilisations'. While this does not tell us much about what Waismann thought of racial categorisation as a causal explanatory tool it does tell us that he thought that one could identify people of different races as having made contributions to the philosophy of science, and hence that there are meaningful ways of racially categorising people. Thirdly, immediately after raising the possibility of explaining historical events by means of inherited racial dispositions, Waismann stresses that we do not actually have good theories of historical processes. As we shall see, Waismann is fairly typical of the logical empiricists on race. He raises the possibility of explaining human behaviour by appeal to a racial explanation, and suggests that such an explanation would be an empirically meaningful example of (quasi-biological) reasoning. But he does not actually endorse any such explanation, and if anything seems to go out of his way to undermine this explanation.

The second passing reference comes from Reichenbach. When discussing the (then present) state of the logical empiricist movement in 1930s Germany, he remarks: "Science, surely, is not limited to national or racial boundaries; we prefer to stand for this historical truth, in spite of all the pretensions of a certain modern nationalism" (Reichenbach, 1936, p. 160). Historical context makes it clear that the 'certain modern nationalism' Reichenbach is referring to is Nazism. It is hard to infer what Reichenbach believed about race in general from this, only that he believed that Nazi attempts to explain dispositions to produce different scientific

theories by referring to different racial dispositions were not resulting in truths.

The third passing reference comes from Otto Neurath. He imagines designing a school curriculum, and in particular somebody suggesting that we teach Nazi racial theory. He responds as such: "If we were to discuss the Nazi literature on race, as far as it is based on a purely empiricist language, I think we would agree about its undesirability, because we did not think the approach sufficiently serious, but rather frivolous" (Neurath, 1983, p. 241). He then says that lessons on telepathy would be treated in the same way, implicitly equating the epistemic worth of Nazi racial science to claims about telepathic powers. Again, note that Neurath does suggest that at least some fragment of the Nazi literature on race can be reconstructed within a purely empiricist literature. Neurath thus does not suggest that racial categorisation is metaphysical, or meaningless. He goes on to say: "The spreading of muddle does not seem to be as simple as the spreading of a successful technique. The frivolity of the race theory developed by the Nazis in many books on character, physiognomics and heredity, did not even infect the mathematics, astronomy, chemistry, and physics of the Nazis very much. If it had, the firing capacity of their machine-guns might have been reduced" (Neurath, 1983, p. 242). Thus, Neurath's reference to a racial theory is (in particular) a reference to a biological racial theory. Further, this reference is again made in the context of mocking the racial theory's intellectual merits.

The fourth passing reference is from Hempel's *The Function of General Laws in History*. Hempel is trying to illustrate the idea of historical 'pseudo-explanation'. This is a story which seems to explain a certain event having occurred, but which appeals to empirically meaningless concepts in the process of doing so. These explanations must be rejected as unintelligible, Hempel claims. To illustrate this idea he turns to the following example: "In the case of non-empirical explanations or explanation sketches, on the other hand—say, by reference to the historical destination of a certain race ... the use of empirically meaningless terms makes it impossible even roughly to indicate the type of investigation that would have a bearing upon those formulations, and that might lead to evidence either confirming or infirming the suggested explanation" (Hempel, 1942, p. 43). This is hence another case of a logical empiricist discussing a racial explanation only to reject it. Of great interest is what exactly the empirically meaningless term is here. The sentence structure indicates that it is the 'historical destiny' of the race. It is meaningless to declare groups have destinies, Hempel is not claiming that it is meaningless to appeal to racial groupings. Further, the context of utterance and the specific language of the 'historical destination' of a race used make it highly likely that what Hempel is attacking here is Nazi racial ideology. So, as with Neurath and Reichenbach, this is a positivist reacting negatively to Nazi racial explanations in particular.

The fifth passing reference comes from Frank (1949). In his book *Modern Science and its Philosophy* Frank mentions racial theories on a couple of occasions. First, in discussing why different scientists prefer more intuitive or abstract theories respectively, Frank notes that people sometimes treat it as a function of the scientist's personality, and that "[t]hese psychologic factors are sometimes taken to be facts of individual psychology, sometimes of race or nationality'. However, Frank immediately after says that 'the importance of such psychologic considerations has been exaggerated' and that they 'play little role in the world of the great masters of science to whom we are chiefly indebted for the present state of the sciences' (Frank, 1949, p. 150). Second, Frank says that adopting the tenets of 'logical positivism' will help ensure that foundational problems in physics do not spread to the scientific world view as a whole, and in particular guard against 'those that advocate a return to pre-Galilean science, whether it be under the name of "idealism,"

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