



# Was Race thinking invented in the modern West?

Ron Mallon

Department of Philosophy, Washington University-St. Louis, 208 Wilson Hall, Campus Box 1073, One Brookings Drive, St. Louis, MO 63130-4899, USA

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## ABSTRACT

The idea that genuinely racial thinking is a modern invention is widespread in the humanities and social sciences. However, it is not always clear exactly what the content of such a conceptual break is supposed to be. One suggestion is that with the scientific revolution emerged a conception of human groups that possessed essences that were thought to explain group-typical features of individuals as well the accumulated products of cultures or civilizations. However, recent work by cognitive and evolutionary psychologists suggests that such essentialism is a product of culturally canalized, domain-specific, and species-typical features of human psychology. This suggests that one common explanation of the content of a break in racial thinking is wrong, and casts some doubt on the thesis that genuinely racial thinking is a culturally and historically local invention.

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## 1. The Conceptual Break Hypothesis

Most people (at least in contemporary European-American cultures) think racially. That is, they cognitively and verbally represent humans as divisible into racial kinds, and they draw further inferences and associate further properties of a variety of sorts with membership in these kinds.

Why do we do this? Why do we think racially? Why do our racial representations have the specific content that they do? Why do they seem to license the specific inferences that they do? How widespread, culturally and historically, is racial thinking? These questions all form part of the study of our racial representations.

Much work in the humanities (including in philosophy) and the social sciences pursues this study by assuming that the answers can be found using some sort of *social constructionist* explanation. That is, most work assumes that our racial representations have the content that they do because of the content of inherited culture, or the content of human decisions, or both. This social constructionist consensus suggests that our racial representations are best understood by considering their cultural predecessors, the historical and institutional context of their emergence, and the theoretical and practical choices people have made regarding how to represent humans as members of groups.

Pursuing these strategies in the study of racial representations, many social constructionists have come to agree on a provocative claim: that the contemporary concept of race was invented or improvised in the Western cultural tradition sometime in modern times (often dated to the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century) (see, e.g., [Banton, 1977](#); [Banton & Harwood, 1975](#); [Fredrickson, 2002](#); [Guillaumin, 1980](#); [Hannaford, 1996](#); [Smedley & Smedley, 2012](#)). Summarizing, George Fredrickson writes:

It is the dominant view among scholars who have studied conceptions of difference in the ancient world that no concept truly equivalent to that of ‘race’ can be detected in the thought of the Greeks, Romans, and early Christians. (2002, 17)

To be sure, Fredrickson and others recognize many similar forms of representation predating genuinely racial thinking, but, they nonetheless hold that some significant change in content or meaning of people’s thinking about human groups emerged in recent centuries. Call this the *Conceptual Break Hypothesis*.

*Conceptual Break Hypothesis*: Sometime in or since the Renaissance, some fundamental change occurred in the European and American tradition of thinking about the human groups that we now call “races”—a change in the concept, meaning, or theory by which people represent those groups.

E-mail address: [rmallon@wustl.edu](mailto:rmallon@wustl.edu)

On some renderings, the Conceptual Break Hypothesis involves a claim of a failure of conceptual identity among older and newer concepts of human groups.<sup>1</sup> That is, they believe that contemporary racial terms came to have a fundamentally different meaning than terms for human groups used previously, such that it would be a mistake to take previous authors to be talking about the same things we do with terms like “race.” While adjudicating questions of conceptual identity is a favorite pastime of philosophers, it is no part of my aim here. Rather, my aim is to ask whether some significant change occurred in, or since, the Renaissance in European-American thinking about human groups. This could be a change that introduced the contemporary concept *race* (i.e. the contemporary meaning of “race”), but it could also be some other significant change in beliefs about race that do not amount to a conceptual switch.

Once we set aside questions of conceptual identity, the Conceptual Break Hypothesis remains substantive. Even scholars that believe genuine *racial* thinking (i.e. thinking involving the contemporary concept *race*) emerges far earlier than the Renaissance can endorse the hypothesis of some important modern change in the content of beliefs about human groups. For example, Benjamin Isaac’s study of classic conceptions of group difference is happy to allow that ancient Greek and Roman cultures already had genuine concepts of race and racism, but he nonetheless draws a distinction between racism and the “scientific racism” of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (2004, p. 1). Isaac thus believes that there is some important difference in the meaning or content of racial theories in modern times and representations of human groups of the past, but he does not locate the change as a change within the concept *race* (i.e. within the meaning of the word “race”).

While there is much agreement on the existence of a conceptual break in thinking about human groups, it is not always clear exactly what this putative change consists in. This question is important because we would like to know whether the Conceptual Break Hypothesis is true. But it is also important because it offers the possibility of understanding distinctive features of modern European-American racial thinking, including:

- (1) Features that distinguish modern European-American racial thinking from the European-American thinking about human groups that immediately preceded it.
- (2) Features that may distinguish modern European-American racial thinking from European-American thinking about other socially important categories (e.g. class, sex, or ethnicity).
- (3) Features that may distinguish modern European-American thinking from the thinking of other cultural traditions about human groups.

Below, I argue that one plausible candidate for both accommodating what the social constructionist defenders of the Conceptual Break Hypothesis say, and for vindicating the truth of the

Conceptual Break Hypothesis, is the idea that in recent centuries individuals in the European-American cultural tradition began to conceive of race in an *essentialist* manner. That is, they came to believe that members of the groups that they now think of as races differed not only in superficial properties like skin color, hair type, or body morphology, but also in possession of some perhaps unseen property that

- (1) was (at least causally) necessary and sufficient for membership in the race
- (2) explained typical features of the race
- (3) was passed on from parents to children.

Call this view *racial essentialism*. As I will argue, some defenders of the Conceptual Break Hypothesis claim that racial essentialism is a culturally and historically local product of modern European and American thought.

But is this true? Did people begin to engage in racial essentialism in thinking about human populations or cultural groups only in modern times, perhaps as a result of the scientific revolution? Below, I argue that the answer is “no.” For while social constructionist accounts of racial representations have it that essentialist thinking about race is a relatively recent phenomenon, recent *evolutionary cognitive* work tells a different story, one on which essentialist thinking about human groups is itself, or is a product of, a psychological mechanism that is *innate*, *domain-specific*, and *species-typical* (Gelman, 2003; Gil-White, 2001a, 2001b; Hirschfeld, 1996; Jones, 2009; Machery & Faucher, 2005a, 2005b; Sperber, 1996).<sup>2</sup> In saying a mechanism is “innate,” I mean that these evolutionary cognitive theorists hold at least that the trait that is largely *culturally invariant*—that it develops relatively invariant across a wide range of cultures.<sup>3</sup> To say that a mechanism is “domain-specific” is to say that, unlike *domain general* cognitive capacities (like memory, attention, or perception) that are employed across a wide-range of problem domains, this mechanism is specialized for solving a narrower problem or problems.<sup>4</sup> And to say that they are “species-typical” is to say that, like having two arms and legs, or eyes, or ears, or hair, these cognitive capacities are traits that humans usually possess.<sup>5</sup>

To this characterization, I add two caveats. First, to say that a trait is innate is not to say that it is unchangeable. “Innateness” concerns only the process by which a trait develops or is acquired. In the present context, assertions of innateness assert, at a minimum, a strong degree of developmental invariance across a range of cultural environments.<sup>6</sup> But such invariance says nothing about whether the process or processes that produce it can be interrupted, or their outcome altered. Second, to say that some aspects of contemporary racial representations are developmentally invariant across cultures, or are the result of a mechanism that is developmentally invariant across cultures, is not to say that all of them are. Rather, the “racial essentialism” that evolutionary cognitive

<sup>1</sup> Puzzo (1964, p. 579), Hannaford (1996, p. 6), Fredrickson (2002, p. 17) and Smedley & Smedley (2012, p. 13ff).

<sup>2</sup> While I characterize this research program as “evolutionary-cognitive,” some theorists give only passing attention to evolutionary concerns (e.g. Gelman, 2003) though others (e.g. Gil-White, 2001a; Hirschfeld, 1996; Keil, 1992; Tooby & Leda, Cosmides, 1992) more fully engage the project of using evolution to consider what (if any) the adaptive function of this trait might be.

<sup>3</sup> This is usually considered a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for innateness (see, e.g., Mallon & Weinberg, 2006). Such developmental stability suggests that the developmental resources for producing the trait are available in a wide range of cultures, either because they are part of the genotype and other internal resources of the developing organism, or because they are generally available in environments in which humans can survive. Recent critiques of the concept of innateness (e.g. Griffiths, 2002) do not deny the existence of developmentally invariant traits in this sense, only that they are perspicuously labeled “innate.”

<sup>4</sup> But this is not to say that the mechanism is for thinking about race. Evolutionary cognitive theorists that consider the adaptive function of such cognition do not typically believe that there is a *race module* or a specific mental mechanism designed for thinking racially. Rather, they understand racial essentialism to be the by-product of an innate, domain-specific, and species-typical mental mechanism that is for something—or some things—else. This view is at least partially a consequence of their racial skepticism: evolutionary cognitive theorists typically do not believe that biological races (or racial essences) exist. It would therefore be odd for them to suppose a cognitive mechanism was adapted to tracking them.

<sup>5</sup> Some, especially in philosophy of biology, worry that the anti-essentialism central to Darwinian thinking about biology (e.g. Mayr, 1976; Sober, 1980) undermines evolutionary psychological claims of species-typical traits as well. This worry seems to me ill-founded, in part for reasons given by Machery (2008).

<sup>6</sup> I am grateful to Elizabeth O'Neill for helpful discussion of innateness and invariance.

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