

Race and Politics^{*}

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ABSTRACT: Some reflections on Hussein Kassim's article on the concept of race in *A Companion to Genethics*. Kassim claims that modern genetics has shown that there are no such things as human races and that there is no biological entity that corresponds to the concept of race used in everyday language. I believe that his arguments are problematic and that he is wrong when he assumes that there is no morally innocent use of the race concept.

In this paper I will comment on Hussein Kassim's article on the concept of race in *A Companion to Genethics*. I consider Kassim's arguments and positions to be fairly representative of the modern debate on race and

* I am grateful to Johan Brännmark for helpful comments. An earlier paper on roughly the same subject was presented at the Department of Philosophy in Lund. My thanks to all the participants in the following discussion, and in particular to Wlodek for your willingness to also discuss topics which are not on your own philosophical agenda!

morals or politics. This will also be underscored in my concluding reflections.

A New Paradigm?

Under the section title “A New Paradigm”, Kassim writes:

Genetics has identified the mechanism of heredity in human beings and the source of variation in humans, demonstrating that the idea of “race” in the typological sense has no basis in biology. It has shown that variability occurs at the level of individuals, not at the level of any mystical collective entity entitled “race” ... The fact of individual variability in hereditary characteristics undermines means [*sic*] that pure “races” do not exist in the sense of group of individuals corresponding to the same racial type.¹

Although it is not altogether clear from this quotation, Kassim refers to a variability that is more extensive on the individual level than on the group level. And this fact is then exploited in what can be called a “difference argument”, which says that since the genetic variation between individuals *within* one and the same “racial” group is larger than the genetic variation between *different* “racial” groups, there are no such things as human races: “Genetic science has demonstrated that there is no biological entity that corresponds to the concept of ‘race’ advanced by racial theorists or used in

¹ Hussein Kassim, “‘Race’, Genetics, and Human Difference”, *A Companion to Genethics*, ed. Justine Burley and John Harris, Blackwell, 2004, p. 309.

everyday language”.² (In the concluding section I criticize this argument.) What modern genetics has shown, in other words, is, according to Kassim, that the concept of race does not work as a classification about *types*. The concept of type, as introduced by Cuvier in the early part of the nineteenth century, is used “... to convey the sense of permanent and essential difference between the races”.³

This is the kind of thinking against which Kassim argues with the help of modern genetics – the race thinking, or the *polygenism*:

Polygenists contended that humankind was divided into different “types”, distinguishable by an assemblage of particular physical characteristics: skin color, hair texture, head size, or shape. These traits, they deemed, were innate and hereditary. Each “type” occupied a position in the natural hierarchy, commensurate with its endowments and abilities, as well as its level of cultural attainment. By identifying the particular “type” to which an individual belonged, they held that it was possible to determine his or her behavior, mental capacity and moral worth.⁴

I believe that Kassim – when he presents this as the position according to which “there is such a thing as ‘race’”⁵ – lumps together what ought to be

² Ibid., p. 302.

³ Ibid., p. 305.

⁴ Ibid., p. 305.

⁵ Ibid., p. 313.

kept apart. Given the way he describes what is involved in racial thinking it is impossible not to be against it, both on moral and scientific grounds.

Let us start with science. He assumes that the one who is prepared to use the concept of race after Cuvier looks upon race as something “permanent” and as an “essential” property. I am not sure what he means exactly by “permanent” but no-one with any idea of the theory of evolution would claim that the alleged differences in race between us humans are impossible to change over time. And the same goes for “essential”. This term suggests that the properties by which you identify a race are unique for each race and shared by all members of the race. But that is not the case.

To belong to the same race means probably, if anything, to have a relationship to one another which is similar in kind to the relationship between family members. Within a family we typically find a family resemblance, which means that A can share some salient properties with B, B with C, without A sharing any salient properties with C. You can imagine a race resemblance which works in the same way: people belonging to the same race are tied together in a more or less intricate system of property overlappings. And we will soon see that Kassim’s own suggestion about a new paradigm is not very different from this.

You may also add that Kassim seems to assume that if you are prepared to make a classification of human beings into different races, then the basis of your classification will resemble the basis in Deniker’s classical and detailed race maps from the nineteenth century. But neither is this the case. All the traditional physical bases of classification need not have the same relevance, and recognizing the importance of the concept of race, for instance in pharmacology, does not mean that you also believe that the

shape of people's skull, for instance, varies in a systematic way or has any relevance.

However, most importantly, we seem to have a classic example of guilt by association. I believe it is tremendously important to be aware of the historical connection between people's ideas about race, level of cultural development and moral worth. Without that kind of awareness we will not be able to make the necessary risk evaluations of employing a concept of race. But if you describe the race classification as a type classification and if in the description of the classification into types you bring in these culturally and morally chauvinistic conclusions, then you imply or at least suggest that it is impossible or very hard to use the concept of race without believing that people are unequally valuable. But the latter is not the case. A recent discussion in pharmacogenetics even suggests the opposite. Abdallah S. Daar and Peter A. Singer (2005) have recently claimed that it is more difficult to implement political ideas of human equality and global justice if we choose to regard humans as genetic individuals rather than members of various genetic collectives. Today drugs, which exclusively are tested on people from North America and Europe, are sold – sometimes with a proved efficiency of merely 30 per cent – also to the developing world, without the slightest concern about the possible risks, or even if the drug at all works for these populations. This is so because of the assumption that there are no biological races. People in the developing world may therefore gain if we take seriously the possibility that there *are* races, since they may then be spared from drugs that are harmful to them and receive drugs that are more efficient.

The Concept of Population and the Statistic Concept of Race

Kassim is strongly opposed to a concept of race that is based on a biological classification about types. He supports his critique with modern genetics, which according to him has paved the way for a paradigm change in population research.

He writes:

Genetics has replaced the static typological conception with a dynamic view of human difference. The relevant differences between human groups or “populations,” defined as a class of interacting individuals whose members have inherited common characteristics in different combinations subject to continual modifications are from a geneticist’s perspective identifiable and measurable, but lie in gene frequency and the composition of the gene pool rather than the possession of race-specific physical traits. Importantly, populations differ in relative rather than absolute ways, tending to grade into each other. The unity of the human “race” is underlined by the fact that the various human populations share an overwhelming percentage of genes and that there is a small, but significant, gap between all human beings and even the closest nonhuman relative. As the geneticist Stephen Jones has remarked, “all families and all nations are connected by an invisible web of kinship” ...⁶

I am not sure I understand what this quotation *in fact* says. But I do believe I understand what Kassim *wants* to say, namely that genetics has proved

⁶ Ibid., p. 310.

that there are no distinct human races with physical characteristics, but only human populations in which certain genes occur more frequently than in other human groups, and that there are no sharp borders between the populations.

First of all, I believe that Kassim here mixes sociology with genetics in an unfortunate way. Defining a “population” as a group of interacting individuals with certain common genetic traits is to work with an impure concept which I believe is not very useful. Interacting and sharing genes are two different things. Sociological research has no obvious use of this kind of population concept, since it will not include research on groups of interacting people lacking the kind of genetic resemblance described in the quotation. In a similar vein, the concept will not be interesting from a medical and pharmacological perspective, since it will only allow for a classification of groups of interacting people. Therefore, a research project on the medical similarity of people in Africa and people who descend from Africa would not profit from the population concept. And the question is whether that kind of project would ever materialize if we abandon the racial type classification.

Secondly, Kassim claims that genetics have identified different human groups or populations, but that the relevant difference between these groups concerns the frequency of a certain type of genes, rather than the presence of certain race-specific physical traits. This can mean different things. It can mean that irrespective of the existence of race-specific physical characteristics, modern genetics does not *define* a population from these characteristics but from its genetics. This seems innocent and not very controversial. But it might also mean that you *cannot* define a population from the frequency of certain physical characteristics (plus interaction),

since there *are* no such characteristics, which does not seem very plausible. It does not require great powers of observation to see that there are certain typical physical characteristics for different populations. People from the Nordic countries are paler than people from Central Africa and have longer noses than people from Eastern Asia. Furthermore, it would be strange if a difference between the gene pools of two populations would not be reflected also in their physique and physiology.

And when Kassim writes that the genetic, and not the physical, difference is the relevant one, you may object that that depends on *for what* you want to use population research. If you want to test drugs, then the genetic difference between groups will not be important *in itself* but instead what physiological and pharmacological effects this genetic difference will have.

Thirdly, Kassim claims that we have to see that populations differ from one another in a relative but not absolute way and that the crossing of populations takes place gradually and with the presence of all kinds of intermediate forms. It is important to note this fact, he claims. But I seriously doubt that any person of any substance in this debate has ever asserted anything else. Take the relativity. As far as I know, not even the most prejudiced race biologist in the twentieth century claimed that differences between the races were non-relative: some people were supposed to have *shorter* skulls, *darker* skin, *lower* intelligence, and so on. I know of no serious claim to the effect that the so called lower standing races have some property which is unparalleled in their own race.

And I know of no case in which one has denied that there are intermediate forms of the different racial groups. For one thing, these intermediary forms are what most racist people oppose and want to avoid.

For another, these intermediate forms exist “naturally” and independently of any mixing of the races: *more* people have dark hair as you travel to southern Europe from Scandinavia.

But this is not the most important thing. Most importantly, one might ask what the significance of the intermediate forms is taken to be. Does Kassim mean that the existence of intermediate forms will make it more difficult to speak about a difference between racial groups? That would not follow. Possibly it would follow if it could be shown that a few people belong to one single human race, and that most people belong to intermediate racial forms. But I have seen no argument for this. The existence of intermediate racial forms does not in itself make the concept of race useless in medical contexts, just like the fact that some men are flabby won’t disqualify an assertion that men with big bellies are more likely to suffer from cardiovascular diseases than men with small bellies.

In other words, the presence of intermediate forms does not mean that you have no use for the classification of human beings into racial types. Take for instance the much debated drug BiDil. If there is a difference in the reaction patterns concerning this drug between white and black people, it seems reasonable to give different medicines or doses to white and black people.⁷ The fact that there are intermediate groups whose reactions we are still ignorant of will not prevent us from differentiating between the groups whose reactions we are *not* ignorant of.

⁷ See Abdallah S. Daar & Peter A. Singer, “Pharmacogenetics and geographical ancestry: implications for drug development and global health”, *Nature Reviews/Genetics*, vol. 6, March 2005, pp. 241–246.

Fourthly, one of Kassim's arguments for the thesis that we human beings are one race and not several races is that different human populations share the overwhelming majority of genes with one another and that there is a genetic gap between human beings and their closest relative, even if this gap is small. This argument is also difficult to understand. A genetic difference between human beings and chimpanzees cannot be an argument for the non-existence of (systematic) genetic differences between human beings. Quite the contrary; one might claim that the fact that there is a fairly large physical and physiological difference between human beings and chimpanzees despite the small genetic difference, speaks for the possibility that there might also be differences between human races in spite of the small genetic difference. Kassim's argument is an example of a *non sequitur* – the conclusion about the homogeneity of the human species simply does not follow from the observation that we are all genetically different from the chimpanzees.

And Kassim's conclusion does not follow from the quotation from Stephen Jones either. We cannot deny that "all families and all nations are connected by an invisible web of kinship" and we cannot deny that this may hold true of the entire animal kingdom. The fact that there is an invisible web of kinship supports the idea that there can be *visible* differences between different human groups in spite of the deep kinship. One might even claim that there *has* to be visible differences between two groups in order for the similarity to be invisible.

In the previous quotations, Kassim describes the old paradigm that allegedly has been abandoned by the geneticists, but also to a certain extent the new one. A more explicit description of this new paradigm, which might be called a "statistic concept of race", is this:

Genetics therefore offers a very different understanding of the differences between populations. Differences are explained in terms of the “frequency distributions of one or more genes within a population that differ from those of other populations ... [representing] the effects of the action of different isolating agents on a common stock of genetic materials ... [‘Racial’] differences simply represent more or less temporary or episodic expressions of variation in the relative frequencies of genes in different parts of the species population” ... It rejects absolutely the idea that humankind is divided permanently into separate “races” with characteristic physical traits.⁸

Once again I ask myself whose position Kassim is arguing against and why we should call this a paradigm change. No-one with an idea of the theory of evolution would claim that a presumptive racial classification is eternal and permanent and no-one with any power of observation would deny that the typical racial traits are relative both in expression and frequency. No-one can claim that all Scandinavians are light-skinned and blond; only that there is a higher frequency of people with these characteristics than in some other populations. Neither can we claim that every European has a longer nose than every East Asian, at the most that there is a higher frequency of long-noses in the one group compared to the other. And the same goes for all other typical traits.

In other words, the statistical group concept described by Kassim in terms of the statistical occurrence of genes among the group members, is

⁸ Kassim, p. 310. Kassim quotes A. Montagu: *Man’s Most Dangerous Myth: The Fallacy of Race*, Walnut Creek: Alma Mira, 1997.

quite sufficient to be useful in medical contexts. If there is a gene or a gene complex in 45 per cent of the black Americans, which means they react in a positive way to BiDil, and if this gene is absent amongst white Americans, then we ought to differentiate pharmacologically between the groups. The fact that this difference will not necessarily last in the future is not even a relevant consideration in this context.

Furthermore, if we accept the statistic concept of race, then the concept *will* have a biological foundation. Kassim is therefore wrong when he claims that there is no biological entity answering to the concept of race used in everyday language.⁹ I believe that the statistic concept of race is more or less the concept used in everyday language and Kassim himself seems to admit that there is a biological basis for this concept. I believe that “race” and “population” – as “population” is defined by Kassim – are more or less the same concepts and that what Kassim describes as a paradigm change will not distance us from biology. Kassim does not explicitly claim that his statistic concept of race is non-biological, but I am of the opinion that he does so in his rhetoric.

Concluding Reflections

Today, the “difference argument” is often employed to show that there are no human races and that the concept of race therefore is of no significance,

⁹ Ibid., p. 302.

medical or other. For instance, Troy Duster says (interviewed by David Rotman in *Technology Review*):

... it is fine to look at health disparities between any two groups – religious, gender, class, race, age, region of the country, et cetera – and ask why. But DNA should be the last place we look to try to explain those differences. Every molecular geneticist knows that there is far more genetic variation within what we call loosely African, European, and Asian continental ancestry than there is between these broad groupings.¹⁰

I claim that the “difference argument” cannot show that the concept of race has no genetic foundation and is of no use in medical contexts, since it compares two different things. It claims that the *range* of differences is larger between the individuals within each race than the *overall* difference between two races. The *individuals* within each race might therefore be more different from each other than the *races* are. But this fact (and I believe it is a fact) will not show that the concept of race has no biological foundation and importance, as long as it is more likely that members within a race genetically seen are more similar to each other on certain (race-specific) points than members of different races. The difference between the races would be suspended if we could show that two randomly chosen individuals from the same race would probably be more different from each other *on each point* than two randomly chosen individuals from different races. But I have seen no argument for that position.

¹⁰ http://www.technologyreview.com/read_article.aspx?id=13392&ch=biotech.

In other words, the “difference argument” does not refute a statistic concept of race. We have seen that Kassim believes that the argument would invalidate a more essentialistic or typological concept of race. And he is not the only philosopher to do so. Recently, Ron Mallon has argued that

... studies of human genetic diversity suggest that genetic variation within racially identified populations is as great as or greater than diversity between populations. Thus, it is very unlikely that any interesting genetic “essence” will be shared by all and only members of a race.¹¹

Once again, as long as these studies only show that the *range* of differences within the racially identified populations is as great as the *overall* diversity between populations, we are free to think that there might be some property which all and only members of a race have. It is true that these properties might be more or less interesting genetic markers, but they may also, for instance, be genes or gene complexes with medical importance. The fact that the overall medical differences between two members of the same race can be more numerous than the similarities does not show that there are no race-specific similarities within a race, for instance concerning how its members react to a drug.

I believe that there is often a mix of discourses in the race debate. The normative question of whether we ought to categorize people in different

¹¹ Ron Mallon, “‘Race’: Normative. Not Metaphysical or Semantic”, *Ethics*, vol. 116, 2006, p. 529.

biological races is one question, and I agree with Mallon that this is the *important* question in the race debate.¹² If we fear that the race talk will promote racism, we should avoid the race category, for instance in medical contexts, even if the category would answer to something in reality. If we, on the other hand, believe that we might profit from the category, then we should employ it whether or not it refers to something real. This fact should not conceal that the metaphysical or empirical question of whether or not there are races is a separate question. I get the impression that Kassim tends to mix these questions by loading the race concept in order to deter us from using it and by assuming that there exists no morally innocent use of the race category. I believe that the traditional concept of race *in itself* is fairly innocent and neutral or at least can be employed in such a way; I may classify a person biologically without having racial prejudices against her. But I am also aware that a concept which in itself is innocent might be used in such a way that it becomes dangerous.

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¹² Ibid., p. 550.

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