

24.293 Topics in Philosophy: Race & Biology

TR, 2:30-4:00pm, Bldg.66-160

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12 units

Course Description

What is a race? Is race a biological kind? The standard philosophical view is that race either does not exist, or is a social construct. But is either true? New developments in evolutionary biology challenge the standard view. So, this course boldly sets out to explore what, if anything, biology can tell us about the nature of race. The course is divided into three parts. During the first part we will study biological theories of race developed before the modern evolutionary synthesis, as well as the standard philosophical critiques against them. For example, we will introduce and understand Appiah's famous semantic argument for why race does not, and cannot, exist.

In the second part of the course, we will explore biological theories of race developed after the modern evolutionary synthesis, with an emphasis on biological theories of race developed in the last 12 years. We will also learn about the three major philosophical responses to the new biology of race. Here, we will tackle several new philosophical questions, such as, how much can biologists change the meaning of 'race' and still call it 'race', what does it mean to represent human evolutionary history using a phylogenetic tree, must race be a natural kind in order to be a legitimate biological kind, and can biologists detach the project of defining 'race' from the project of defining 'species'?

In the last part of the course we will use what we have learned to do some applied philosophy. Specifically, we will investigate the plausibility of a curious new trend in commercial genetics: using genetic genealogy tests to identify people's ethnic ancestries. Some claim that such tests are a godsend, especially for African Americans whose ethnic origins were lost during American slavery. However, we will explore whether such tests are capable of providing the information that they claim to be able to provide, and if not, what they can tell us about our ancestries.