

Reviews

The Philosophy of Race

by Albert Atkin

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Albert Atkin's *The Philosophy of Race* is a fine introduction to a dynamic, growing field. The book covers certain of the central questions in the field with care, and it genially, and convincingly, assures its readers that philosophers might fruitfully contribute to the work of understanding racial phenomena. Unfortunately, the field is even more dynamic, and is growing in more directions, and engages with more vital questions, than one would guess from this book. More than anything else, the book announces that a particular orientation to race theory has become a going concern, and shows its readers what the enterprise looks like from that perspective. This is a valuable contribution, but it comes with some costs.

The book is organized into five chapters. The first chapter, 'Is Race Real?', works carefully and persuasively toward the conclusion that 'our ordinary concept of race' does not refer to anything real, if we judge the concept 'by the standards of science and scientific study' (46). This chapter is noteworthy for introducing subjects like clinal variation and allele frequencies without bogging down, and for taking a new approach to the old question of how to locate and specify anything we can responsibly call 'our ordinary concept of race'. Atkin's introduction of his 'method of disagreement' for this latter purpose may be one of the book's stronger sections.

The second chapter, 'Is Race Social?', is served less well by its title than the other chapters. The operative question is not whether race is social – it obviously is, whatever else it is – but what kind of social phenomenon it is, and what its sociality means. The main burden is to figure out the implications, mainly but not entirely for metaphysics, of the social dimensions of racial discourse and practice. Here Atkin lays out three basic options. Strong social constructionism holds that certain of our social practices make races real in just the way that others of our practices make nations real. (Nation-talk is Atkin's example; I would choose others.) Weak social constructionism holds that racial practices demand our attention, but not because they confer reality on the concept at their heart – because they don't. Finally, the view that Atkin calls 'reconstructionism' insists – in Atkin's view, rightly – that our race-related social practices are most interesting because of their potential – revealed in part by a

Careful reading of the history of the mutable and malleable race concept – as resources for productively reshaping social life.

The third chapter, ‘What Should We Do With Race?’, takes up the obvious question that follows from accepting that race is in any way constructed or susceptible of reconstruction. Atkin presents the most prominent answers to the question in another three-way mapping of the possibility space, one that overlaps with but is not identical to his mapping of the metaphysical options. Here one chooses eliminativism, preservationism, or, again, reconstructionism, all of which are what they sound like, and what the previous chapter invites one to think they are. As in the previous chapter, the reconstructionist – think here of Sally Haslanger or Josh Glasgow – turns out to be the hero of the story, for giving us a way out of the tired eliminativist-preservationist debate.

The fourth chapter, ‘Racism’, introduces both the problem of defining ‘racism’ and the most common and promising attempts at a solution. Atkin judiciously evaluates the different approaches, and along the way helpfully introduces some of the key distinctions that have emerged in the literature (including the one between, for example, avert and overt racisms). As in the other chapters, a tripartite scheme ends up doing the most work, distinguishing here between accounts of racism that foreground belief, those that foreground behavior, and those that foreground affective states. After weighing the merits and demerits of these different approaches, he gently calls the broader project into question by suggesting that the aspiration to find necessary and sufficient conditions may be problematic, and closes with a gesture at two promising approaches that decline to pick one or another of the three basic options. (In the interest of full disclosure: Atkin cites me as the author of one of these alternative accounts, and of some other views that he regards less favorably. We will return to this.)

The final chapter, ‘The Everyday Impact of Race and Racism’, leaves aside the ‘definitional questions’ that organize the rest of the book, and focuses instead on the ways in which race and racism ‘impact... our daily lives’ (145). Atkin takes this to be a question of ‘social policy’ (145), and of revealing how philosophically informed reflections on race and racism can illuminate the murky world of policy. This leads him to undertake a thoughtful discussion of the understudied phenomenon of racial profiling. After an illuminating attempt to narrow the topic, to find a ‘philosophically interesting instance of racial profiling’ (150) that isn’t an ethical non-starter, Atkin follows the pattern that largely governs the other chapters. He adduces arguments for and against, weighs them carefully, and

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offers what might serve as a motto for the book as a whole: ‘as ever, the arguments are not conclusive, and the debate is not closed’ (170).

Atkin’s book is in some ways a model introduction to a growing subfield. The book’s virtues start with its clarity and readability, and with its openness about the ongoing debates that swirl around the arguments that it introduces and provisionally evaluates. But perhaps the best feature of the book is its flexibility. It is not just a sure-footed guide to state of the art analytic race theory and to the fine thinkers working in the area, but also a thoughtful reflection on real social issues and controversies, and a bridge to relevant work in other fields – including sociology, biology, psychology, anthropology, and history.

These virtues aside, though, the book suffers a bit from at least three important oversights. These omissions shape the provisional conclusions that Atkin draws in his not-yet-closed debates. And they probably have more to do with the state of the field than with any missteps Atkin himself makes. That is: the omissions involve silences around the availability of certain theoretical resources. Whether this silence is a matter of indifference, of active and principled refusal, or of ignorance, we cannot interrogate it until we become aware of it. Atkin has done us the service of making us aware. I don’t know whether he would argue for the silences, or whether he needs to do so in order to carry the burden that his book assumes. I just mean to highlight the need for some argument.

First, the book says next to nothing about what one might think is the most pressing aspect of living in a racialized world. One searches in vain for any sustained reflection on the broadly phenomenological dimensions of racialization. I am thinking here of a range of questions related to the formation and, one might say, distortion, of experience in racialized settings. Think here of questions in existential phenomenology or in ethics about the prospects for forming stable and virtuous selves in racially problematic social contexts. Or think of a generation’s worth of calls – often under the heading of ‘intersectionality’ – to analyze the way race works in concert with categories like gender, class, and sexuality.

This relative indifference to the experiential dimension of racialization connects directly to a second kind of omission. The book hardly appeals at all to figures, canonical or contemporary, that take up these phenomenological questions. Figures like Alain Locke, Frantz Fanon, W.E.B. Du Bois, Sartre, Heidegger, Arendt (these last two for good and ill), and Foucault receive no index entries, and as far as I can tell are not mentioned at all. And contemporary stalwarts like Angela Davis, bell hooks, James Baldwin, Patricia Hill Collins,

Etienne Balibar, Lewis Gordon, David Theo Goldberg, Linda Alcoff, or Judith Butler fare no better.

I may seem to be overreaching with this last complaint. After all, we don't expect philosophers to be responsible for everything that calls itself philosophy, and we routinely absolve philosophers in the tradition Atkin represents from any obligation to the kinds of figures I mention above. On this line of thinking, it is important that we don't expect analytic philosophers to consort with non-analytics, and that one might plausibly derive this view from the thought that mutual unintelligibility is a condition of specialized intellectual work, not from the conviction that only analysts have good sense or speak truth. Similarly, we do not expect analysts (not working in the history of philosophy, anyway) to consort with figures who did their work in the dim mists of time before Frege (or Ryle, or Rawls), or who don't write in English, or who make no explicit claim on the attention of professional philosophers as such. If we don't have these expectations in general, it is not clear that we should impose them on analytic race theorists.

But of course we do expect more than this from philosophers in other sub-fields. Philosophers of mind read widely across the cluster of fields that make up cognitive psychology, and have to do this in order to do their work properly. Anglophone Kant scholars read German commentators. Ethicists and philosophers of mind read people like Kant and Hume, and sometimes even like Hegel and Heidegger. Aestheticians (at our best) engage art historians and critics (and we should when we don't). And so on. If we refuse parochialism in these other domains, it is not at all obvious that we should allow it in race theory.

A more important response to this argument from specialization is that the refusal of disciplinary and subdisciplinary parochialism enabled the emergence of philosophical race theory, which might lead one to think of ecumenism as a condition of doing quality work going forward. Appiah's breakthrough with *In My Father's House* was a breakthrough in part because it aspired to speak all at once to postcolonial literary critics and to analytic philosophers of language, and because it settled comfortably into the epistemically pluralistic settings in which, say, critical theorist Lucius Outlaw, to whom I will return, could argue with sociologist Howard Winant and analytic philosopher Howard McGary over what Appiah might have meant – and over how Appiah's intervention related to the traditions of inquiry that people like Anna Julia Cooper inaugurated and that people like C.L.R. James – and Richard Wasserstrom – advanced.

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Thinking of Outlaw's work brings me to third kind of omission that I find in Atkin's book. Unlike the other figures I mention above, Outlaw figures prominently in the text. But he appears there only in part, as the truncated version of himself that appears to scholars examining his work through certain kinds of analytic lenses.

Outlaw appears in Atkin's text as a racial preservationist, which is to say, as someone guilty of the dual sins of (a) refusing to rise above the old eliminate-or-preserve debate, and (b) committing to race-thinking as it stands rather than to reconstructing race in the interests of social amelioration. I should report that I also get assigned this role. Outlaw gets to preservationism by way of critical theory while I get there through Deweyan pragmatism, but we both apparently miss the insight of reconstructionism – that race is mutable, and better reconstructed than preserved.

These characterizations are essential to the story of gradual transcendence of the eliminativism debates; but they do some violence to the story of recent race theory. Outlaw and I both argue explicitly for what the narrative requires of the reconstructionists: an insistence on the mutability of racial categories, and on the need to leverage this into a program for world-changing work. I don't have the space here to point to the textual evidence for this point, so I'll wave at the metaphilosophical contexts to establish a *prima facie* case.

Outlaw is a critical theorist in the mold of Marcuse and Adorno. He works in a tradition that explicitly foregrounds the dynamic and artifactual nature of human history, and that means to provide history's agents with the tools to intervene productively in the material and psychocultural processes of its unfolding. Similarly, I aspire to work in the tradition of people like Dewey, a tradition that also insists on dynamism and voluntaristic social construction, and that counts as one of its minor classics a little book called *Reconstruction in Philosophy*. For Outlaw and for me, the entire point of what Atkin hears as a call to preserve races is to create the conditions for the intelligent reconstruction of contingent and dynamic but deeply rooted racial formations. How does this count as 'preservationism'? How, that is, apart from a peculiarly analytic tone-deafness to expressions like 'pragmatism' (which on Atkin's rendering is only slightly more complex than the traditional analytic caricature of William James); or 'critical theory' (which Atkin says nothing about); or, for that matter, '*conservation*', which Outlaw, like many others, learns from Du Bois to apply to race, and which is precisely not about preserving otherwise dynamic realities as if sealing them in amber?

In its indifference to the phenomenology of race, to the figures who might unpack it, and to the wider commitments of even the figures with whom it proposes to be in conversation, Atkin's book plays out a familiar script. New schools of thought use introductory texts to narrate their emergence from the benighted past; and they motivate the narrative by tendentiously depicting 'unschooled' views in ways that render them untenable. Analytic philosophers have no monopoly on this practice, but they have raised it to an art form.

To be clear, these worries do not put me off Atkin's book. I still mean to recommend it, but with some critical guidance as to the nature and limits of its contribution. Atkin gives his readers an indisputably valuable, eminently readable, extremely thorough guided tour of the *contemporary analytic* philosophy of race. The book just happens also to make clear that certain familiar oversights of that tradition – a tradition that, I hasten to add, I address fondly, as one of its adherents and offspring – also shape its orientation to race theory.

Analytic race theory is now where the analytic approaches to mind and to art were in 1950. We pretend that our subject is all new, that no one ever thought these thoughts before we could (struggle to) express them in the current analytic vocabularies. And we will, unless something changes, spend the next several years reinventing things – like calls for social amelioration and cultural reconstruction – that we could find around us if we could be bothered to look.

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God and Necessity

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In 1974 Alvin Plantinga's *The Nature of Necessity* signaled a renaissance of Christian philosophy in the Anglophone world. Brian Leftow's new book *God and Necessity* epitomizes that renaissance. It is a major contribution to modal metaphysics, striking in its creativity, impressive in its argumentation, and mind-numbing in its thoroughness.

The fundamental aim of the book is to meet the ostensible challenge posed by necessary truths to the claim that God is the sole ultimate reality by formulating and defending a theistic metaphysics for