

**Justin E.H. Smith.** *Nature, Human Nature, and Human Difference: Race in Early Modern Philosophy*. Princeton University Press 2015. 312pp. \$39.95 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780691153643).

In contemporary philosophy of race, it is common to hear that race is a ‘social construction’ originating in 18<sup>th</sup> century European Enlightenment thought. The ‘invention’ of race by such thinkers as Bernier, Linnaeus, Blumenbach, Kant, and others is thought to be related in complex ways to the projects of colonialism and the trans-Atlantic slave trade, both of which, not coincidentally, gained traction roughly alongside the burgeoning idea of race. This raises interesting questions of cause and effect. Did the concept of race emerge as an ideological justification for slavery and colonization? Or did it arise independently, from the naturalism and taxonomic imperatives of modern science? Smith’s thorough and erudite history of the role of early modern philosophy in constructing the idea of race does not provide a final answer to this question, but it certainly helps us to think about it in a more informed and precise way, corroborating some aspects of the above-mentioned orthodoxy while complicating others.

Smith’s book has a number of related aims, but perhaps its central thesis is that the rise of ‘race science’ grew out of the attempt to ‘naturalize’ the human person—to reject the Cartesian dualism of immaterial soul and material body, and understand the human as a ‘natural’ being fully subject to the same principles as other living (and non-living) beings. Dualism, Smith claims, discouraged inferences from physical appearance to essential characteristics. In particular, the soul’s possession of rationality—the key attribute which marked its possessor as human—could not be inferred from the physical appearance of the body in the way that later thinkers like Kant, Locke, and Hume would suggest. This thesis structures the book’s exploration of a number of early modern thinkers and themes, from the theological (and later scientific) debate over monogenesis (whether different races have the same genealogical origins) to precursory theories of human ‘degeneration’ that would set the stage for the emergence of evolutionary theory.

One result of structuring the exploration of race in this way is that Smith’s account begins earlier than standard histories of race. This is evidenced by the fact that Smith’s chapter on Enlightenment thinkers is actually the *last* chapter of the book, consistent with his view that these thinkers are actually responding to problems and themes that were long simmering in European intellectual culture by the time they published their own contributions. In fact, Smith argues that there are important precedents to modern race thinking as far back as the ancient Greeks, whose cultural distinctions between Greeks and barbarians and ideas about ‘spontaneous generation’, ‘informed’ debates about human difference and origins in the modern period. As mentioned above, theological debates about the humanity of native peoples, and about whether or how non-Christians could be converted and ‘saved’, are also part of this story. In the background is Smith’s view that racial distinctions, while unique to the modern period, derive from a central human cognitive tendency to categorize and essentialize human groups. That is, he argues, drawing from accumulating work in social science and cognitive psychology, that ‘categorical systems throughout history and throughout the world amount to variations within certain parameters that are fixed by human biology’ (28). If this is correct, then what is unique to the modern period is not so much its attempt to divide up and categorize humanity in a systematic way, but to assume that the relevant features for such a taxonomy are physical or phenotypical in nature. Hence the central role of what might be called the ‘naturalization thesis’ in Smith’s genealogy.

As evidence of this thesis, Smith notes and discusses the origins of the term ‘race’ (in French, at least) as having to do primarily with animal husbandry. Race, in this sense, is synonymous with ‘breed’, and entails that significant physical differences can occur within the same species. For worldviews in which humans are metaphysically distinct from the animal world, such a fact might be irrelevant. But once humans are understood as part of nature, as *animals* of a certain sort, the apparent similarities (and differences) must be wrestled with. One such similarity is the fact, which most (though not all) early modern thinkers recognized, that humans of various appearance can nonetheless inter-breed and produce fertile offspring. This fact mitigated against the conclusion that different ‘racial’ groups amounted to something like fundamentally different species, a conclusion that, according to Smith, there was great cultural and political pressure to accept.

This points to one of Smith’s secondary theses: that the racial essentialism commonly attributed to modern thinkers is mostly misattributed. ‘It is hard’, he argues, ‘to find anyone who advocates a thoroughgoing realist or essentialist theory of races’ in the modern period (32). Instead, he argues, racial essentialism was driven not by theoretical commitments, but ‘by a broader culture desirous of scientific legitimation for a racial realism to which it is committed on largely independent, nontheoretical grounds’ (33). Yet, his account is not of the familiar kind that tries to redeem racist philosophers by arguing that their racism was a merely peripheral, non-essential feature of their thought. To the contrary, he traces the ways in which cultural forces *fundamentally shaped* that thought. What emerges is a picture of the inextricable links between culture and philosophy, and of the ways in which modern theorists attempted to calibrate their thinking to what seemed to them axiomatic truths.

This approach brings into greater relief not only the tortured attempts to provide theoretical accounts consistent with the cultural presumption of European superiority, but also the consistent engagement with, and pushback from, non-European thinkers and forms of knowledge. The ‘discovery’ of the New World looms large in Smith’s book, and the emergence of ‘race science’ is presented as continuous with Europe’s attempt to come to terms with the vast botanical and zoological diversity encountered in its global exploits. These discoveries often forced Europeans to rely on local, indigenous forms of knowledge even as they attempted to dismiss the rational capacities of their authors. Against this assumption, Smith also shows us non-European thinkers challenging the assumptions of European thought, especially regarding their supposed inferiority. Thus, Smith provides an entire chapter on Anton Wilhelm Amo, the Ghanian-German philosopher who confounded European presumptions about African intellectual abilities by developing an original philosophy of mind premised upon a critique of Descartes (and, according to Smith, a more local critique of Stahlianism and German pietism). Smith also discusses the work of Spanish-Incan philosopher Garcilaso de la Vega who, according to Smith, uses the term ‘race’ several decades earlier than Francois Bernier, who is frequently cited as the first to use the term in something like its contemporary sense.

As one can begin to see, this book is wide-ranging in its coverage and ambitious in its goals, such that it is difficult to give a comprehensive view of it in brief. In fact, this is perhaps one of the simultaneous strengths and weaknesses of the book. Other works that explore race and racism in modern philosophy typically anthologize a number of essays on particular thinkers (Andrew Valls, ed. *Race and Racism in Modern Philosophy*, Cornell UP: 2005; Robert Bernasconi and Tommy Lee Lott, eds. *The Idea of Race*, Hackett: 2000) or paint the history of race in broad strokes as part of a

philosophical project aimed primarily at understanding contemporary issues. Smith, by contrast, ambitiously tries to trace the emergence of race through a period of centuries, encompassing dozens of thinkers (including Leibniz, whose metaphysics of ‘unity in diversity’ plays a central role in Smith’s account, to which this review has not done justice) without losing the subtlety of close reading and careful historical scholarship. Its closest correlate would thus be Emmanuel Eze’s *Race and the Enlightenment* (Wiley-Blackwell: 1997), which focuses on later thinkers, especially Kant. Smith’s text would be a natural complement to Eze’s for an even more comprehensive view of the topic.

Finally, notwithstanding the point that Smith’s study is already incredibly broad (and focused on the *early* modern period), it is rather surprising given Smith’s naturalization thesis that Charles Darwin and evolutionary theory does not play a more central role in the story. Much in the book points toward this eventual innovation (for example, in the attempts to account for human diversity via ‘degenerationist’ views). In the end, one is reminded of those films where the key event, the thing that the film is ultimately *about*, happens only in the last scene, or is even merely hinted at before the credits roll. Though Smith barely mentions Darwin in the book, there is a sense in which it could be read as being *about* Darwinism and evolutionary theory: the attempt to understand how not just human diversity, but the diversity of life in general, comes about. But that is perhaps a book in itself, and Smith has more than enough to deal with in the period that he takes on.

Overall, Smith’s book is a provocative and valuable addition to the literature on the origins and function of the idea of race, and the central role that philosophy played in its development. Both scholars of race and those who tend to underestimate the centrality of the issue of race in the modern philosophical tradition will find much of value in the text.

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