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Where Did Hegel Go Wrong on Race?

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Abstract

Where exactly did Hegel go wrong on race? Moellendorf helpfully tells us that Hegel's treatment of race begins systematically in the Philosophy of Subjective Spirit and that he went wrong philosophically in the use of the biological category of race. This is basically correct but requires precisification. This article considers why Hegel's category of race is not unambiguously biological. Race's biological status can be problematized from the standpoint of contemporary biology and from the standpoint of Hegel's system. The textual placement of Hegel's systematic discussion of race in the philosophy of spirit makes clear that Hegel conceived of race in spiritual terms. Hegel took race to be a biospiritual category. Hegel was clearly committed to the now-controversial proposition that there is such a thing as human biological race, that there is a plurality of biological human races. He regarded race as a robust natural kind. His preferred list of races includes Caucasians, Negros, Mongolian, Malaysians and Americans. One noteworthy feature of his understanding of race's physical aspect was his focus on the formation of the skull and the face. At the same time, he clearly held that there were other deeper physical differences that accounted for the spiritual differences of race. Hegel was perfectly clear that race has a spiritual as well as physical aspect. He held that that the members of racial groups essentially shared certain fundamental, heritable, moral, intellectual and cultural characteristics with one another that they did not share with members of any other race and that these differences were such as to support an objective ranking. This shows that Hegel took the category of race to be the sort of category we today would characterize as 'racialist'. Hegel's concept of race was the racialist concept of race.

I. Introduction

That Hegel held abominable views about race is uncontroversial (Bernasconi 1998, 2000, 2003, 2010; Hoffheimer 2001; James and Knappik 2023). That Hegel himself was a racist *ought* not to be controversial.¹ But *where exactly* did Hegel go wrong on race? In asking this question, we might mean (1) Where *in his philosophical system*

did Hegel go wrong? Or we might mean (2) Where *philosophically* did Hegel go wrong? What fundamental *philosophical* mistake did Hegel make in connection with race? Moellendorf helpfully suggests a plausible answer to both questions. With respect to (1), he tells us that Hegel's systematic treatment of the 'biological category of race' begins in the Philosophy of Subjective Spirit (Moellendorf 1992: 243).² Provided what Moellendorf means by his reference to 'the biological category of race' is that Hegel's category of race is one that *we* (in the twentieth or twenty-first century) would regard as biological, this is correct. The specific place in the system where Hegel began to go wrong on race was in Section 1 of the third volume of the *Encyclopaedia of Philosophical Sciences*.³ That is by no means the only place where he went awry. Hegel also expressed—and elaborated—wrongheaded views on race in his lectures on the Philosophy of History, Philosophy of Religion, Philosophy of Right and History of Philosophy.⁴ The degree to which Hegel's views on race infect the rest of his philosophy is a matter of intense scholarly debate.⁵

With respect to (2), where *philosophically* Hegel went wrong, Moellendorf suggests that it was in his use of the 'biological category of race'. This, too, is correct, but potentially misleading and less than maximally precise. It could mislead us into thinking that Hegel's category of race can be thought to be *unambiguously* biological. And it could leave us wondering whether Hegel went wrong (a) in the *specific* use he made of a category of race that can be regarded as biological or (b) *simply in using* a race category that can be understood to be biological. The contemporary popularity of scepticism about biological race, the view that there are no human biological races, makes (b) an especially tempting option. I will suggest in Section IV that (b) is incorrect. But, before we can consider which, if either, of these two possibilities is correct, we need to interrogate the *for us* natural assumption that the category of race with which Hegel operated can be understood to be biological. I say this assumption is natural 'for us' because the notion that the category of race is biological is the 'default' position today. The current popularity of social constructionist conceptions of race notwithstanding (cf. Haslanger 2019), we (in the early twenty-first century) are at least initially disposed to think of race as a (putative) biological category. It must also be borne in mind that Moellendorf himself was writing some thirty years ago—before the most recent problematization of the idea of (human) race as a biological category had become widespread.⁶ But, however 'natural' it might be, the idea that the race category with which Hegel operated can be construed as 'biological' must be critically interrogated.

Section II explains why Hegel's concept of race cannot be taken to be unambiguously biological. Section III reconstructs Hegel's understanding of the biology of race. Section IV turns to the philosophy of race to consider where Hegel went wrong on race from a contemporary perspective. It introduces two non-racialist (non-essentialist and non-hierarchical) biological concepts of race as a way of

showing that it is possible to reject Hegel's racialism without rejecting the idea of biological race as such. The discussion concludes in Section V.

II. Why Hegel's category of race is not unambiguously biological

One angle from which it is possible to question the idea that Hegel's category of race can be understood to be biological is provided by contemporary biology. It has been observed that, since the mid-twentieth century, no mainstream scientist has considered race a biologically significant category (Smith 2015). The biological—or, in any case, 'natural'—credentials of the race concept, although not unquestioned in Hegel's time (see e.g., Herder (1784) and Forster (1786)), were more secure then than they are now.⁷ It is sometimes said that race today is an obsolete biological category; that race is to biology as phlogiston is to chemistry (Montagu 1962). This would suggest that Hegel went wrong on race in applying a biological category that is obsolete. But philosophers discussing the topic of race in human beings tend to forget that the concept of race has not been expunged from the vocabulary of contemporary biology. The notion is still thought to have application to various non-human biological species such as chimpanzees (Templeton 2013). So, the biological category of race *as such* is not obsolete. More plausible is the contention that what is obsolete is the idea that the category of biological race applies to human beings. This would suggest that Hegel's fundamental philosophical error in connection with race was applying an otherwise valid biological category to a species (*Homo sapiens*) to which it cannot be applied. On this view, Hegel's treatment of race as natural shipwrecks against the (putative) biological fact that the human race is not subdivided into biological races. (We will return to this idea below in Section IV.)

The biological status of the category of race can also be problematized from the standpoint of Hegel's system. A quick glance at the location of Hegel's initial systematic discussion of race makes clear that Hegel did not think of race as a biological-*rather-than-spiritual* category. Its placement in the Philosophy of Spirit (rather than the Philosophy of Nature) indicates that Hegel conceived of race in expressly spiritual (*geistig*) terms. The fact that the word 'Rasse' appears as (what we might call) a philosophically weight-bearing term in the discussion of *spirit* suggests that Hegel regarded 'race' as having an essential mental, spiritual or cultural dimension. Moreover, the specific use Hegel made of 'Rasse' makes it clear that he thought of race as a determination of *Geist*. This can be seen in his characterization of 'racial variety' (*Rassenverschiedenheit*) as an expression of the particularization of the 'universal planetary life of the natural spirit' (*Enz.*: §393; my emphasis).⁸ This remark indicates that Hegel took the diversity of the races in humankind—the putative fact that the species is divided into natural races—as an aspect of the life of what he called 'natural spirit' (*Naturgeist*). Hegel thought that human races

were ‘natural spirits’, determinate natural ways in which spirit (singular) particularizes itself. Indeed, the precise context in the *Encyclopaedia* in which Hegel began his discussion of race, namely in the *first* subdivision (Natural Qualities) of the *first* division (The Natural Soul) of the *first* subsection (Anthropology) of the *first* section (Subjective Spirit) of the Philosophy of Spirit indicates that Hegel thought of race as the most basic ‘natural’ way in which spirit is divided.⁹ Hegel seems to have held that, philosophically speaking, spirit was subdivided into races from the start. This may help explain his otherwise puzzling indifference to what he called the merely ‘historical’ (*historische*) question concerning whether monogenesis (human beings descended from a single pair) or polygenesis (human beings were the result of several local creations) is true (*GW* 25.1: 33–34). Hegel appears to have been committed to the striking philosophical view that there is no *spirit* without natural racial differentiation, that spirit is (in this sense) *essentially* divided into biological or natural races.

Hegel referred explicitly to the ‘spiritual characteristics of the races [*Charakteristische des Geistigen der Racen*]’ (*GW* 25.1: 35). He held that racial membership bears directly on straightforwardly spiritual traits such as the possession (or non-possession) of an ‘inner impulse [*innern Trieb*]’ toward culture (*GW* 25.1: 35), the presence or lack of ‘consciousness of personality [*Bewußtsein von Persönlichkeit*]’ (*GW* 25.1: 35), the grasp of the ‘universal’ [*das Allgemeine*]’ (*GW* 25.1: 35), and the attainment of ‘individual freedom [*individuelle Freiheit*]’ (*GW* 25.2: 612). Hegel contended that these and other spiritual traits are differentially distributed across racial groups. He seems to have assumed that the race to which you belong is very likely to determine your capacity for education and religion, your grasp of the universal, your attainment or non-attainment of true freedom, and so forth. He would likely have said that, if you belong to what he took to be the ‘Negro’ race, you will in all likelihood be immersed in uninterested and indifferent naiveté. You will be exceedingly unlikely to display an inner impulse to culture. Spirit will most probably be ‘entirely dormant’ in you. If, on the other hand, you belong to what he took to be the Caucasian race, it may be possible for you to achieve self-determination and self-development, to produce world-history and enjoy true freedom. Even if Hegel were to allow that there could be exceptional individual Negroes who were philosophers (a biographical question about which I am unclear), he surely would have denied that this possibility was open to Negroes in general.

A quick qualification. To say that Hegel took the category race to have a ‘spiritual dimension’ is not to say that he took the category to be straightforwardly spiritual. Race differs from straightforwardly spiritual categories which appear later in the system. Take, for example, ‘person’, a category that first appears in subsection A (Right) of Section II (Objective Spirit) of the Philosophy of Spirit (*after* spirit has placed itself into complete opposition to nature). ‘Person’ is a clear case of a

category that is spiritual-*and-not-biological*. On the other hand, *Persönlichkeit*—personality—is not altogether free of conditioning by biological race. It is, to the contrary, inflected by race's biology.¹⁰ This can be seen in Hegel's view that race figures in the explanation of the degree to which different populations have attained the 'consciousness of personality' (*Bewußtsein von Persönlichkeit*). He held that the reason Negroes had not attained this exalted level of consciousness lies in the limitations imposed by the *natural* determinations—what we today would call the 'biology'—of their race.

But, if it would be a mistake to say that Hegel's category of race is best understood as a biological-rather-than-spiritual category, it would be no less of a mistake to think it is best understood as spiritual-rather-than-biological. Hegel did not, for example, think of races as identity groups constituted on ethno-linguistic rather than biological grounds (cf. Smith 2015). He did not think of race as exclusively cultural. The natural/organic connotations of the word 'Rasse' in German (both ordinary and philosophical) were fully present to him. So, we are entitled say that the category of race with which Hegel operated can be thought of as biological, provided we understand it to be a biological category *with a spiritual aspect*. Race, as found in Hegel could be more precisely characterized as a *biospiritual* (or biocultural) category—at least in human beings.¹¹ Hegel's category of race is philosophically amphibious. It has a life in the domain of nature (from which it was drawn) *and* in the domain of spirit (in which it unfolds). It straddles the two domains. This is not to say that the distinction between the natural and the spiritual is annulled when it comes to race. Nor is it to deny that there is a conceptual distinction to be made between some natural aspects and some spiritual aspects that are built into Hegel's concept of race. The metaphor is that race stands with one leg on the nature side of that distinction and with the other leg on the spirit side of that distinction. The image of *straddling* between X and Y preserves the basic distinction between them.¹²

III. Hegel on the biology of race

I do not think it overly anachronistic to say that Hegel was at least implicitly committed to the now-controversial proposition that there is such a thing as human biological race. That, indeed, is precisely the force of his *Enz.* §393 use of the term 'Rassenverschiedenheit'. But about the details of the biology of race Hegel has remarkably little to say. This may reflect the circumstance that his discussion of race falls under the aegis of spirit rather than nature. It may well indicate that he was less interested in the details of what we would regard as the biology of race than we might expect him to be. His dismissal of the polygenesis/monogenesis debate as unphilosophical (*GW* 25.1: 33–34) appears to indicate that he

regarded a detailed understanding of what we would regard as the biology of race to be unnecessary for a grasp of race's spiritual role. Nonetheless, to see where Hegel went wrong on race, we need *some* understanding of how he conceived of what we would regard as its biology. It will be necessary to piece together this understanding from scattered remarks.

First, Hegel took the circumstance that the human species could be objectively subdivided into a small number of well-defined, highly discrete smaller biologically or naturally defined groups that could properly be called 'Rassen' to be so obvious as to require no explicit statement. His considered position that natural racial differentiation results in profound spiritual differentiation indicates he took race to be what we would regard as a biologically significant category.

Hegel's preferred list of races is traditional. It includes the group that he, following Blumenbach, called the Caucasian (*kaukasische*) race (roughly Western Eurasians) (*GW* 25.1: 232). He also referred to this group as the European (*europäische*) and Germanic (*germanische*) race (*GW* 25.1: 612). He held that this group could be further subdivided into two smaller races, which he called 'Near Asian' (*Vorder-Asiaten*) (roughly Western Eurasians living to the east of Europe) and 'European' (*Europäer*) (roughly Western Eurasians living in Europe) (*GW* 25.1: 37). His list of races also included the group he variously referred to as the Ethiopian race (*die aethiopische*), the Negro race (*Neger*) and the African race (*Afrikaner*) (roughly, sub-Saharan Africans) (*GW* 25.1: 232). And it included the group he called the 'Mongolian race' (*die Mongolische*) ('middle' and 'north' Asians), also called Asian (*Asiaten*). Hegel appears to have taken this triad to constitute the races that most adequately embody and express the Concept in being fully determinate, that is, in having clearly defined boundaries. He also counted as races the less determinant group he called the 'Malaysian race' (*malaische*) (roughly, Oceanians) and the group he calls the 'American race' (*die americanische*) (roughly Amerindians) (*GW* 25.1: 232). It is clear that this list of (putative) races is recognizable as a list of *races* (that is, groups that can plausibly be regarded as races) from a contemporary point of view. Hegel's list corresponds quite well to contemporary commonsense specifications of which groups are races. Nor is this a chance correspondence. This classical way of dividing races, which Hegel takes over from Blumenbach, has helped to shape modern perceptions of race.¹³

Hegel thought that the division of the races (at least those of the old world) was necessary rather than contingent (James and Knappik 2023: 99, 100, 109, 110). He also presumably thought that the division of the human species into races was 'complete' in the sense that every individual human being could be properly counted as a member of exactly one of these five races or, perhaps, as some admixture of the same.

With respect to Hegel's understanding of the physical aspect of race, one noteworthy feature is the following: although Hegel recognized skin colour and

hair as visible physical respects in which races differed and although he was undoubtedly aware that racial groups were distinguished by a number of additional visible physical features, the specific physical differences on which he focused were differences in the formation of the skull and the face (*GW* 25.1: 35; 25.2: 608–10).¹⁴ In this he followed Blumenbach. This may have been a reflection of the anthropologist's authority. It may also have been that Hegel took such differences to be biologically or naturally more significant than differences of skin colour. In one place he said that 'the osteological has a relation to the spiritual' (*SG*: 610), suggesting that 'the spiritual' is prefigured or can be seen in 'the osteological'. Hegel appears to have thought that the formation of the skull and the face were the most important physical features on the basis of which we distinguish racial groups. This focus may also have been a way of indicating that, biologically (or naturally) speaking, race is more than 'skin deep'.

From what has been said, it is clear that Hegel attributed to race a spiritual as well as physical aspect. He maintained, for example, that the character of the African race is different from the European race in both physiological (*physiologisch*) and spiritual (*das Geistige*) respects (*GW* 25.2: 611; my emphasis). Hegel operated with the racialist concept of race.¹⁵ There was, incidentally, nothing idiosyncratic about this. At the time Hegel wrote, the racialist concept of race was widely taken to be the concept of race. Thus Moellendorf is correct in his assertion that '[t]he source of [Hegel's] racism can be traced to the general ideology of the nineteenth century' (Moellendorf 1992). This is not to suggest, however, that Hegel did no more than 'passively absorb' the prejudices of his times.¹⁶ Bernasconi (1998) argues convincingly that Hegel wilfully misconstrues his sources in ways that exaggerated the negative characteristics of Africans. The same point can be made with respect to Hegel's treatment of Blumenbach's view of skulls.¹⁷ This behaviour suggests racial ill-will on his part. Racial ill-will is a form of racism.¹⁸

A crucially important spiritual respect in which races differed on Hegel's view was in their capacity to participate in world history (*Weltgeschichte*), the process through which spirit attains knowledge of its own nature.¹⁹ Although this idea is developed much more fully in the lectures on world history, its seeds are fully evident in the Philosophy of Spirit lectures. Thus, for example, Hegel writes:

[t]he Africans retain a pure inwardness that never proceeds to development. The Africans are now as they have been for the last thousand years. They have never gone out of themselves, but always remain within themselves in a childlike manner. They have remained in the condition of particularity, of individuality, of desire, and have not developed the oppositions of the understanding, of law and particular instances (*SG*: 43; *LPS*: 91).

He tells us that:

in the Asians the universal emerges. They have an objective God, an all-encompassing, all-dominating laws, right and state. The universal emerges there, but with the qualification that the subjective is submerged in it, so that individuality is wiped out. (*SG*: 44; *LPS*: 91)

And, finally, ‘[t]he Caucasian, European, Germanic, races validates both the substantial and the subjective, the principles of morals and conscience. There concrete freedom exists, the harmony of freedom as content and freedom as formal principle’ (*SG*: 44; *LPS*: 91).

Hegel rejected the view that the correspondence between the overt physical features of race and spiritual differences of race was *contingent*. He regarded the correspondence between the two sorts of features as *necessary*—as in accordance with the concept.²⁰ This essentialist understanding of the spiritual dimension of race commits him to the position that the biology of race must include underlying organic structures that would account for these fundamental differences. It is true that Hegel nowhere refers to such structures explicitly. Nor does he characterize them as ‘essences’. But the biological structures his account of race implicitly called for are such that they can be aptly called ‘biological essences’ in as much as they purport to explain for example why a person with a particular skin colour, hair type and skull formation has or is likely to have the spiritual capacity she does. So Hegel appears to have been committed to the view that races have biological essences, even if he did not use the term ‘essence’. This makes him a racialist.

Now, one possible complicating consideration is the following: Hegel said that the origin of the physical and spiritual differences between the races can be traced back—somehow—to differences in the geographical regions of the earth the races inhabited (*Enz.*: §393; *GW* 25.2: 231–34, 605–607).²¹ I say ‘somehow’ because his discussion leaves obscure the precise nature of the mechanisms connecting the physical and spiritual differences between race to differences in geography. This linkage of race and geography might lead one to wonder whether Hegel could have thought that the differences in the spiritual characteristics between the races were due solely to differences in the geography of the regions in which the races were found. This, in turn, might lead one to ask whether, if members of one racial group R_1 , which found itself in a geographical environment E_1 , marked by a particular geographic orientation (e.g., north-south), were to be transplanted to a different geographical environment E_2 , marked by a different geographic orientation (e.g., east-west), the members of R_1 would come to exhibit spiritual characteristics much like members of the racial group R_2 , who inhabited E_2 . The view just sketched would amount to a kind of ‘environmental determinism’.²² The explanation of the spiritual differences between the races would be ‘situational’

rather than ‘dispositional’. It would lie in the difference in the ‘situations’ (the structure of the geography) in which members of different races found themselves rather than innate biological features internal to those individuals. Geographer and historian Jared Diamond suggests just such an explanation of the differences in the level of material development between racialized groups (Diamond 1997). In this vein, McCarney attributes to Hegel ‘a species of geographical materialism’, holding that Hegel’s position could be advanced without assuming ‘any inherent natural, and, hence, any racial, inadequacy’ (McCarney 2000: 144). But reflection on Hegel’s overall view makes clear that this was not Hegel’s considered position. Confirmation can be found in James and Knappik’s observation that Hegel explicitly considered what we might call the ‘natural experiment’ in colonial America in which indigenous Americans and Africans were exposed to European culture and education (James and Knappik 2023: 107). As James and Knappik point out, Hegel wrote that the missionaries were not able to ‘bring any drives and excitation into’ the Americans (*W*: 611), owing to the Americans’ ‘weakness and stupor [*Stumpfsinn*]’ (*W*: 823). Forestalling any doubt that Hegel thought spiritual traits were biologically inherited, James and Knappik note that he held that Creoles—a group that exhibited an admixture of American or African and European ‘blood’—were able to reach ‘the higher-feelings of self, the upward-striving to autonomy, independence’ (*W*: 510), presumably because of the portion of European ‘blood’ they possessed—which is to say: because of their biological ancestry. Hegel’s treatment of this case makes clear that he thought that mental traits of the races were biologically inherited, and that this inheritance was invariant in the face of geographical/cultural transposition. It is clear, then, that Hegel thought (or was committed to the idea) that the inner biological constitutions of the different races were very different.

We are now in a position to revisit the question posed at the outset of this essay: Did Hegel go wrong *in the specific use* he made of the category of race, or did he go wrong *simply in using* the category of race? That Hegel went wrong in the specific use he made of the category is plain. It is well documented that the particular ways in which he characterized the spiritual traits of the groups he called Negroes, Mongolians and Americans were straightforwardly and unambiguously racist (Bernasconi 2000, 2003, 2010; Hoffheimer 2001; Moellendorf 1992). But in addition to this, the specific concept of race with which he operated—the racist concept of race—is itself racist. It counts as racist, first of all, because it is the race concept that social theorists dubbed ‘racist’ in the 1930s, when the term first entered into general circulation. ‘Racism’ was originally a name for *this* conception of race (Miles 1989). Should a more principled reason for labelling it ‘racist’ be sought, one could say that it counts as such because it is essentialist and hierarchical, because it stigmatizes racialized groups deemed inferior, and because it served

to legitimate colonialism, slavery and genocide. If that is not enough to make a concept racist, nothing is.

But to say that Hegel went wrong in deploying the *specific category* of race with which he operated is *not*, however, to say, as many would maintain today, that his fundamental philosophical error was in operating with the biological category of race as such. It is here that the philosophy of race becomes relevant. To develop this point, I will draw on Hardimon 2017 in the hope that this can bring some of the philosophical issues concerning where Hegel went wrong on race into a sharper light. In that book I argue that the racialist concept of race (i.e. the category of race with which Hegel operated) should not be identified with *the* concept of race as such and that it is possible to conceive of biological race in at least two *non-racialist* ways. To be sure neither of these concepts were available to Hegel and it would be crudely anachronistic to blame him for not using them, but they can nonetheless shed light on where philosophically Hegel went wrong on race.

IV. Two non-racialist biological concepts of race

To begin with, one can conceive of the biological category of race using what I have dubbed the minimalist concept of race. The minimalist concept of race says that a race is a group of human beings

- (M1) that, as group, is distinguished from other groups of human beings by patterns of visible physical features;
- (M2) whose members are linked by common ancestry peculiar to members of the group;
- (M3) that originates from distinctive geographic locations (Hardimon 2017).

The ‘visible physical features’ referred to in (M1) include skin pigmentation, nose shape and head form. They are innate biological characters that correspond to differences in geographical ancestry and trace back to the distinctive geographic locations from which minimalist races originate.

The minimalist concept of race does not posit a racial essence. It does not say that minimalist races differ with respect to honesty, courage, or intelligence, and so forth. It makes no reference whatsoever to normatively important features. It does not posit a correlation between visible physical features and normatively important traits. It neither ranks races on a scale of inferiority and superiority nor specifies features on the basis of which they could be ranked. It is a non-essentialist and non-hierarchical race concept.

The minimalist concept of race allows that skin pigmentation and other visible physical features can vary as much within a minimalist race as between

minimalist races. It also allows that genes can vary as much within a minimalist race as between minimalist races. So, too, it allows that the genetic differences within minimalist races are greater than the genetic differences between them. It recognizes that determining whether a given individual belongs to minimalist race MR_1 or minimalist race MR_2 may be difficult. It allows that a given individual may belong to more than one minimalist race and that the boundaries between minimalist races may be blurry.

The minimalist concept of race is ‘biological’ in the basic sense in that it characterizes its referent in biological terms. The visible physical features that figure in its definition, such as skin pigmentation, nose shape and head form are biological properties. The ancestry referred to in (M2) is biological ancestry. The minimalist concept of race is also ‘biological’ in the more robust sense of being biologically respectable because it can survive the argument from human population genetics (Hardimon 2017: 65–66). It is compatible with the principles and findings of modern biology.

It is plausible to suppose that there are human groups to which the minimalist concept of race applies. Examples include Western Eurasians (the group formerly known as Caucasians), sub-Saharan Africans, East Asians and Amerindians. Each is an ancestry group that has its own distinctive pattern of visible physical features that corresponds to its geographical origin. Each is what Quayshawn Spencer calls a ‘human continental population’ (Spencer 2019). Aboriginal Australians very likely also constitute a minimalist race. Contrary to Hardimon (2017), I no longer think that Pacific Islanders constitute a single minimalist race, since this group includes both Melanesians and Polynesians, groups that exhibit markedly different patterns of visible physical features.

The minimalist concept of race represents the barest, most stripped-down characterization of biological race possible. It is a maximally thin, maximally deflationary conception of what it is to be a race. It captures the ‘logical core’ of the ordinary concept of race. It is not itself a scientific race concept (in as much as it is not formulated in scientific terminology) but it has a scientific counterpart, the populationist concept of race. The populationist concept of race says that

a race is a subdivision of *Homo sapiens*—a group of populations that exhibits a distinctive pattern of genetically transmitted phenotypic characters that corresponds to the group’s geographical ancestry and belongs to a biological line of descent initiated by a geographically separated and reproductively isolated founding population. (Hardimon 2017: 99)

The populationist concept of race is a ‘scientization’ of the minimalist concept of race. It ‘scientizes’ the minimalist concept of race using the scientific vocabulary of ‘phenotype’, ‘genetic transmission’, and ‘reproductive isolation’. It locates the

category of race in the framework of population thinking and identifies reproductive isolation as race's biological basis. It counts as a candidate scientific concept in biology in that: it is formulated in a scientific biological vocabulary; it is framed in terms of an accepted biological outlook (population thinking); it is suitable for deployment in an accepted branch of biological inquiry (ethology, ecology and evolutionary biology); and it presents the scientific ground of the phenomenon it represents (reproductive isolation).

Like the minimalist concept of race, the populationist concept of race does not posit a racial essence. It does not say that populationist races differ with respect to honesty, courage or intelligence, and so forth. It, too, makes no reference whatsoever to normatively important features. It does not posit a correlation between visible physical features and normatively important traits. It neither ranks races on a scale of inferiority and superiority nor specifies features on the basis of which they could be ranked. It, too, is a non-essentialist and non-hierarchical race concept.

Like the minimalist concept of race, the populationist concept of race can survive familiar objections that undercut the empirically refuted racialist concept of race. It, too, can withstand the argument from human population genetics because it, too, does not require that the percentage of genetic variation between minimalist races be larger than the percentage of genetic variation within minimalist races.

Now, the further details of these concepts are not terribly important for our purposes. My point in introducing them is simply to show that there are now biologically respectable ways of conceiving of human beings as exhibiting biological race. If this is correct—and this is the payoff of our excursion from Hegel scholarship to the philosophy of race—then the popular view that Hegel went wrong in his supposition that the human species is subdivided into groups that can properly be called 'races' is mistaken.

Hegel's error lay rather in thinking that there is some kind of intrinsic, essential correlation between the outward biological features of human races (for example, bone structures and facial features) and the mental or spiritual properties of members of human races. He went wrong in operating with a *racialist* concept of race. The racialist concept of race is false.²³ The human species is not divided into racialist races; there are no racialist races. It is just a mistake to think that differences in the biology of race account for differences in the possession (or non-possession) of an inner impulse toward culture, the attainment of the consciousness of personality, the degree of awakening as spirit, or the grasp of the 'universal' or the attainment of freedom. The biological category of race that is respectable by our lights is not a biospiritual category.²⁴ It does not straddle the domains of nature and spirit but, instead, remains firmly within the natural.²⁵ Bonetto is quite right to say that '[s]imply having a concept of race does not a racist make (Bonetto 2006). But use of the *racialist* concept of race does make one a racist.

V. Conclusion

One advantage of a proper biological understanding of race is that it facilitates grasping the spiritual unimportance of the biology of race and reveals the sheer contingency of the relation between biological race and culture (or biology and culture).²⁶ This is perhaps *the* most important lesson we can learn about biological race. To put the point in a nutshell: there is no *biological* reason why someone who is, for example, a member of the sub-Saharan African minimalist race could not be fully acculturated in, say, an East Asian culture—a full cultural citizen of that culture.²⁷ And conversely, any child can in principle learn any language (Chomsky 1965); likewise, any child can *in principle* acquire any culture. This is not a new or original idea but it is, I think, important.

I have been suggesting that there is a legitimate biological category of race (indeed there are at least two) to which Hegel could have appealed had they been available to him. But ironically and importantly neither category plays an essential role in the development of spirit—other than to provide the superficial biological differences that figured as objects of racist attitudes, which arguably did play an essential role in spirit's development.²⁸ There is no possibility of using a legitimate biological category of race in anything like the way Hegel deployed his race concept in the *Philosophies of Spirit and History*.

These reflections prompt a basic question: Is there room in Hegel's *Philosophy of Spirit* for the recognition of the spiritual unimportance of what we regard as biological race and the contingency of what we understand as the biology-culture relation? This question goes well beyond the scope of the present essay but nonetheless merits brief discussion here.

One familiar strategy for contending that there is room for these ideas is to note that Hegel's racist remarks in the *Philosophy of Spirit* are found in the *lectures* and to deny that the things he is alleged to have said there are representative of his systematic view. But the scholarly reception of the recent publication of critical editions of Hegel's lectures makes clear that the racist views Hegel expressed in the lectures do express his considered philosophical judgments and systematic view (Bernasconi MS; James and Knappik 2023: 100–102).²⁹ Furthermore, in as much as Hegel's reference to *Rassenverschiedenheit* in §393 of the *Encyclopaedia* refers to a specifically *racialist* form of *Rassenverschiedenheit*, his commitment to racialism is unquestionably part of his official, systematic view.

Another line of defence would be to argue that race is a merely 'natural' aspect that is overcome by the spiritual development of freedom.³⁰ Such a view is difficult to square with the degree to which the modern social world that Hegel describes is marked by racial inequality. So, the question becomes: Is it possible to *reconstruct* Hegel's *Philosophy of Spirit* in such a way as to abstract from—that is, ditch—

Hegel's racialism? I am not prepared to say this is impossible, but I suspect that doing so will be extraordinarily difficult; for what we have seen in this essay is that some of Hegel's fundamental claims about spirit are racialist.³¹ Accordingly, developing a Hegelian account that abstracts from his racialism would require a massive revision of his position. It would, for example, require a radical rethinking of his entire Philosophy of History. It is not immediately clear how such a through-going revision would go.³² It would certainly require a deep transformation of his understanding of spiritual formations such as nations, traditions and forms of ethical life.³³ The worry is that such a transformation would amount to what Mills calls 'sanitizing' (Mills 2017: 111). This leaves us with the unhappy thought that the stain of racialism in Hegel's Philosophy of Spirit may be indelible. For my own part, I am left with ambivalence. Nothing presented in this essay undercuts Hegel's claim to be a great philosopher. The project of trying to disentangle his insights from his racialism may well be worth trying. But before undertaking this project—if indeed we want to undertake it—we must fully register its difficulty.³⁴

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Notes

¹ 'Ought' does not imply 'is'. The claim that Hegel was a racist *ought* not to be controversial, but is. Numerous scholars have sought to defend Hegel from the charge of racism. These include S. Bonetto (2006), J. McCarney (2000), T. Pinkard (2000) and W.A. Walsh (1971). Some of these thinkers may have fallen prey to the seductive inference: *Hegel is a great philosopher, therefore he is not a racist*. What Hegel's example shows is that one can be a great philosopher *and* be a racist. Hegel is by no means alone in this. The same can be said, for example, of Kant, to name just one obvious figure (Mills 2017). The fact is that philosophy does not immunize one against racism; one can be a great philosopher and be a racist. The present essay seeks to show that Hegel was committed to a racialist conception of race. The corollary of this point is that Hegel was himself a racialist (someone committed to racialism) and hence a *doxastic* racist, that is, a racist in virtue of having held racist beliefs. Hegel's fundamental racist belief was that humankind is subdivided into racialist races—or, to put the point a slightly different way, that racialist race exists. The notion of racialist race is clarified in Section III. To the best of my knowledge, the claim that Hegel's conception of race was specifically racialist has not been explicitly recognized in the literature.

² I draw on Moellendorf because he makes the point that the concept of race with which Hegel operated can be regarded as biological with special clarity. I do not think that the idea that Hegel's

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concept of race can be regarded as biological by present lights is original or idiosyncratic. I assume most Hegel scholars would agree, anxious though they might be about falling into anachronism in characterizing Hegel's concept of race as biological. One prominent Hegel scholar who appears to think that Hegel's concept of race does not allow of the sort of retrospective biological reading I am proposing is Bernasconi, who emphasizes the *historical* character of Hegel's conception of race (Bernasconi MS). To pre-empt possible misunderstanding, I should make it clear that I recognize that the idea of *directly* ascribing a biological race concept to Hegel—that is, suggesting that the race concept with which he operated is one that *he himself* thought of as 'biological—is rendered problematic by the fact (i) that Hegel was living just after the period of the so-called 'gestation of biology' as a science which means that there was no fixed, stable and well-understood notion of 'the biological' on which he could have drawn (Zammito 2017), (ii) that Hegel tends to associate race with 'nature' rather than (what we would call) 'biology', and (iii) that Hegel did not expressly think of or characterize his own concept of race as 'biological'. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for asking for clarification on this point. So let me be clear, rather than anachronistically ascribing a (modern) biological race concept to Hegel, I am instead investigating whether and to what extent the race concept with which he operated is one that can be regarded as biological *from our point of view*. The central role that biology plays in contemporary discussions of race makes this question inescapable for us in the twenty-first century. What we today want to know is where Hegel came down on what *we* would characterize as the 'biology of race'. This is, I think, a perfectly intelligible and well-motivated question. The claim that Hegel's concept of race can be understood to be biological-by-our-lights does not turn on a tendentious notion of 'the biological'. The guiding thought is that the region of nature within which Hegel took race to originate is one we today think of as belonging to the science of biology. Registering this point does not require a detailed analysis of the modern-day concept of 'the biological'. All that is required is that our grasp of the concept be firm enough for us to be able to apply it with due circumspection to concepts and structures Hegel discusses. It might, however, be claimed that *any* suggestion that Hegel's category of race can be understood to be biological will be inescapably anachronistic in as much as it necessarily presupposes a sharp distinction between biology and culture that is completely foreign to Hegel. This view seems to me mistaken. First of all, I begin my discussion by noting ways in which regarding Hegel's concept of race as counting as biological by our lights may be problematic. Second, I argue that important aspects of Hegel's concept of race can be properly regarded as 'biological' from our point of view only if it is noted that his concept of race cannot be regarded as biological-rather-than-cultural. My position is that Hegel's concept of race should neither be construed as a biological-rather-than-spiritual nor spiritual-rather-biological. This is the force of characterizing Hegel's conception of race as 'biospiritual'. The conception of 'the biological' with which I operate in Sections I–III does not require a sharp biology/culture distinction but allows for the possibility that there might be something in Hegel, to wit, race that is biological in some respects and spiritual/cultural in others. The worry about anachronism can be found in Bernasconi (2010). One final thought on Hegel and biology. Hegel may not have held any *de dicto* beliefs about the biology of race. But it is clear that he held *de re* beliefs about race's biology. He had views about the

domain we regard as biological even if he did not expressly think of this domain in biological terms. My interest in this essay is in exploring Hegel's *de re* commitments with respect to the biology of race.

³ §393 is the one specific section in the published *Encyclopaedia* (1830) where Hegel discusses race. His detailed discussion of the topic and indeed the bulk of what he has to say about race in the Philosophy of Spirit is found in the lectures that Hegel gave on spirit in 1822, 1825 and 1827 and in his draft for a monograph on subjective spirit. The student transcripts of the lecture and the draft monograph constitute the materials from which the familiar additions (*Zusätze*) to the *Encyclopaedia* were drawn. The source material, the student transcripts and draft manuscript are now available in critical editions, including the Academy's *Gesammelte Werke*. The present discussion of Hegel's understanding of race draws on the critically edited source material.

As for the scholarly legitimacy of appealing to the lectures, James and Knappik note that Hegel himself indicated in the preface to the first edition of the *Encyclopaedia* that his lectures constitute an authoritative source for the details of his system not covered by separate publications (James and Knappik 2023: 101). They also observe that it is standard practice to use Hegel's lectures as a source for his views on other topics such as art, religion, history, and the history of philosophy and that it would be arbitrary to apply different standards when it comes to race (2023: 101). Before the publication of the critical editions of the lectures, the view that Hegel's lectures are not a bona fide source for his views on race, may have had some force, but, in light of current scholarship, this position is no longer tenable.

⁴ There is also a further question: where *historically* did Hegel first exhibit wrongheaded views about race? James and Knappik suggest that the objectionable things Hegel has to say regarding race first appear in the Jena fragments of 1803/4 and 1805/6 (James and Knappik 2023: 101).

⁵ Harris (2021), Pinkard (2017), Tibebu (2011), Zambrana (2017).

⁶ Appiah's *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture*, which inaugurated the most recent problematization of the idea of human race as a biological category appeared in 1992, two years after the publication of Moellendorf's essay.

⁷ Herder (1784), Forster (1786).

⁸ Abbreviations:

Enz. = Hegel, *Encyclopaedia of Philosophical Sciences in Basic Outline. Philosophy of Mind*, trans. W. Wallace and A.V. Miller, rev. M. J. Inwood (Oxford: Clarendon, 2010).

GW = Hegel, *Gesammelte Werke*, ed. Nordrhein-Westfälische Akademie der Wissenschaften und Künste (Hamburg: Meiner, 1968ff). All translations from the Philosophy of Subjective Spirit in *GW* are my own.

LPS = Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Spirit 1827–28*, trans. R. R. Williams (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

SG = Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie des Geistes (1827/28)*, ed. F. Hesse and B. Tuschling (Hamburg: Meiner, 1994).

W = Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Weltgeschichte*. *GW*, vol. 27.

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⁹ Hegel cannot be defended from the charge of racism by arguing that his concept of race is ‘natural’ rather than ‘biological’. The idea that there are ‘natural’ races is no less problematic than the idea that there are ‘biological’ races. Hegel is committed to the proposition that there are differences in the capacities of different racial groups to actualize spirit that are *fixed by nature*. That is racialism. It is a false and racist view. My approach to Hegel’s conception of race is distinguished by its focus on Hegel’s racialism, the way in which it draws on contemporary work in the philosophy of race, and the philosophical clarity it brings to the issue.

¹⁰ Having run through the occurrences of ‘biological’ and ‘biology’ in this essay, I find that the main points I am making about Hegel’s racialism could be preserved by systematically substituting ‘natural’ for ‘biological’ and ‘nature’ for ‘biology’. This is to say: it is possible to defend the thesis that Hegel’s conception of race was racist *without* deploying the concept of biology. The point can be made and documented by identifying the many ways in which Hegel took the spiritual prospects for members of the groups he identifies as races to be fixed by ‘nature’.

¹¹ De Laurentiis suggests that Hegel may have recognized the existence of races in non-human species (De Laurentiis 2014: 591; 2021: 73). It seems unlikely that Hegel would have thought that race in non-human-animals has a spiritual dimension.

¹² Here I am responding to a point made by one of the reviewers.

¹³ Thanks to one of the anonymous reviewers for urging this point.

¹⁴ Apropos of skin colour, Hegel wrote tellingly ‘[t]he white color [of Europeans] is to be regarded as inherently the most perfect (*LPS* [1827/28]: 88).’

¹⁵ On the racist concept of race see Appiah (1996) and Hardimon (2017).

¹⁶ Here I agree with James and Knappik (James and Knappik 2023: 100)

¹⁷ Here I follow the suggestion of one of my anonymous referees.

¹⁸ Garcia (1996, 1997, 1999).

¹⁹ Regarding the role that ‘race’ plays in shaping Hegel’s view of world history, see Tibebe 2011, Zambrana 2017 and Harris 2021.

²⁰ For a helpful discussion of the respects in which the division of humankind into races exhibits a ‘higher’ philosophical necessity, see James and Knappik (2023).

²¹ The important role that geography plays in Hegel’s view of race makes it clear that the ‘nature’ that figures in the determination of race on Hegel’s view cannot be reduced to biology.

²² For the importance of geographical determinism in Hegel, see Livingstone (2002).

²³ For a critique of the racist concept of race, see Hardimon (2017).

²⁴ There are alternative non-racist African-American concepts of race such as those advanced by Dubois (1986 [1903]) and Outlaw (1996) which are non-hierarchical and biospiritual. Jeffers, who holds a cultural constructionist conception of race, thinks that the concept of race includes differences of visible physical features that correspond to differences of geographical ancestry (Jeffers 2019) and so it may be that his conception of race, too, is properly classified as biospiritual as well.

²⁵ In this section, and in contrast to sections I–III, I rely on the valuable modern idea that there is a sharp distinction to be drawn between biology and culture.

²⁶ The notion that the relation between what we think of as biology and race could be contingent would have been intolerable to Hegel. His use of the (racialist) race concept was meant to account for the *necessity* of the relation of these two terms.

²⁷ To say that there is no *biological* reason why someone who is a member of the sub-Saharan African minimalist race could not be fully acculturated in an East Asian culture is not to say that there could not be socio-cultural reasons (racism, for example) why a member of the sub-Saharan African minimalist race could not become a full cultural citizen of that culture. Members of an ‘East Asian culture’ might be unwilling to accept members of the sub-Saharan African race as full members of their culture simply because the latter are members of a different minimalist race. The same point holds with respect members of the East Asian minimalist race and sub-Saharan African cultures.

²⁸ Social groups that are falsely taken to be racialist races, which is to say, the kind of group I call ‘socialraces’ (Hardimon 2017), do arguably enter into world history. It would be an understatement to say that it would be difficult to describe world history without reference to the role that the white, Black, Asian and Amerindian socialraces played in its unfolding.

²⁹ See note 4.

³⁰ Bourgeois (2002), Houlgate (2005).

³¹ Perhaps foremost among these is the idea that spirit is essentially divided into different racialist races.

³² For a recent attempt to reconstruct Hegel’s Philosophy of History in such a way as to make his racialism marginal, see Pinkard (2017).

³³ I owe this observation to Allen Wood.

³⁴ I would like to thank Daniel James and Franz Knappik for inviting me to participate in the 2022 workshop on ‘Racism and Colonialism in Hegel’s Philosophy’ at which an earlier version of this paper was presented and for their useful suggestions. I am grateful to the participants at that workshop for their thoughtful comments. Thanks are also due to the three anonymous referees who reviewed this essay. In particular I am extremely grateful to the third anonymous referee whose incisive and constructive criticisms and questions forced me to clarify my philosophical position. I would also like to thank Allen Wood for comments on an earlier draft.

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