

Philosophy 3334: Philosophy of Biology
Summer 2018
Fourth homework

This assignment is due on Tuesday, July 3rd.

In the last seven classes, we read papers on 1) sex and gender (Symons, Pinker, Dupré, and Vickers and Kitcher); 2) human behavioral genetics (Sober, Bouchard, Bateson); and 3) race (Bernier, the AAA, Appiah, and Mills). Pick two of these topics to write short essays about.

I expect two serious, complex, thoughtful essays. Each will be worth 9 points. As a guide, I might expect that they will each be roughly 400-800 word answers.

You can write about anything that is relevant to what we read in class. You should engage with the readings that we did in class (at least one of them per essay) and not merely summarize what they said. These are argumentative essays—you should defend some particular conclusion.

You can choose any thesis that you want relevant to these papers, but in case you want a guide, here are some possible topics/theses:

Sex/Gender

- 1) Is thinking about evolution important for understanding human sexual behavior? How? When studying human behavior, when is it appropriate to study humans in the same way we would study animals and when would that be inappropriate?
- 2) Does the reason that more men get PhDs in physics than women have more to do with biology or with culture?
- 3) Are transgendered women “really” women? If men and women are actually different kinds of people, what makes them different?

Human Behavioral Genetics

- 1) Sober argues that the concept of “the environment” is really important for understanding “nature vs. nurture” questions, but that when heritability studies compare genetic causes to environmental causes, the concept of the environment that is implicitly used is not exactly what we have in mind. What does he mean? Is he right? What do we really mean when we talk about something being caused by “the environment”?
- 2) Does it make sense to talk about “genes for obesity”? Or “genes for homosexuality”? Under what circumstances?
- 3) Should we care about whether a trait like IQ is heritable? Why or why not?

4) Jonathan Kaplan, a critic of human behavior genetics, once concluded a paper by saying “to reduce the prevalence and ameliorate the impact of violent, antisocial, and criminal behavior within societies, such people should treat biological research as, at best, intriguing distractions from the hard work ahead.” Is he right? Or can heritability studies on anti-social behaviors help us?

5) We know that both genes and the environment interact to cause any particular human traits. What does this mean for questions of free will and moral responsibility? You might be helped by thinking about a trait like homosexuality. Many people think that the extent to which this is genetically controlled matters a great deal for moral purposes. But does it? What about various kinds of criminal tendencies?

Race

6) Are human races real? Are they socially constructed?

7) Is racial eliminativism the best way to combat racism?

8) How should we think about the question of what “race” means? Who are the linguistic experts here? Should we care about what people thought about race two hundred years ago?

9) Are human races natural kinds?

10) Is race like sex and/or gender? In what ways?

11) Is it possible for someone to change their race during their lifetime? Is it possible that people with identical biological characteristics would be different races depending on where and when they were born and lived? What do the answers to these questions tell us about whether race is socially constructed?

11) Is Hispanic and/or Latino a race? Why or why not?

12) Pick one or multiple “problem cases” from Mills’ paper and discuss what the race of the person in the story is.