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Applied Philosophy

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October 11, 2025

Race as Relations

In this essay, the topic of discussion will be Jeffers, “Cultural constructionism”, from the topic of “What is race?”. The view approached by this author is one of social constructionism with regard to the question of what race is. His view within this framework takes the position that, although race’s origin can be found in the political, in order to understand what it is, one must be prepared to accept the impacts of culture. This distinction is significant, primarily regarding the potential reality in a world post-racism, where the reality of race would still exist even without the structures of oppression which generated it. This argument by Jeffers proves the most effective in illustrating metaphysically why race cannot simply be defined by present or past socio-political structures, in my opinion, and especially factors in individual’s experiences with race that possess a positive connotation in terms of identity, as well as when there remains differing practice of even seemingly universal traditions, such as holidays. One issue with Jeffer’s argument which I take up, however, is the lack of a substantive definition of what constitutes culture. I believe if he more accurately defined what culture itself is produced and delineated by, I believe there would be more weight to this position on race. Different examples will be introduced to better flesh out the need for a tighter construction of culture within the argument. The reality of race to Jeffer’s, aligns the origin of race with politics, yet adds on the relation of culture to best define the view of race as it exists within individuals.

Regarding the question of the reality of race in a world no longer defined by structures and systems which oppress based on its understanding, there is great merit to Jeffer's argument that it would still exist. I assert that this is primarily due to the nature of race as a positive association, especially in the minds of marginalized peoples. This is specifically on account of the discrimination and alienation which is inflicted upon individuals of certain groups, which are politically defined as races. In Jeffer's argument, he includes the observation that race's origin as a concept possesses its connection to European imperialism, which divided the globe into a dynamic of prosperous and dispossessed peoples. His view hinges on the fact that race demonstrates both political and cultural factors, and that one can simply not substitute for the equation for convenience's sake. To me, this takes a position much more friendly to those in previously mentioned groups, whose sense of place in the world, as well as relation to others, is oftentimes distinctly connected to these politically constructed races. One can posit, for example, that cultures which have been divided in this way cannot exist in a post-race world, where someone's heritage is removed from their being simply because they do not benefit or suffer politically on account of it. The view of purely social constructionism would expect all individuals to relate to each other perfectly across cultural lines, on account of the lack of social structures of inhibition. This proves tellingly false, when one considers the factors played by religion, language, as well as group history, which all play a role in general conversations about culture. To take an example, even without social pressure, a Hispanic, Spanish-speaking Catholic individual, and an Anglo-American English-speaking protestant would never be, in reality, on the same page with discussions of values, ideals, and lived experience, which would be supposedly wiped away by a lack of outside reinforcement. Another example is, the celebration of holidays which may possess a certain aspect of universal presence across all humanity, such as

the New Year. Because of the presence of differing calendars to tell time, differences such as Lunar New Year, or the Islamic New Year, would still exist to define race even outside political factors of creations abolishing. Generally speaking, examples like these illustrate the manner in which there is an element of interiority, or self-perspective, which correlates with the reality of race, as it exists. With this in mind, I believe the example of a post-race world to be the most effective argument for the adopting of a culturally constructionist view of race as adopted by Jeffer's in his argument.

One factor which detracts from Jeffer's argument is his lack of defining qualities as to what culture is and is not. I have previously mentioned some aspects which can be said to influence it, but within the text itself there exists no exact framework. To exemplify the issues with this, one can exhibit examples where some aspects of culture may be shared, such as language or religion, yet the identity of race cannot be directly correlated. Within the process of European colonialism, many sections of Africa and Asia were colonized by England, France, Portugal, and Spain at large. In the modern day, Spanish culture in South and Central America is generalized to be Hispanic in nature. However, the Philippines in East Asia, and Equitorial guinea in Africa, were also included in the Spanish Empire, and to this end in the modern day many people there speak Spanish and practice Roman Catholicism. Is Jeffer's argument to imply these individuals are also the same race as indigenous, Black, and white Hispanics in the Americas? As well as this, Angola, Mozambique, Guinea-Bissau in Africa, and East-Timor in Asia were all colonized by Portugal, meaning the populations there retain the similarly corresponding languages and religion of their colonial oppressor. The same question must be asked if these people are the same race as Brazilians and are similarly Latino. I will contend that perhaps Jeffer's would state, all these distinct colonized locations shared a related status as

non-European peoples, and that is where their race interweaves, however, is the aspect of cultural relation included to imply the present identity of race is ubiquitous across all divisions of physical space and appearance? To reintroduce the question of holidays, religions themselves cannot be equvalated with races, as the shared cultural practice of the Islamic New Year cannot be said to define all Muslims, North African, Arab, Asian and other, as the same race.

Furthermore, if an individual, such as a native American, or African-American were to lack aspects of their culture such as practice of traditional religious belief, and speaking of native language, is it to be said that such persons are now the race of the dominant white European culture, despite their physical appearance and group identity? These examples exemplify the complications which arise from a poor definition of culture, which also cannot rely back on variation in appearance alone. A reason physical appearance cannot alone define race, exists on account of sometimes shared features, such as dark skin among Africans, Aborigines in Australia, and South Asia, cannot be said to unify these differing groups into the same race. Likewise, Hispanic culture certainly exists and is shared between members of the group who physically appear white, brown, and black in skin. I believe if Jeffer's included a stricter outline of what factors define culture, without relating back to physical appearance which has racial connotations, thus creating circular reasoning, then his argument would hold much greater weight in the face of these, and other examples.

In review, Jeffer's argument for what constitutes race relies on the combined origin of the political structures enacted historically by Europeans, alongside the ever-present reality of cultural differences across the spectrum of humanity. The greatest strength of his line of thought bears demonstration in his example of a world where these structures of oppression have been abolished, yet cultural factors still play a role in individuals' identity and interrelation to one

another. I demonstrated how, groupings such as languages and religions will always play a dividing role in the method by which humans' group themselves, based in the reality where lived experience will differ on their account. Holidays represent a great example of this, where even though traditions may be present in all people, their practice differs even on such supposed universals New Years. This is because humans have always possessed differences between groups across time, going back to different alphabets and calendars. In a post-race world, these elements would still be present, in context of how people related to themselves and others. An issue discussed with this cultural and political construction is the limitations demonstrated by a lack of clear distinction in the separations of culture. Factors such as language and religion prove more complicated than helpful when discussing the experience of race as shared between different people and groups across geographic space. One cannot also turn back to physical appearance as the unifier of cultures, as there exists great diversity within some, and shared unity across others. To this end, a better, stronger definition of culture within Jeffer's argument would eliminate these potential flaws in defining race by this measure on top of political origins, which do not explain away the previously mentioned diversity and unity in all cases. At the end of the day, however, it remains a firm advocacy of what race exists as outside of biological realism, solely political constructionism, and eliminativism within the context that race certainly does include a real aspect of relation to oneself expression as well as group relations.