

Part I

Ideas and Realities of Human Race

Introduction

Evaluative ideas about human races in the history of Euro-American societies have not been neatly separated from beliefs that there are human races and that humankind is naturally or biologically divided into them. Beliefs that racial divisions naturally exist have usually been in the background of discussions about relations and interactions between racial groups. From a contemporary vantage point, the modern idea of biological race developed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, has always been racist.

In Part I of this book, ideas of race in the canonical history of philosophy are considered first (Chapter 1). Insofar as those ideas now appear to be biased toward Eurocentrism or what some today would call ongoing white supremacy, it is important to also consider alternative ideas of race that were more egalitarian and inspired an historical tradition of resistance against racism and hope for a better future. The egalitarian tradition began in the ancient world, spanned Christianity, was taken up by abolitionists in England and the United States, and motivated the US Civil Rights Movement. Thinkers in fields outside of philosophy, as well as philosophers, contributed to that tradition and their work merits philosophical consideration in retrospect (Chapter 2). The subject of race in the modern period originated in the new sciences of biology and anthropology. For the first time, there was a universal scheme for dividing humankind. Biological race developed through monogenism, polygenism, evolutionary theory, and population genetics. Science of any kind is inherently self-revising and this has been especially true in the former science of race (Chapter 3).

Distinctively American pragmatist philosophy has lately directed positive attention to race, which is relevant insofar as the United States is the primary context for contemporary scholarship on race. Continental Philosophy has reflected liberatory intellectual phenomenology. Both of these philosophical traditions merit distinct and comparative consideration as alternatives to analytic philosophical approaches to race (Chapter 4). The idea and historical reality of ethnicity has been closely related to race, especially as affected by the movements of peoples. Ethnicity and race have overlapping meanings in different countries, as well as within indigenous societies (Chapter 5).