

More Than Provocative, Less Than Scientific: A Commentary on the Editorial Decision to Publish Cofnas (2020)¹

Rasmus Rosenberg Larsen^a, Helen De Cruz^b, Jonathan Kaplan^c, Agustín Fuentes^d, Jonathan Marks^e, Massimo Pigliucci^f, Mark Alfano^g, David Livingstone Smith^h, and Lauren Schroederⁱ

^a Department of Philosophy & Forensic Science Program, University of Toronto Mississauga, ^b Department of Philosophy, Saint Louis University, ^c School of History, Philosophy, and Religion, Oregon State University, ^d Department of Anthropology, University of Notre Dame, ^e Department of Anthropology, UNC Charlotte, ^f Department of Philosophy, City University of New York, ^g Department of Philosophy, Macquarie University, ^h Department of Philosophy, University of New England, ⁱ Department of Anthropology, University of Toronto Mississauga, ^j

We are addressing this letter to the editors of *Philosophical Psychology* after reading an article they decided to publish in the recent vol. 33, issue 1. The article is by Nathan Cofnas and is entitled “Research on group differences in intelligence: A defense of free inquiry” (2020). The purpose of our letter is *not* to invite Cofnas’s contribution into a broader dialogue, but to respectfully voice our concerns about the decision to publish the manuscript, which, in our opinion, fails to meet a range of academic quality standards usually expected of academic publications.

As we read it, Cofnas’s article is a defense of the pursuit of the hereditarian scientific program that explores the alleged genomic differences in IQ between “racially” defined populations (e.g., “Blacks” vs. “Whites”), claiming that there is a strong and unfortunate tendency among researchers to ignore this line of research due to moral reservations. Cofnas argues that racial classifications, insofar as these may have discrete genetic correlates, could one day partially explain the differences measured in IQ between various populations; ignoring this hypothesis, Cofnas holds, could have potentially harmful consequences.

There are, however, several critical problems with Cofnas’s piece, which we believe should have either disqualified the manuscript upon submission or been addressed during the review process and resulted in substantial revisions. Here we outline what we see as the most pressing issues:

The first problem we find with Cofnas’s contribution is related to its implicit endorsement of *racial realism*: the idea that the human species is naturally divided into many clusters of biologically discrete/different populations.² Although the theory of racial realism is not problematic in and of itself, Cofnas makes it problematic by representing the theory as *scientific*

¹ This manuscript was originally submitted to *Philosophical Psychology* on January 22, 2020. It was rejected by the journal on March 4, 2020. The editors’ response is included below in *Appendix A*.

² While Cofnas is mostly speaking about hereditarianism – the idea that the differences in phenotypic and psychological traits we measure between human individuals can be significantly explained by hereditary genetic differences – he also suggests that hereditary genetics may map onto a “racial” classification of populations, which implies that Cofnas accepts racialism or racial realism. This observation is also made by the editors of *Philosophical Psychology* in their *editors’ note* (van Leeuwen & Herschbach, 2020).

when he suggests that science could soon discover racially grounded genetic explanations of differences in intelligence between human populations (Cofnas, 2020, pp. 126-127). This way of representing unproven metaphysical theories *as if* they are scientifically sound crucially oversteps the extent of speculation usually tolerated in philosophy journals.

There is no evidence from the study of human biological variation that suggests that racial realism is true, and neither is it the case that scientific insights are restrained by an *absence of evidence*. Moreover, the idea that the human species is divided into genetically discrete “races” has for long been refuted as empirically unsupportable.

An abundance of evidence about the human evolutionary lineage shows that no human groups were ever phylogenetically distinct in the way that racial realism posits. Put differently, the human species never persisted in multiple sufficiently isolated “pure” groups for such a prolonged time that it would, evolutionarily speaking, make sense to talk about our species being divided into biologically distinct populations. Indeed, migration in and between continents and regions was never one-way, but evidently an intricate multi-way network of substantial intersection and interaction. Because of this mobility, the genetic variation within the human species is much more complex than what racial realism presumes or predicts (e.g., Ackermann, Mackay, & Arnold, 2016; Marks, 2017; Rosenberg et al., 2002; Scerri et al., 2018; Tishkoff & Kidd, 2004).

The evidence of human genetic diversity – and the rejection of racial realism that it leads to – is not scientifically controversial, but has been part of the established and common knowledge in the natural sciences at least since the completion of the *Human Genome Project* in 2003 (e.g., Patrinos, 2004). This abundance of evidence has led to no shortage of quality popular writings on the topic. For instance, Jonathan Marks has recently summarized why racialism is unscientific in his book, *Is Science Racist? Debating Race* (2017). Similar publications come to mind, including Angela Saini’s *Superior* (2019), Michael Yudell’s *Race Unmasked* (2014), Robert Sussman’s *The Myth of Race* (2014), and Tattersall & DeSalle’s *Race? Debunking a Scientific Myth* (2011).

With regards to scientific consensus, on March 27, 2019, the *American Association of Physical Anthropology* (AAPA) published a (revised) statement denouncing racial realism (Fuentes et al., 2019), a message that is evidently acknowledged by the vast majority of biological anthropologists and geneticists (e.g., ASGH, 2018; Wagner et al., 2017). One paragraph in the AAPA statement stands in particularly stark contrast to the underlying viewpoint in Cofnas’s contribution, namely:

Humans share the vast majority (99.9%) of our DNA in common. Individuals nevertheless exhibit substantial genetic and phenotypic variability.

Genome/environment interactions, local and regional biological changes through time, and genetic exchange among populations have produced the biological diversity we see in humans today. Notably, variants are not distributed across our species in a manner that maps clearly onto socially-recognized racial groups. This is true even for aspects of human variation that we frequently emphasize in discussions of race, such as facial features, skin color and hair type. No group of people is, or ever has been, biologically homogeneous or “pure”. Furthermore, human populations are not – and never have been – biologically discrete, truly isolated, or fixed.

The conspicuous absence of this literature in Cofnas’s contribution suggests that either Cofnas was unaware of it or deliberately ignored it when preparing his manuscript. Perhaps more to the point, the fact that the peer-review process allowed his paper to be published without addressing this gap indicates that it was not subjected to competent and detailed scrutiny. After all, acknowledging the scientific literature on human genetic variation undoubtedly challenges the entire rationale of Cofnas’s paper, which would be unmotivated if his assumption of racial realism were denied.

A second problem with Cofnas’s piece is that it appears to be guilty of making a *strawman fallacy* of sizable proportions, a type of logical fallacy that reviewers and editors of philosophical journals are typically very alert to. Allegedly, Cofnas felt compelled to write this article because he thinks that scientists’ and philosophers’ moral qualms have led them to abandon research into average IQ differences between “races”. He seems to think that important truths will be lost in this process of looking the other way. But this perspective is significantly out of tune with reality; a serious academic discussion of the race/IQ gap has been ongoing (at least) since Jensen’s “How much can we boost IQ and scholastic achievement” (1969) and the volume, if anything, has increased since Herrnstein & Murray’s *The Bell Curve* (1994). Journals like *Intelligence* and *Psych* frequently publish contributions exploring the issue; even the sheer amount of citations in Cofnas’s paper appears to contradict its own thesis that research is being suppressed by extra-scientific motives.

However, while it is true that most researchers in the area of human genetics and human biological diversity no longer allocate significant resources and time to the race/IQ discussion, and that moral concerns may play an important role in these decisions, an equally fundamental reason why researchers do not engage with the thesis is that empirical evidence shows that the whole idea itself is unintelligible and wrong-headed (as we have briefly addressed above).

Ironically, the reason why most modern-day scientists ignore race/IQ research might actually be grounded in the same type of utilitarian logic that Cofnas considers in his contribution, namely,

that scientists simply use their scarce resources on research that, for all they know, is likely to bring the *most* benefit and novel insight. Whereas Cofnas is concerned that a lack of research into the race/IQ topic may lead to harmful consequences, real scientists are similarly concerned that directing their resources toward nonsensical ideas (such as “racially” discrete hereditary differences in intelligence) would deprive themselves and the rest of humanity of the benefits that would otherwise have followed from pursuing more promising and meaningful lines of inquiry.

A third problem we see with Cofnas’s piece relates to the editorial decision to justify the publication in a separate *editors’ note* (van Leeuwen & Herschbach, 2020). Here the editors correctly acknowledge that Cofnas’s article is “controversial” partly due to its implicit endorsement of racial realism. However, from a scientific perspective, the editors appear to get things seriously wrong when they conclude that: “Cofnas’ paper certainly adopts provocative positions on a host of issues related to race, genetics, and IQ. However, none of these positions are to be excluded from the current scientific and philosophical debates as long as they are backed up with logical argumentation and empirical evidence, and they deserve to be disputed rather than disparaged” (van Leeuwen & Herschbach, 2020, p. 149).

While much of what is said about race and genetics in Cofnas’s article will be seen as provocative, none of it can be rightfully claimed to be backed by “logical argumentation and empirical evidence,” since for decades most of what Cofnas assumes about racial realism has been deservedly disputed as scientifically *wrong*.

With that in mind, we would like to respectfully point out that when racial realism is described only as being “provocative” or “controversial”, that comes disconcertingly close to saying that *creationism, anti-vaccination, or climate change skepticism* are just scientifically controversial ideas. Like these fringe ideas, racial realism belongs to a group of ideas that insist on their legitimacy *in spite* (and not in the absence) of disproving empirical evidence – the quintessential definition of being *unscientific*. So, where the claims made by anti-vaxxers, creationists, climate denialists, and racial realists are, by many, seen as provocative, scientists find it lamentable when these ideas seep into academic journals where they certainly do not belong.

We firmly believe that scholars carry the burden of preventing unscientific obstinacy from entering and distorting the scholarly literature, and we are here concerned that the editors of *Philosophical Psychology* either ignored such responsibility or took it very lightly.

A final and obvious point that we find necessary to address is the seemingly racist ideological undertones of Cofnas’s article. Indeed, as the editors also recognize in their *editors’ note*, racial realism is historically inseparable from scientific racism and the harmful ideologies that for

centuries have fanned and funded it (e.g., Saini, 2019). Though this history should not in advance disqualify academic contributions on the topic, serious contributions tend to openly and elaborately acknowledge the socio-political sensitivities inherent to conducting such research, something that Cofnas's piece never really gets to, aside from a few glib remarks.

Although we cannot know for a fact whether Cofnas's contribution was inspired by ulterior ideological motives, it is undeniable that his article can reasonably be read as pandering to proponents of scientific racism. These strands of society obviously enjoy it when scholarly forums publish work that in some way legitimizes their harmful ideas. We therefore wonder whether the editors have seriously risked or damaged the reputation of *Philosophical Psychology* by publishing Cofnas's manuscript; we surely find it plausible that many people – professional academics as well as students – will interpret their decision as an ill-disguised legitimization of racial realism and the murky waters in which these ideas dwell.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to: Rasmus Rosenberg Larsen, Department of Philosophy, University of Toronto Mississauga, 3359 Mississauga Road North, MN6148, Mississauga, ON L5L 1C6. E-mail: rosenberg.larsen@utoronto.ca

References:

- ASHG. (2018). ASHG denounces attempts to link genetics and racial supremacy. *Am J Hum Genet*, 103(5), 636. doi:10.1016/j.ajhg.2018.10.011
- Ackermann, R. R., Mackay, A. & Arnold, M. L. (2016). The hybrid origin of “modern” humans. *Evolutionary Biology* 43, 1–11. doi:10.1007/s11692-015-9348-1
- Cofnas, Nathan. (2020). Research on group differences in intelligence: A defense of free inquiry. *Philosophical Psychology*, 33(1), 125-147. doi:10.1080/09515089.2019.1697803
- Fuentes, A., Ackermann, R. R., Athreya, S., Bolnick, D., Lasisi, T., Lee, S.-H., . . . Nelson, R. (2019). AAPA statement on race and racism. *American Journal of Physical Anthropology*, 169(3), 400-402. doi:10.1002/ajpa.23882
- Herrnstein, R. J., & Murray, C. A. (1994). *The bell curve: Intelligence and class structure in American life*. New York: Free Press.
- Jensen, A. R. (1969). How much can we boost IQ and scholastic achievement? *Harvard Educational Review*, 39(1), 1-123. doi:10.17763/haer.39.1.l3u15956627424k7
- Marks, Jonathan. (2017). *Is science racist? Debating race*. Malden, MA: Polity.
- Patrinos, A. (2004). “Race” and the human genome. *Nature Genetics*, 36(11), S1-S2. doi:10.1038/ng2150
- Rosenberg, N. A., Pritchard, J. K., Weber, J. L., Cann, H. M., Kidd, K. K., Zhivotovsky, L. A., & Feldman, M. W. (2002). Genetic structure of human populations. *Science*, 298(5602), 2381-2385. doi:10.1126/science.1078311

- Saini, Angela. (2019). *Superior: The return of the race science*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Scerri, E., Thomas, M., Manica, A., Gunz, P., Stock, J. T., Stringer, C., . . . Chikhi, L. (2018). Did our species evolve in subdivided populations across Africa, and why does it matter? *Trends in Ecology & Evolution*, 33(8), 582-594. doi:10.1016/j.tree.2018.05.005
- Sussman, Robert W. (2014). *The myth of race: The troubling persistence of an unscientific idea*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Tattersall, I. & DeSalle, R. (2011). *Race? Debunking a scientific myth*. College Station: Texas A&M University Press.
- Tishkoff, S. A., & Kidd, K. K. (2004). Implications of biogeography of human populations for “race” and medicine. *Nature Genetics*, 36(11 Suppl), S21-27. doi:10.1038/ng1438
- van Leeuwen, Cees, & Herschbach, Mitchell. (2020). Editors’ note. *Philosophical Psychology*, 33(1), 148-150. doi:10.1080/09515089.2020.1709283
- Wagner, J. K., Yu, J. H., Ifekwunigwe, J. O., Harrell, T. M., Bamshad, M. J., & Royal, C. D. (2017). Anthropologists’ views on race, ancestry, and genetics. *American Journal of Physical Anthropology*, 162(2), 318–327. doi:10.1002/ajpa.23120
- Yudell, Michael. (2014). *Race unmasked: Biology and race in the 20th century*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Appendix A: Response from *Philosophical Psychology*
(NB: Email addresses have been removed for privacy purposes)

Re: Philosophical Psychology - Decision on Manuscript ID CPHP-2020-0013

Dear Dr. Rasmus Larsen,

Thank you for your submission of your manuscript entitled "More Than Provocative, Less Than Scientific: Commentary on the Editorial Decision to Publish Cofnas (2020)" to *Philosophical Psychology*. We welcome responses to Cofnas's paper like yours and are committing to seeing them appear in print. But there are some issues that mean we will not be able to publish your commentary in its current form. We do, however, invite you to revise and resubmit in light of these comments.

The primary issue with your commentary is its overall framing as a commentary on our editorial decision to publish Cofnas's paper, rather than as a commentary on Cofnas's paper itself. As you write in your first paragraph: "The purpose of our letter is not to invite Cofnas's contribution into a broader dialogue, but to respectfully voice our concerns about the decision to publish the manuscript, which, in our opinion, fails to meet a range of academic quality standards usually expected of academic publications." We do not believe our journal is the appropriate place to be debating with the editors. Thus, we expect any commentaries related to Cofnas's article to be explicitly framed as responses to Cofnas's paper itself. We think this will not be difficult for you to do with your commentary, since most of it is devoted to challenging claims in Cofnas's paper by raising philosophical and scientific literatures on race, genetics, and human diversity. To clarify the scope of this requirement: it is entirely appropriate in a commentary to argue that a paper's flaws are so significant that it does not deserve to be published. It is also appropriate to comment on the moral implications of a paper's being published. But we do ask that your paper be framed as a commentary on Cofnas' article itself.

Another aspect of your paper we think you might consider revising is your discussion of racial realism. You cite many important texts defending biological racial anti-realism. But there are scholars who defend biological racial realism (even if many of these scholars would deny Cofnas' thesis that biologically real racial groups differ in socially and morally significant traits like IQ). We think your commentary would be stronger with a more in-depth discussion of racial realism vs. anti-realism.

We welcome a resubmission that makes revisions along these lines, and look forward to receiving a revised manuscript in due course. In that case, we will ask Mr Cofnas for a rebuttal. Normally, the editors of Philosophical Psychology will reach a decision about commentaries and rebuttals without consulting external reviewers. In this case, however, we may decide otherwise.

You will be unable to make your revisions on the originally submitted version of your manuscript. Instead, revise your manuscript using a word processing program and save it on your computer. As you do, please track your changes via either your word processing program's track changes feature or by manually marking the changes with colored or highlighted text. When you resubmit online, you should include both a clean version and a tracked changes version of your paper, and describe the revisions your made in your cover letter.

To resubmit your manuscript, go to <https://mc.manuscriptcentral.com/cphp> and login to your Author Center. Click on "Manuscripts with Decisions," and then click on "Create a Resubmission" located next to the manuscript number. Then, follow the steps for resubmitting your manuscript.

Alternatively, your manuscript can be resubmitted by way of the following link: *** PLEASE NOTE: This is a two-step process. After clicking on the link, you will be directed to a webpage to confirm. ***

https://mc.manuscriptcentral.com/cphp?URL_MASK=f43f8d3fff5e4c948df805128e952984

I look forward to a resubmission.

Sincerely,
Prof. Cees van Leeuwen and Mitchell Herschbach
Editors, Philosophical Psychology

Appendix B: Reply to *Philosophical Psychology*'s rejection letter

(NB: Email addresses have been removed for privacy purposes)

Dr. Cees van Leeuwen & Dr. Mitchell Herschbach
Editors, *Philosophical Psychology*

Re: Decision on Manuscript ID CPHP-2020-0013

We thank you for considering our manuscript. However, we have decided to respectfully decline your invitation to revise and resubmit the manuscript for the following reasons:

In your response you state, without offering any explanation, that you “do not believe our journal is the appropriate place to be debating with the editors”. We find this problematic since there is plenty of precedence in academic philosophy where journals facilitate such a discussion, and your *editors' note* can reasonably be seen as an appropriate target of criticism.

Further, in your letter you suggest that we should include a deeper discussion of racial realism, thereby indicating that you seem to read our manuscript as *defending* racial anti-realism. To be clear, we are doing no such thing. We are merely presenting the *current state of knowledge* regarding human biological variation that clearly refutes race as a biologically salient mode of dividing up humanity. The overwhelming data and analyses of human biological diversity demonstrate that the positions of *racial realists* are refuted, thoroughly. Individuals who are (still) defending biological racial realism are scientifically wrong. A large part of our commentary was simply to point this out.

Since we can only assume that the editors (and the editorial board) of *Philosophical Psychology* are familiar with the scientific consensus, we are therefore profoundly puzzled by your insistence that Cofnas' piece not only belongs in an academic journal, but that it also deserves further and deeper discussion (through published commentaries and rejoinders). To constantly re-engage with individuals who intentionally deny or obfuscate scientific consensus among the scholars who work on that topic is quite frankly not scientifically, or philosophically, acceptable. Neither is it morally acceptable in this case, since the ideas we are dealing with can be demonstrably rather harmful.

Thank you for your consideration.

Yours sincerely

Rasmus R. Larsen, Department of Philosophy, University of Toronto Mississauga

Helen De Cruz, Department of Philosophy, Saint Louis University

Jonathan Kaplan, School of History, Philosophy, and Religion, Oregon State University

Agustín Fuentes, Department of Anthropology, University of Notre Dame

Jonathan Marks, Department of Anthropology, UNC Charlotte

Massimo Pigliucci, Department of Philosophy, City University of New York

Mark Alfano, Department of Philosophy, Macquarie University

Lauren Schroeder, Department of Anthropology, University of Toronto Mississauga

David Livingstone Smith, Department of Philosophy, University of New England