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LETTER TO THE EDITOR

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More than provocative, less than scientific: A commentary on the editorial decision to publish Cofnas (2020)

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We are addressing this letter to the editors of *Philosophical Psychology* after reading an article they decided to publish in the recent Volume 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

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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.[1] Although the theory of racial realism is not problematic in and of itself, Cofnas makes it problematic by representing the theory as *scientific*. He does this when he suggests that science could soon discover racially grounded genetic explanations of differences in intelligence between human populations (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 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. In other words, 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 a one-way movement, but, rather, an intricate multi-way network of substantial intersections and interactions. Because of this mobility, the genetic variation within the human species is much more complex than presumed or predicted by racial realism (e.g., Ackermann et al., 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 racial realism is unscientific in his book, *Is Science Racist? Debating Race* (Marks, 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 and DeSalle's *Race? Debunking a Scientific Myth* (2011).

With regards to scientific consensus, on 27 March 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., ASHG, 2018; Wagner et al., 2017). One paragraph in the *AAPA* statement stands in particularly stark contrast to the underlying viewpoint in Cofnas's contribution:

> Humans share the vast majority (99.9%) of our DNA in common. Individuals never-theless 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 varia-tion 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 – biolo-gically discrete, truly isolated, or fixed.

The conspicuous absence of this literature in Cofnas's contribution suggests that either Cofnas was unaware of it, or he 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: his argu-ments would be unjustified 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 *straw man 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. This perspective is significantly out of tune with reality, however. 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 of research, if anything, has increased since Herrnstein and Murray's *The Bell Curve* (1994). Journals like *Intelligence* and *Psych* fre-quently 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 race/IQ 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. From a scientific perspective, however, the editors appear to get things seriously wrong when they conclude the following: "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 rightfully be 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 of (and not in the absence of) disproving empirical evidence – the quintessential definition of being *unscientific*. Hence, 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 have fanned and funded it for centuries (e.g., Saini, 2019). Though this history should not disqualify academic contributions on the topic in advance, 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.

Note

1. 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).

Disclosure statement

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