



Black Issues in Philosophy › James Africanus Beale Horton: Racism and the Fate of Naturalism in Victorian...

Black Issues in Philosophy

Diversity and Inclusiveness

James Africanus Beale Horton: Racism and the Fate of Naturalism in Victorian Philosophical Anthropology

Zeyad El Nabolsy

October 10, 2023

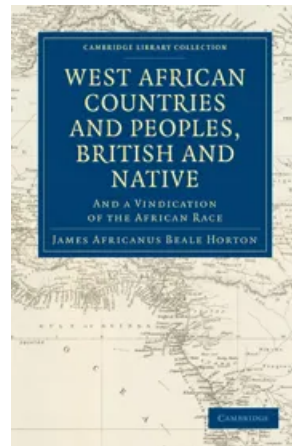
0



There has been a recent increase in interest in the place of race in the writings of modern canonical European philosophers (e.g., in Locke, Hume, Kant, and Hegel). However, while it is undoubtedly necessary to undertake such investigations, we should also not stop there, insofar as stopping there does not, in fact, overturn the charge of Eurocentrism or parochialism which has often been leveled against academic philosophy. Because the circle of interlocutors is not being expanded in such an approach, it results in merely asking different questions about the same people (primarily male white European thinkers). Hence the importance of taking into consideration and critically evaluating the response of African philosophers and scientists such as [James Africanus Beale Horton](#) (1835 – 1883).

In 1853, the British government moved to recruit Africans from Sierra Leone to the army's medical service as a response to fears that European medical officers were dying at an unsustainable rate in the British colonies in West Africa. This fear was not without basis. In

fact, mortality rates for Europeans in their first year of residence in West Africa in the late eighteenth century were somewhere **between 30% and 70%**. The initial mortality rate of the Europeans who participated in the second settlement of Sierra Leone in 1791 was 49%, and 35% of the Europeans who took part in the Niger Expedition of 1841–1842 died. These mortality rates would decline in the 1840s with the increasing use of quinine, but West Africa’s reputation as “the white man’s grave” would continue for at least a few decades. In response to this, three West African students, including Horton, were selected to study medicine in Britain in 1855. Horton studied for three years at **King’s College, London**, and then spent an additional year of study at the **University of Edinburgh** before earning his M.D. Horton would return as a medical officer in the British Army Medical Corps to British-controlled West Africa in 1859.



The mid-nineteenth century, when Horton began writing, is identified by some historians of race science as being the period during which race science fully came into its own. During this period, race science was also gaining adherents from among leading statesmen. As Horton notes in his *West African Countries and Peoples* (1868): “it would have been sufficient to treat this [racist scientific discourse] with the contempt that it deserves, were it not that leading statesmen of the present day have shown themselves easily carried away by the malicious views of these negrophobists, to the great prejudice of that race” (i). Horton would use his medical and anatomical knowledge in order to undertake a critique of race science. One might wonder what any of this has to do with the history of philosophy. The first thing to note is that study of the history of the concept of race in the nineteenth century must integrate history of philosophy with history of science (and the history of medicine), since even though there was increasing specialization over the course of the nineteenth century, **disciplines where the concept of the race became important such as anthropology and anatomy were not isolated from philosophy**. More specifically, the rise of methodological naturalism to prominence over the course of the second half of the nineteenth century, meant that the results which were obtained through race science were coming to play an ever-increasing role in philosophical anthropology (i.e., philosophical discourse on human nature). By ‘methodological naturalism’ I simply mean the idea that, as Ludwig Feuerbach put it in his *Preliminary Theses on the Reform of Philosophy* (1842), **“philosophy must again unite itself with natural science and natural science with philosophy.”** The idea here is that

philosophical discourse, in our case philosophical discourse on human nature, must take as its starting point the results obtained by means of the relevant empirical sciences.

The fact that race science increasingly came into prominence during the mid-nineteenth century created a problem for philosophers who endorsed methodological naturalism and who also wanted to defend human moral or axiological equality. According to race scientists such as **Robert Knox**, **James Hunt**, and **Carl Vogt**, the relevant empirical sciences (specifically anatomy and physiology) seemed to be saying that there are physiological and anatomical differences between different races which are correlated with differences in intellectual abilities. For race scientists such as Hunt, careful empirical investigations apparently showed, as he put it in his *On the Negro's Place in Nature* (1863), that "the theoretical assumption of a mental equality of the different races or species of Man" is unjustified (52 – 53). The attempt to specify the place of humans, and specifically the place of specific subsets of humans, in nature and to derive normative conclusions from such specification is, of course, not in any way unique to nineteenth-century philosophical anthropology. Arguably, the entire Aristotelian tradition is characterized by such a move. However, what is unique to nineteenth-century philosophical anthropology is the place that was accorded to the empirical sciences, now coming to be seen as increasingly independent of the strictures of philosophy, in the determination of "man's place in nature," to use **Thomas Huxley's** expression.

Defenders of human equality who also accepted methodological naturalism were faced with an argument that had the following structure:

1. Philosophical discourse on human nature must start from what the relevant empirical sciences say about different races. (This is simply the result of endorsing the naturalistic turn.)
2. **The relevant empirical sciences are saying that there are physiological and anatomical differences between different races which are correlated with differences in intellectual abilities.**

From these two premises the following conclusion was derived: philosophical discourse on human nature must start from the claim that there are physiological and anatomical differences between different races which are correlated with differences in intellectual abilities.

Defenders of racial equality had two options. The first option was to reject the naturalistic turn, i.e., reject the first premise, perhaps in favor of appeals to biblical authority. The second option was to accept the naturalistic approach but reject the second premise, namely the thesis that the relevant empirical sciences, in particular anatomy and physiology, are saying that there are physiological and anatomical

differences between the different races which are correlated with differences in intellectual abilities. Horton's contribution was to show, in great detail in his *West African Countries and Peoples*, that the second premise in the argument above was false.

Horton's argument has the following form:

1. Philosophical discourse on human nature must start from what the relevant empirical sciences say about different races.
2. The relevant empirical sciences show that physiological and anatomical differences which are correlated with differences in intellectual abilities between different races are non-existent.

From these two premises, Horton derives the conclusion that philosophical discourse on human nature must start from the claim that physiological and anatomical differences which are correlated with differences in intellectual abilities between different races are non-existent. This is the core argument made by Horton. Hence Horton's intervention takes place not only at the "scientific" level, but it also has clear implications for philosophy, and especially philosophical anthropology. Horton successfully severs the connection between the naturalistic turn and the endorsement of racist philosophical anthropology.

Horton remains thoroughly naturalistic in his defense of racial equality. For example, he never appeals to biblical authority to argue for the truth of monogenism. This distinguishes him from some of his contemporaries who were also concerned with defending human equality such as the African American physician [Martin R. Delany](#). Delany in his *Principia of Ethnology: The Origins of Races and Color* (1879) [2nd Edition 1880] tries to refute the arguments of Victorian-era racist physical anthropologists by invoking both "the light of science, and [the] assistance of divine authority" (20). Horton, by contrast, wants to accomplish the same goal without invoking divine authority, since any such invocation would constitute a violation of the strictures required by his endorsement of the naturalistic turn. Horton qua philosophical anthropologist thought that philosophical anthropology ought to be placed on a naturalist foundation but that a correct understanding of that naturalistic foundation involves a repudiation of biological racism.

Yet Horton, while defending human equality (in terms of basic biologically grounded cognitive capacities), does not deny that there are differences in the level of "civilizational" attainment of different peoples and for him, there were clear differences between "civilized" and "uncivilized" peoples. After all, he was a Victorian gentleman. However, the explanation of this divergence cannot refer to physical differences or cognitive differences because he thinks that careful investigation of the relevant evidence shows that there are no significant physical or cognitive differences that can serve as an explanation for such differences in degrees of civilizational attainment.

Instead, external circumstances, primarily contingent and reversible historical accidents, account for observed divergences. For Horton, the fact that a given people is at a certain stage of “civilizational development” does not say anything about their innate biological characteristics. Horton deploys his knowledge of anatomy to argue that it is in fact not possible to understand why different societies have attained different degrees of “civilizational” development using evidence about the physical properties of different racial groups. One way to understand this move is to think of Horton as showing that a naturalistic approach to philosophical anthropology will require the analysis of the results that have been obtained through both the relevant natural sciences as well as the relevant historical sciences.

All of this goes to show that attempts to dismiss racist discourse in the work of nineteenth-century philosophers with the claim that they were simply “of their time” are utterly vacuous. This is for the simple reason that thinkers like Horton were also “of their time.” Such a move, therefore, does not have as much explanatory power as its proponents seem to think. Moreover, while the proponents of this approach would like to think that they are showing sensitivity to the relevant historical context, they are in fact foreclosing further investigation of the relevant historical context. Turning our attention to figures like Horton not only serves to refute the “men of their time” response, but it also helps us understand the fault lines that characterized philosophical anthropology in the second half of the nineteenth century. Thus, the call for diversification of sources and texts in philosophy is not simply a matter of recognizing thinkers from hitherto marginalized groups, it is also a matter of rectifying empirically and theoretically inadequate narratives in the history of philosophy. These inadequate narratives, one has to add, have also shaped our image of the sort of activity that philosophy is.



Zeyad El Nabolsy

Zeyad el Nabolsy is an assistant professor of philosophy at York University. He specializes in the history of African philosophy. He has previously published on Amílcar Cabral's philosophy of culture, methodological debates about racism and ideology in the historiography of philosophy, Paulin Hountondji's philosophy of science, modern African political and social philosophy (with a focus on African Marxism), and ancient Egyptian philosophy.