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CHAPTER ONE

How Race Became a Problem

CONSIDER THESE STATEMENTS:

“Some have thought fit, to employ the term of races for four or five divisions . . . but I see no reason for this appellation.” (Johann Gottfried von Herder, Outlines of a Philosophy of the History of Man, 1784)

“A man must be blind not to be struck by similitudes between some of the lower races of mankind, viewed as connecting links in the animal kingdom.” (Josiah C. Nott, Types of Mankind, 1854)

“The notion of race . . . is only a subjective notion, a conception within our minds. . . . One questions whether it would not be preferable to be less free with the word race.” (Paul Topinard, “On ‘Race’ in Anthropology,” 1892)

In sequence, these passages mark the beginning, middle, and end of a story about the rise and fall of the concept of race as a subject for scientific inquiry between the late eighteenth and late nineteenth centuries. This book is an attempt to understand how and why this concept emerged, what the stakes of the discussion were thought to be, what resistances it encountered and eventually conquered, what ends it served, and why the most responsible and respected intellectuals and scientists eventually gave up on it. Since this renunciation created an opening for the call by others to preserve and promote a nonscientific concept of race—a call that is still being heeded—it is also intended as a contribution to more recent debates in which race has figured in discussions of history, morality, economics, social justice, and human rights.

From the perspective of the twenty-first century, the value of studying the history of the concept of race is not self-evident. So strongly has the

term been linked with specific social practices, legal arrangements, and ideological formations that the concept can easily seem to have no independent history at all, or none worth considering. And so inescapable are the associations of race with colonial exploitation, enslavement, and violence that it might seem almost morally irresponsible to suggest that the term ever had a neutral or uncertain meaning, or that it was ever unimplicated in practices now considered shameful and beliefs now proven to be false.

For understandable reasons, historical discussions of race often produce the impression that the word always meant what it has come to mean, and that the associations that now burden the subject were always in full view. Looking at the past from our present vantage point, we treat statements made long ago by people who had at best fragmentary information about people living far away in isolated cultures as if they were considered reflections on the descendants of those people. In this way, historical figures are held accountable to present standards as if they were speaking directly to and about our world rather than to and about the world they lived in or imagined they lived in.¹

From our perspective, the most remarkable and disquieting fact about the emergence of the concept of race is that the word had, in the early days, no definite meaning and even no clear rationale for its use. It slipped almost unnoticed into the vocabulary of eighteenth-century intellectual discourse as one term among many for human variation, its entry facilitated by its inoffensive vagueness. There were other terms for human groupings—varieties, tribes, nations, peoples, and stocks, to list just a few of those in English—and other ways of thinking about human variation than as categories in the organizational scheme of nature. The case for race was not self-evident or compelling; Herder was far from the only thinker to be skeptical about whether it was needed at all.

To a scientific or philosophical culture that valued precision, the term may even have seemed a step backward, for it was applied indiscriminately to humans, animals, professions, nations, and plants; even worse, it combined and blurred two meanings that other terms generally separated: a biological notion of genealogy or descent, and a distinct culture or way of life. The Australian ethnologist Bronwen Douglas describes the slurry of meanings associated with race in the early days:

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* . . . the etymology of the English term “race” and its European cognates is “uncertain and disputed.” The OED derives race ultimately from Italian *razza*, via French *race*, and the semantic history of the English term is entangled with continental

meanings. . . . The *OED*'s earliest citations date from the sixteenth century when, with reference to man, the concrete noun race signified a family, a kindred, or the posterity of a common ancestor, as in the "race & stocke of Abraham" (1570). More generally, it meant a "tribe, nation, or people regarded as of common stock," as in "the Englishe race" (1572), or served as a synecdoche for humanity, as in "the humane race" (1580).

The primary connotations of consanguinity and shared origin or descent are patent in the several translations of *une race*, "a race," in an early French-Latin dictionary—they include *familia* ("house," "family"); *gentilitas* ("kindred"); *genus* ("birth"); *sanguis* ("blood," "descendant"); and *stirps* ("stock," "stem," "root," "offspring"). The first French dictionary (Nicot 1606: 533–4) explains that race "signifies origin [*extraction*]," as in "man, horse, dog, and other animal of good or bad race" or "a noble race and house." The *OED* cites parallel English usages from half a century earlier. This semantic conflation of a race with family breeding served to fortify the prerogatives of nobility over populace. The first edition of *Le dictionnaire de l'Académie française* (1694, II:364) defines race as "progeny [*lignée*], lineage [*lignage*], origin, all those who come from a single [noble] family." . . . But race/race were minor words in French and English before the late eighteenth century while their German equivalent *Racen* or *Rasse* was a recent borrowing from French and rarely used.

Importantly, however, the sixth edition of the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie* (1835, II:553) also gives an extended signified for race: "a multitude of men who originate from the same country, and resemble each other by facial traits, by external form. *The Caucasian race. The Mongol race. The Malay race.*" The *OED* likewise cites late eighteenth-century and subsequent uses of race to mean "any of the major groupings of mankind, having in common distinct physical features or having a similar ethnic background." These emergent meanings are lexical confirmation of a series of important shifts in the linguistic and ideological significance of race in western Europe from the mid-eighteenth century as naturalists appropriated the term to serve novel taxonomic ends.²

In essence, what Douglas describes is the gradual but inexorable reduction and clarification of a once-ambiguous and marginally important term to the point where it possessed a single dominant meaning, referring to a physically distinctive category of humans.

Since the history of a word can shadow the meanings it has at any given moment, it is possible that an older application of the term to

animals as well as humans was retained as an unvoiced implication that the entire natural world including humanity was organized in categories of this kind. Such an implication would actually recommend the term to the intellectual culture of the mid-eighteenth century as a way of meeting what Douglas refers to as its “novel taxonomic ends.”

Douglass is referring here to the fact that the intellectual culture of the time was beginning to understand the world and especially the natural world from a rationalist perspective as an immense system of categories that could best be approached not through theology, mythology, or philosophy but through empirical research and theoretical reflection. The resulting understanding of the natural order could then be applied to the traditional philosophical project of understanding the human condition. As this possibility came more clearly into focus, the term race began to appear in inquiries into the origin, nature, and implications of human variation.

In recent years the idea that the culture of the eighteenth century produced any significant change in the understanding of human variation has become controversial, with a number of scholars insisting that earlier periods also exhibited a “racial” sense of difference. In their introduction to a volume of readings, *Race in Early Modern England*, for example, Ania Loomba and Jonathan Burton argue on the basis of scores of descriptions of various “others” during this period that even without modern biology or zoology, the early modern construction of difference, applied to Negroes, Muslims, Irish, Jews, and others, was effectively a notion of race, lacking only the word. If early modern accounts of difference stressed cultural factors and later accounts stressed biology, they say, both were describing uncrossable barriers between “us” and “them,” and in that respect each can be considered a version of the same thing.³

This argument is suggestive, but I believe that it overstates continuities and understates the innovation represented by Enlightenment philosophy and by the empirical methods of modern science.

The replacement of theology and traditional concepts such as the “great chain of being” by biology, ethnology, and zoology as master discourses for understanding the human condition does not represent a minor tweaking. And as the readings in Loomba and Burton’s volume themselves suggest, it was not only the word that was lacking in the early modern era. Also absent were other entailments peculiar to race, including the linked premises that humanity could be divided into fundamental groups defined by unalterable traits and tendencies not shared with other groups; that some of these traits and tendencies beginning with appearance but including aptitudes, capacities, and dispositions were transmitted by inheritance

and not by culture or tradition; and, most important, that groups themselves were not merely geography- or climate-induced variations on a common pattern but were part of a natural order that many still believed was established by God. Jews and Muslims can convert; races cannot.

In one of the strongest statements of the discontinuity thesis, Ivan Hannaford, whose formidable book *Race: The History of an Idea in the West* begins with a nearly two-hundred-page exploration of “Western History and Thought before Race,” argues that race represented not just a new vocabulary of difference but a fundamentally new way of conceiving of generation, descent, and ordering that became, over the course of the nineteenth century, a scientific obsession, encroaching on and eventually displacing politics. What Hannaford demonstrates in compelling detail is that while, for example, ancient Greeks and Romans noted differences in appearance and behavior between themselves and others, they did so without antipathy or stereotyping. The Greeks’ sense of their superiority to the Ethiopians, for example, “had nothing to do with the phenomenon of race” and was based rather on the “Homeric ideal of excellence,” which the Greeks honored and the Ethiopians did not. To those who would argue for continuity and gradualism in the European understanding of difference, Hannaford responds that “the idea of race does not lie dormant in every society on all occasions and at all times, simply waiting to be discovered. . . . [R]ace is *not* everywhere.” Race, he concludes, is an Enlightenment notion, “an attractive and powerful modern idea” that was “inimical to Western civilization in the strict political sense of that word as it was understood before the Reformation.”⁴

Race, in short, is not mere difference; it is difference, with a difference.

We could say that while the *perception* of difference is a constant in human history, race represents a new and distinctive *understanding* of difference. The early modern accounts of distant peoples, tribes, or nations were *descriptive*, taking the form of lists or inventories of physical features, cultural practices, beliefs, languages, locations, modes of living, deities, diets, and so forth. Many of the studies of human variation conducted in the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries under the rubric of race were, by contrast, *analytical*, and took the form of an inquiry into the origin, depth, nature, and consequences of the physical and other differences among humans. The study of races focused on the possibility of a system of such differences, a hidden organizational scheme of nature that when fully articulated would have philosophical, social, political, and even theological implications. The concept of race reflected a new understanding of human variation not just as something to be recognized and

described but as a problem—an important problem with tremendous implications—to be solved.

In recent years, many have argued that the concept of race was itself a problem, not a solution. The general accusation is that by promoting the idea that racial categories were facts of nature, nineteenth-century science wittingly or unwittingly consented to a fantasy of fixed biological categories that served the ends of colonial domination and economic exploitation. The entire inquiry into race, according to this argument, was from the outset a corrupt enterprise undertaken for political or ideological purposes, a pretentious representation of difference functioning as a pretext for the imposition of power by the more advanced and *soi-disant* enlightened nations over the benighted, backward, mentally limited, and spiritually deficient populations of the world, especially those in what is now known as the Global South.

In 2019, the American Association of Biological Anthropologists made this argument against its own discipline, declaring that “the Western concept of race must be understood as a classification system that emerged from, and in support of, European colonialism, oppression, and discrimination. It thus does not have its roots in biological reality, but in policies of discrimination.” In a recent book, Joseph L. Graves Jr. and Alan H. Goodman boil this case down to its essence, describing the concept of race bluntly as “a myth that provides cover for racism.” The prominence both early and late of German intellectuals in the discourse on race strikes some as particularly telling evidence of the complicitous implication of the concept in atrocities. Introducing a collection of nineteenth-century writings, Hannah Franziska Augstein defines nineteenth-century racial theory as “the biologically founded racial theory . . . culminating in the racial ideology of the German National Socialists.” Whatever the role their countrymen may have played in the invention of race, however, German thinkers are now taking the lead in denouncing the entire project. As the 2019 “Jena Declaration” issued by the German Zoological Society proclaims, “The concept of race is the result of racism, not its prerequisite.”⁵

This charge is certainly not unsupported. Nobody could dispute that various theories of hardwired differences among peoples were instrumental in justifying programs of systematic disenfranchisement, domination, and violence carried out by some Western powers against populations that could be represented as being so different from them that they neither possessed nor deserved status or rights comparable to their own. It is also indisputable that by the mid-nineteenth century in Europe and the United States, the concept of race was figuring in debates around slavery,

the imperial conquest of indigenous peoples, and political revolution. Especially from the perspective of the twenty-first century, it is easy to see how some discourses on race made explicit or implicit accommodations with the premise of inequality used to justify these programs, and possible to understand that some would regard the defense of that premise as the point of the entire undertaking.

But attitudes, beliefs, and practices we now call racist including slavery have been a constant feature of human existence, and have never required philosophical or scientific support, much less a “myth that provides cover” for them. American slavery was an extraordinary stimulant to racial theorizing, but the New World slave trade flourished for two centuries without a theory of race. And while many intellectuals who contributed to a theory of racial difference—Edward Long, Julien-Joseph Virey, James Hunt, Christoph Meiners, Robert Knox, Thomas Henry Huxley, Samuel George Morton, William Lawrence, Josiah C. Nott, Ernst Haeckel, and Paul Broca—were convinced of both the reality and the inequality of races, and of the inferiority of black people in particular, and while as Frederick Douglass noted in 1854 some of their work was cited by supporters of American slavery, the institution of slavery received little explicit support from respected intellectuals outside the United States during the antebellum period.⁶ Even the proslavery advocates Hunt and Nott could only endorse the practice on the humanitarian grounds that slaves were better off in the United States than they had been in Africa where many of them had already been enslaved or subjugated before they were sold to slave traders, or the economic grounds that slavery was essential to the prosperity of the nation, or the practical grounds that slavery was the only workable relationship between such different populations. Just as common as tacit complicity with slavery or other forms of violence—and far more common than explicit assent—were statements of revulsion or repudiation.

Not even those who felt that the differences between races were effectively fixed necessarily believed that such differences justified acts of violence, domination, or expropriation, of which they were acutely aware. Some felt that present inequalities could be eliminated over time given equal conditions and opportunities; others believed that inequality was an argument against rather than for domination. Most if certainly not all of those whose contributions on the topic were taken seriously by the intellectual community rejected on moral grounds any attempt to use their work to support the economic or imperial domination of one racial group over others.

That group included Charles Darwin, a man of broadly humanitarian convictions whose *On the Origin of Species* (1859) could be said to

have lent itself to projects of exploitation or colonial domination by positing a process of gradual modification from lower or primordial forms to higher, more specialized and complex forms. One could conclude from Darwin that some populations were more primitive than others and were for that reason either fitted for exploitation or doomed to extinction. But this was not a conclusion Darwin ever drew or came close to drawing; nor did he endorse the assimilation of race to species on which many such arguments rested, stating in *The Descent of Man* (1871) that the fact that groups “graduate into each other” is “the most weighty of all the arguments against treating the races of man as distinct species.”⁷

Darwin was undoubtedly thinking of the arguments coming out of the “American School” of anthropology led by Nott, which will be discussed later in this book. But others who agreed with Nott on the question of a fixed Negro inferiority also rejected such arguments. According to Thomas F. Gossett, the majority of proslavery advocates in the antebellum South believed that a species distinction between blacks and whites contradicted the Bible’s story of the origins of humanity, and given the choice between the Bible and a science that might have provided the only intellectually respectable defense of slavery they could have taken up, they chose the Bible and accepted the humanity, if not the equality, of slaves.⁸

Even if the scientific community had the will or desire to support policies of racial domination or exploitation, it would have been an ineffective ally. This at least is the claim of historian Emmanuelle Sibeud in her study of the Anthropology Society of Paris founded by Broca in 1859. This group, which was in its early years dedicated to the study of skulls in which Broca had become a leading figure, is perhaps the lowest-hanging fruit for the argument that science was complicit with racism, but as Sibeud shows, the Society was by the 1880s already in a state of disarray as a consequence of Broca’s death and the internal wrangling that followed. Burdened by the manifest failure of craniology to yield convincing evidence of anything, and still unable to define race itself, the Society was “neither an efficient colonial tool nor a racist plot projected from the metropolis on the colonies.” All in all, it was, in the words of her title, a “useless colonial science.”⁹

Nor, according to Colin Kidd, did European powers ever require scholarly or scientific approval for their exploitation of non-European peoples. When Europeans undertook the exploration and conquest of much of the rest of the world, they did so, he argues, out of a mixture of private and national motives, and relied for conceptual support and warrant not on any sense of biological differences among populations but rather on what Kidd describes as “the Christian imperative to spread the Word of God

through missions.” If validation were required, it was sought not in racial science but in “theories of natural law concerning the connection between proper use of the land and rights to its ownership. . . . ‘Whites,’” Kidd concludes, “conquered the world without any overt ideology of white superiority,” and indeed without any understanding of themselves as “white.”¹⁰

And so we return to Bronwen Douglas’s assertion that race was a response not to the ideological interests of colonialism or the slave trade but rather to the scientific culture of the eighteenth century in which we recognize the origins of intellectual modernity. The most compelling instance of the categorical ordering of nature and one of the signal achievements of the modern ethos Hannaford refers to is Linnaeus’s *A General System of Nature*. Appearing in twelve editions during the author’s lifetime with the definitive tenth edition appearing in 1758, this treatise provides a dazzling, if speculative and continuously evolving, model for understanding the complexity of the natural world.

It is surely Linnaeus that Douglas is thinking of when she mentions the “novel taxonomic ends” of the intellectual culture of the eighteenth century. By including humanity in the “general system” of nature, Linnaeus placed human beings in a logical order with classes and subclasses that could be determined by the close observation of particulars coupled with an imaginative grasp of the total system. Race—a concept unavailable to Linnaeus—would become an important part of that system as others tried to improve on his astonishing but idiosyncratic and preliminary efforts.

Although Linnaeus wrote in Latin well before the use of the term race had become commonplace, he—or rather his English translator—had inadvertently established the framework of the debates about human variation that would unfurl over the next century and a half. Linnaeus’s full title mentioned the three “grand kingdoms of animals, vegetables, and minerals,” divided into what was called, in Latin, their “*Classes, Ordines, Genera, & Species*”; his translator William Turton added “varieties,” creating at a stroke a small pocket of uncertainty and hence opportunity for later thinkers who would try to slot race into the system of nature.¹¹

Lacking a precise definition, the term seemed to oscillate between species and varieties, its neighbors in the Linnean, or Turtonian, system. When, in *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1787), Thomas Jefferson wrote, “It is not against experience to suppose, that different species of the same genus, or varieties of the same species, may possess different qualifications,” he anticipated the terms of the following century’s debate on race, which centered on the question of whether race was more like a species

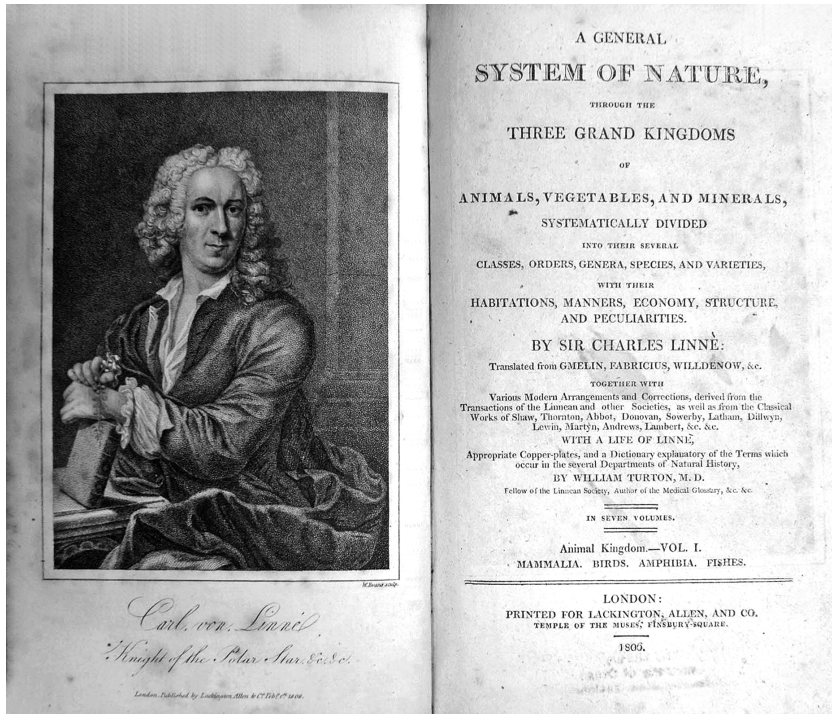


FIGURE 1.1. Sir Charles Linné (Linnaeus), *A General System of Nature*, ed. and trans. William Turton (1806).

or more like a variety.¹² This ambivalence proved to be of immense consequence. Over the next century and a half, the discourse on race hovered over this question: Was *Homo sapiens* a species with races constituting environmentally induced varieties, or was it a genus, with races constituting stable species? Other questions followed in the wake of this one: What is the relation between the adjacent genres of *Homo* and *Simia*? Were some races closer in some significant sense to *Simia* than others? And how were categories organized? Were they just differences, or did they have a range, with a top, middle, and bottom?

Linnaeus's successors were aided in their efforts to puzzle out the meaning of race by an accumulating mass of information about distant populations that was pouring into Europe from travelers, missionaries, pilgrims, maritime merchants, explorers, and commercial or colonial officials. For such people, differences were facts to be recognized and negotiated in order to be able to trade information and goods with the locals. But for European intellectuals, the information they reported was considered as evidence that could be used to assemble a comprehensive scientific

taxonomy.¹³ The reports themselves tended to dwell not on categories but on exotica, leaving to the philosopher or scientist (the distinction not always sharply drawn) the task of extracting regularities and patterns from often exaggerated tales of nature's profusion. The construction of a full and accurate account of the place of humanity within the natural order and the articulation of the distinctions within the human species represented not only a challenge for science but also—given Linnaeus's binomial definition of humanity as *Homo sapiens*—a species imperative, a consequence of the injunction to Know Thyself.

The ambivalence of the term gave race a flexibility that enabled it to survive challenges even as it limited its effectiveness as a descriptor. When, for example, it was objected that the peoples of the world blended into each other with no bright lines dividing one group from another, the concept of race was able to survive by becoming a system of types, ideal essences that did not imply discrete and identifiable human populations. This concept, announced in unmistakable terms by Nott and George R. Gliddon's 1854 compendium *Types of Mankind*, seemed to promise a certain kind of clarity, but in time it became apparent that the innovation was itself unclear because while it appeared to suggest a norm from which deviations could be marked, the norm was difficult to locate.¹⁴ Debates about race became debates about the site of the norm, whether it was in the distinctive qualities of a group, the average member of the group, or the ancestors of the group. None of these had any authoritative claim, however, and none could in any event be determined with any precision.

The typological conception of race may not have settled the many issues surrounding the subject, but it did generate a remarkably durable feature of racial science that has come to seem particularly sinister, a preoccupation with quantification and classification, as millions of people were studied and measured in various ways over the course of the nineteenth century and beyond in an effort to develop the data set for racial types. The reductive implications of these procedures were not at first generally recognized; what was apparent was the dramatic increase in conceptual power enabled by the emphasis on the empirical, and the promise at least of the categorical. Over the course of the nineteenth century, the gathering, observing, measuring, and classifying of human bodies and human populations would become a routine aspect of medical research whose statistical and objective character bespoke a scientific rigor.

Many such efforts today seem outlandish, like British scientist John Beddoe's attempts at the end of the nineteenth century to devise an "index of nigrescence," an algebraic equation measuring the precise degree of

darkness of the skin of inhabitants of the British Isles (Celts scored higher than Anglo-Saxons), or William Z. Ripley's discourse in *The Races of Europe* (1899) on the "nostrility" characteristic of Jews.¹⁵ But they did not seem so at the time, and the combined if uncoordinated efforts of various methods and approaches had the cumulative effect of creating the concept of race as a highly plausible and even imposingly rational way of thinking about the differences among the peoples of the world.

The dominant approach, and the one to which the most attention is paid in this book, was craniology, or the measurement of skulls. At once the most dubious by current standards and the most sinister of the methods used to pursue the subject of human variation, craniology had advantages that other approaches lacked. Skin pigmentation was felt to be too variable and graded to yield useful information—it was, as Gossett remarks, "one of the least satisfactory of the methods tried" to determine racial categories—and brains were too subject to degradation.¹⁶ Skeletons had marrow, which could also degrade, and tended to fall apart. Skulls, by contrast, could be easily gathered, stored, cataloged, transported, and studied at leisure. Providing the hardest of hard evidence, skulls were an exemplary object of a scientific inquiry that had extrascientific implications and rewards for the ambitious scientist.

Ambition was required for such a vast undertaking. Travelers were often urged by anthropologists to bring back measurements that could be added to the archive. The director of the Anthropological Museum in Budapest near the end of the nineteenth century, Aurel Török, is reported to have advocated five thousand different measurements for every skull, some to be made with an invention of his own devising, the gnathometer. For many physicians, each patient was, in addition to whatever else he or she might be, a skull. Before he sets out on his voyage into the heart of darkness, Joseph Conrad's narrator Marlow has his skull measured "as a simple formality" by a doctor who "produced a thing like calipers and got the dimensions back and front and every way, taking notes carefully," saying, "I always ask leave, in the interests of science, to measure the crania of those going out there." He had, the doctor tells Marlow, "a little theory which you Messieurs who go out there must help me prove." Craniology was part of both the imperial and the scientific projects; as the doctor confesses, "This is my share in the advantages my country shall reap from the possession of such a magnificent dependency."¹⁷

One cannot read many of the early treatises on race—even the most deeply flawed or reprehensible—without sensing the excitement the authors felt at what seemed a magnificent opportunity to establish the

ability of empirical research and scientific method to engage with issues whose interest and importance could be immediately grasped by the public and even valued by the state. Those engaged in the study of race experienced the exhilarating challenge of developing a new field of research, the satisfaction of contributing to a growing archive of fact, and the privilege of making meaningful scientific contributions to questions of both immediate and enduring interest. Phrases such as “the ladder of existence,” “the great chain of being,” and “the order of creation” had been part of the European vocabulary for centuries.¹⁸ The study of race, sometimes framed as a scientific inquiry into the “scale of nature,” promised to yield the hidden logic or principle of order—the laws of nature—that undergirded these phrases, making the old concepts newly meaningful to a modern culture. As a term that suggested science and modernity but whose implicative reach exceeded its referential grasp, race could open up new approaches to a range of important religious, philosophical, and scientific issues that were beginning to be framed anew in a culture of intellectual modernity: the universality of human nature, human understanding, human reason, or human rights; the limits of species plasticity; and the place of mankind in the order of nature.

The primary issues to be explored were the origin, character, and depth of human differences, but useful work could also be done on the specific roles of geography, climate, diet, language, and culture in creating, consolidating, or aggravating those differences. If light could be shed on these questions, then the even more mysterious purpose of difference, a question heretofore relegated largely to theology, might be resituated within the domain of science. Then, if the enigma of race could be solved, it might be possible to determine whether all humans possessed the same or different capacities, and thus whether the differences among groups represented alternative realizations of a common human potentiality or the full expression of different potentialities. It would become possible to say once and for all whether humanity was one, as both the Church and classical cosmogony taught, or many, as learned opinion increasingly held. Light would be shed on the difficult question of the responsibilities of the more advanced and powerful cultures toward the peoples they were exploring, colonizing, exploiting, or enslaving.

The urgent questions surrounding the issue of how to think about these peoples—and necessarily, how to think about one’s differences from, connections to, or obligations toward them—required a vocabulary of difference. Race, an uncertain concept of relatively recent vintage, had emerged from a crowded field as the strongest candidate for the study of human

variation because of its potentially comprehensive explanatory power. Unlike any other term, race combined, or seemed like it might combine, elements of biology, culture, geography, and nature in a single and singularly powerful concept.

As consequential as the stakes were, however, the inquiry into race did not lead in only one direction; indeed, the various meanings of this conflicted concept disclosed fissures within the Enlightenment ethos itself. As what Bronwen Douglas called “a synecdoche for humanity,” race was entirely consistent with the universalizing thrust of Enlightenment philosophy; as a system of subcategories within humanity, however, race was an artifact of science. The second meaning negated the first because it accorded any subgroup that could be described as a race the same status as the larger group, so that “Caucasians” could—and frequently did—say they were as distinct from “Ethiopians” as humans from primates. It is the scientific tendency to proliferate distinctions that Hannah Arendt was thinking of when she identified race with “the exclusion in principle of the idea of humanity. . . . Race,” she said, “is, politically speaking, not the beginning of humanity but its end.”¹⁹

To make matters worse, the invented and therefore arbitrary character of all the terms and concepts in play was acknowledged from the beginning, or even before the beginning. In 1749, before any serious effort to explore the concept of race, the French naturalist Comte de Buffon allowed that categories such as type, variety, stock, and family were more or less interchangeable, and were in any event things “of our own creation. . . . [W]e have contrived them to ease our memories, and to aid our imagination.”²⁰ The American naturalist Samuel George Morton began his *Crania Americana* (1839) with the acknowledgment that “the grouping of mankind into Races, has occupied the ingenuity of many of the best naturalists of the past and present century” without producing any consensus even on the number of races, with proposals ranging from one (the human) to fifteen.²¹ Morton himself accepted Johann Friedrich Blumenbach’s identification of five basic or primordial races, but identified within them twenty-two subordinate “families”—noting, however, that families were often confused with races, and that some scholars used the word race when they meant variety.

Morton’s successor in some respects, Nott complained about the difficulty of making any argument about the natural system when the terms themselves were so obviously made up. “The embarrassment in treating of types or races,” he said, “is constantly increased by false classifications.” Each term or principle of classification had resulted in a new number:

six varieties (Buffon), eleven races (Charles Pickering), sixteen species (Charles des Moulins), and sixty-three races (Luke Burke, who included in his total twenty-eight “intellectual” and thirty-five “physical” races). Like many others, Nott himself was unembarrassed by his own inventions, assuring his readers that his identifications of races and types and types with species represented “facts or laws which have emanated from the Creator.”²²

Nott was drawing on a well established understanding of species that could trace its pedigree to the seventeenth-century English naturalist John Ray, who defined a species as an unchanging product of an original creation. What seems to have escaped Nott’s attention was the fact that this definition of species as unchanging types had come under stress, as studies of crossbreeding and hybridism were beginning to suggest the theologically scandalous possibility that species were not fixed and unalterable but might become transformed over time, and even that new species might have come into being since the creation of man. With this possibility in the air, the concept of species had become exposed to the accusation that it, like race, had been imagined into being not by God but by human beings, and could be imagined differently.

We can actually observe the moment when the concept of species defined as a clear and distinct category begins to blur or melt when it comes into contact with race. In the 1826 edition of his *Researches into the Physical History of Mankind*, the distinguished British naturalist James Cowles Prichard begins a meditation on whether all humans belong to a single species with a preliminary comment on the term species, which he says is “very simple and obvious. It includes only one circumstance, namely an original distinctness and constant transmission of any character. A race of animals, or plants . . . which have always been constant and undeviating, constitutes a species.”²³ Simple and obvious enough—except that Prichard conflates species and races, and then compounds the confusion in the very next sentence by noting that “the same meaning was originally attached to the term genus, which we now apply to species.” Animals themselves, he concedes, seem confused about what they are, because while the fundamental criterion for any classification is resemblance, oxen, bison, and buffalo “bear a striking resemblance to each other,” and some variations that have become heritable have caused species to differ from themselves so that they resemble other species. In short, “though the idea of species is simple and definite, it is not always easy to determine what races of animals are of one, and what of distinct species.”²⁴

We know there are species, there must be species—the idea is so beautifully clear—but the animals themselves were making a barnyard mess of the whole thing.

The consequences of terminological ambiguity and inconsistency were especially pronounced in the United States, which was, as its founding documents proclaimed, philosophically and politically committed to an Enlightenment-based concept of human oneness and equality, but which, as the institution of slavery demonstrated, was also committed to the principle of radical differences and permanent inequalities among groups. If races were considered to be stocks, families, tribes, or varieties within a single species, all sharing a common ancestor, Enlightenment premises were not threatened, but if races were more like species in a larger genus, then perhaps some creatures who, as Prichard says, “bear a striking resemblance” to humans might not actually be humans. They might be another species altogether—which would explain why some white humans particularly in the American South might feel that they were living alongside strange and mysterious beings with whom they shared no ancestry and had nothing in common other than that they were diurnal, walked on two feet, and had lactiferous teats. In that case, a different philosophy and even a different politics and a different morality would have to be developed to deal with these humanlike creatures, who had at best a very restricted access to human reason, human understanding, or human rights.

Accommodating both implications, the concept of race—referring both to all of humanity and to groups within humanity, and wobbling between species and variety—registered this ambivalence without resolving it, and so could be deployed in arguments on either side of the question.

A science of racial difference presented a different kind of challenge to Christian theology. By inquiring into the origin of human differences, students of race were trespassing on ground long claimed by the Bible, whose commanding account of human origins still functioned for many as gospel truth. At first, the possibility of a rivalry between science and religion was generally denied, as many of those who wrote about race—John Mitchell, Petrus Camper, Sir William Jones, Samuel George Morton—labored to reconcile their findings to the terms of established religion, with existing human populations being credited with a genealogy that extended back to Eden or, if that seemed implausible, adduced as evidence of the inscrutability of God’s intentions or mysteriousness of God’s ways.²⁵ Debates about race in the early nineteenth century often took the form of clashing interpretations of Genesis. The “monogenists” who held that the human species was essentially unitary could point to the single act of creation and

a single primal pair, while “polygenists” who believed in separate creations and therefore in a deep division between groups could argue that the Bible described only the experience of one tribe among others whose existence is suggested by, for example, the unexplained appearance of the wife of Cain or the wives of the sons of Noah.²⁶

As mid-century approached, however, some began to feel that serious thinking about race required either a concession that the Bible was an ancient fable that translated God’s truth into human terms, or, more radically, a wholesale rejection of the Biblical story as a myth or a compendium of pious lies. Nott’s sneering dismissal in *Types of Mankind* of the notion of a “primal pair” of each species—“a *pair* of bees, locusts, herrings, buffaloes”—suggests a professional exasperation with the constraints on science placed by the conviction that the Bible was a source of historical truth.²⁷ For Nott and others, race was the point at which religion and science threatened to collide or part ways; for a growing number, it was the point on which religion had to yield to science, which was seen by some advanced thinkers not as a complementary but as a superior way for a modern culture to understand human origins. And so, over the course of the century, a Bible-based monogenism consistent with what Arendt describes as the Enlightenment “idea of humanity” was replaced by a harsher, biology-based polygenism that argued that the various races had always—or at least for an extraordinarily long period of time—been as they were at present.

Even so, the authority of the Bible was so durable that as late as 1943, the anthropologists Ruth Benedict and Gene Weltfish felt they had to reassure readers of their pamphlet “The Races of Mankind” that the result of post-Darwinian scientific research into race was that science and Christian faith were in essential agreement, and that “the Bible story of Adam and Eve, father and mother of the whole human race, told centuries ago the same truth that science has shown today: that all the peoples of the earth are a single family and have a common origin.”²⁸

Race had a more complicated effect on one of the other central issues in the nineteenth century, the concept of the nation. Both concepts emerged, or were invented, at roughly the same time, in the wake of the American and French Revolutions and, a generation later, the dissolution of the Holy Roman Empire. These events forced people living in the affected areas to understand themselves not as subjects who merely happened to live on land claimed by a powerful sovereign but as citizens who, collectively, comprised the nation. As a potentially powerful new way of thinking of collective identity, race found its way into many debates on this subject.

In its unsettled state, race played more than one role in the various attempts to conceptualize the nation, and was conscripted on behalf of different causes or ends. In a brief but probing account of “Race-Thinking Before Racism,” Arendt argues that at the beginning of the nineteenth century, race was frequently aligned with an antimonarchical liberalism, but became, especially after the revolutionary events of 1848, part of a “nation-destroying and humanity-annihilating” ideology whose only rival in this respect was Marxism-Leninism.²⁹ Each of the Western nations, she says, followed its own version of this trajectory, cultivating aspects of race that served its needs and interests.

Even within a single country, these needs and interests could be complex or contradictory. The understanding of French citizenship prevailing for most of the nineteenth century treated race primarily as an instance of the kind of divisions among peoples that a national identity based on liberal or revolutionary principles could accommodate by overriding them. Jules Michelet began his nineteen-volume *Histoire de France* (1831) by describing his nation as composed of “race upon race, people upon people”; fifty tumultuous years later, Ernest Renan was still celebrating the ability of the French nation to absorb and assimilate groups that might otherwise be considered natural antagonists including Franks, Normans, Bretons, Celts, and Gauls. A nation that was, as Renan put it in his famous 1883 essay “What is a Nation?,” “Roman by language, Greek by civilization and Jewish by religion” was defined by its ideals not by its racial composition.³⁰ France exported these ideals to its colonies including the Arabs in North Africa, the Africans in Africa and the Caribbean, and the Vietnamese and others in Indochina through its language, its culture, and its administration, encouraging people living there to think of themselves as Frenchmen and Frenchwomen despite the fact that few if any of them had Roman, Greek, or Jewish—or French—ancestry.³¹ In the French instance, then, the “idea of humanity” that according to Arendt was “excluded in principle” by the concept of race was actually strengthened by acquiring the committed patronage of the state, whose heroic mission was not to deny racial differences but to render them irrelevant.

This spacious view of a French nation in which race counted for less than national identity was, however, not shared by the dispossessed post-revolutionary aristocracy, which registered its despair at the direction of the nation by forging a tribal bond with the aristocracy of other nations, an imagined *Internationale* of inherited nobility constructed on a phantasmatic all-but-racial basis. In the most fully developed instance of this argument, Comte de Gobineau’s multivolume tome *The Inequality of the*

Human Races (1853–55), traced all honor, nobility, and virtue back to a long-vanished horde of “Aryans,” an all-conquering horde that had roamed the world, mixing its blood with the local races. This mixture had been fatal to the Aryans, who had vanished as a consequence, but it was a genetic boon for the favored locals. In France, Gobineau said, the Frankish nobility represented the direct descendants of this aboriginal aristocracy and were for that reason superior to the lesser breeds, the Gauls and Celts who made up the rest of the French citizenry.³² For Gobineau and others of his persuasion, the concept of race did indeed function, as Arendt said, as a “weapon for civil war and for splitting the nation.”³³

But race could be weaponized in in the service of other ends as well. The liberal-seeming Renan, with his magisterial view of the history of humanity, was, Arendt says, nevertheless “the first to oppose the ‘Semites’ to the ‘Aryans’ in a decisive *‘division du genre humain,’*” a division that would become more pronounced at the end of the century.³⁴ And Renan and others defended French colonialism in Africa and elsewhere by invoking natural differences among peoples that could easily be construed as racial differences. And while some such as Hippolyte Taine argued for a natural alliance between France and Germany on racial grounds, others especially after 1870 insisted on a natural division between the same nations—also on racial grounds.³⁵ More than in any other country, race became in France a kind of Swiss Army knife, fitted for a wide range of uses.

It was in Germany, however, that the astonishing shape-shifting range and flexibility of the concept was most fully explored. The first appearances of race in German intellectual discourse often had liberal associations of the kind exemplified by Blumenbach, but when conjoined at a later date with other ideas, race took on a darker, more divisive aspect. At first seemingly opposed to nationalistic sentiments, the concept of race was subsequently reworked in a way that established a deep compatibility with the Romantic nationalism exemplified by Herder, who promoted an organic or naturalistic understanding of “the people” (*das Volk*) as an indigenous population united not by subjection to a sovereign but by common origins, language, cultural traditions, and blood relationships. In some of the more mystical articulations of this concept, the people were represented as virtually autochthonous, with a character as ancient and unalterable as the land itself. At the end of the nineteenth century, this principle of national unity was translated into an explicitly racial nationalism that became, in the twentieth century, the “humanity-annihilating” ideology Arendt describes as Nazi “race-thinking.”³⁶

Having endured wave after wave of foreign invasions since the Romans, Britain could not, at first, look to race as a source of national identity. History not genealogy was understood to constitute the singular character of the British people, whose defiantly mongrel composition was both satirized and celebrated over the course of a thousand exuberant and even manic lines in Daniel Defoe's 1701 satire, *The True-Born Englishman*.

Thus from a mixture of all kinds began
That heterogeneous thing, an Englishman:
In eager rapes, and furious lust begot,
Betwixt a painted Britain and a Scot:
Whose gend'ring off-spring quickly learn'd to bow,
And yoke their heifers to the Roman plough:
From whence a mongrel half-bred race there came,
With neither name, nor nation, speech nor fame.
In whose hot veins new mixtures quickly ran,
Infus'd betwixt a Saxon and a Dane;
While their rank daughters, to their parents just,
Receiv'd all nations with promiscuous lust.
This nauseous brood directly did contain
The well-extracted blood of Englishmen. . . .
We have been Europe's sink, the jakes where she
Voids all her offal outcast progeny.³⁷

In Defoe's immensely popular rendering, the English national character was anchored not in a system of lineal nobility in which some were by nature elevated over others but in a regnant populace in which none could legitimately claim to be more "true-born" than another. While other nations might assert their distinctive identities in a way supported by the concept of race, many British citizens thought of themselves as white, Caucasian, Anglo-Saxon, or European, categories they shared with millions of others including some with whom they went to war. British national identity, a produce of evolution not revolution, and always less sharply defined than that of France, was at this time and for many years thereafter grounded not in race but in the monarchy, geography, speech, and politics, as well as in cultural, legal, and intellectual traditions.

Over the course of the nineteenth century, however, this understanding was challenged by various racial theories that connected physical features to cultural behaviors and even to inbuilt capacities and traits. By mid-century, a strain of Anglo-Saxonism had, in the words of George W. Stocking Jr., begun to take on a distinctly racial meaning, resulting in claims

of biological as well as historical and cultural connections between Britons and other Germanic or “Teutonic” peoples, and a natural antagonism between the liberty-loving, mature, and self-reliant Anglo-Saxons and the wild, impulsive, dreamy, and violent Celts.³⁸ The concept of race, and of an “Anglo-Saxon” race in particular, became commonplace, popularized in part by a series of novels by the future prime minister Benjamin Disraeli. A character in Disraeli’s 1847 novel *Tancred* insists that “all is race; there is no other truth”; in the same vein, the Scottish anatomist Robert Knox, speaking for himself in 1850, gave voice to an extreme form of racialism conceived as a suite of physical and other characteristics unchanged since the beginning of time, declaring bluntly that “race is everything.”³⁹

British intellectuals of a more cosmopolitan and humane disposition found reasons and ways to agree with Disraeli and Knox about race as a factor in culture and history. In a country with colonial possessions in East Africa, India, Burma, and the Middle East, the conviction that features fixed in nature determined a people’s fate in the world was not out of the mainstream. In an 1870 essay titled “The Forefathers and Forerunners of the English People,” Thomas Henry Huxley gave voice to this form of common sense, insisting on “the immense influence of that fixed hereditary transmission which constitutes a race.”⁴⁰ Supported by the developing practice of craniology, the growing scientific endorsement of polygenism, and the emergence of professional disciplines of ethnology and then physical anthropology, race established itself as a highly plausible way of accounting for many cultural or biological differences.

In no country were controversies surrounding the racial composition of the nation more directly consequential than in the United States, a “nation of immigrants” with a history of race-based slavery and a deeply persistent strain of hostility toward peoples—Jews, Muslims, Asians, Hispanics, Italians, Africans—who could be described as interlopers in an otherwise homogeneous polity. One episode in this ongoing struggle will be explored in chapter 3 of this book, but the larger point of all the debates about race and national identity in the United States and elsewhere concerns the extraordinary adaptability of the race concept, which could be pressed into service in support of a wide variety of ends, some opposed to or in conflict with others. The specific meaning of the concept varied from context to context. As George Fredrickson commented in his 2015 *Racism: A Short History*, “Racism is always nationally specific.”⁴¹

In addition to its roles in debates about science, philosophy, religion, and national identity, the concept of race made another less visible kind of contribution to the world we now take for granted: the formation of

academic disciplines, specialized ways of knowing with their own assumptions, methods, and goals. Much of the rest of this book will be concerned with the ways race was conceptualized by academic and scientific discourses, but it is clear that the concept of race had a transformative effect on these discourses themselves.

Tracking the changing understandings of the premises, evidence, and methods with which the subject of race was approached, we simultaneously track changes in the understanding of science and the scientific method. Before the mid-nineteenth century, race typically figured as a subordinate element in expansive treatises on such subjects as the natural history of mankind, the philosophy of the history of man, the theory of the earth, human physiology, the physical history of man, or the order of creation. From today's perspective, such sprawling explanations-of-everything, with their charts, graphs, illustrations, and tables, lack the kind of consistent methodology, delimited fields of objects, and clearly specified aims that could produce results that command respect as statements of fact. The disciplines into which modern knowledge has been divided had not yet crystallized or established themselves, so a single text might include materials that would now be distributed across a wide range of fields—archaeology, ethnology, comparative anatomy, zoology, philosophy, theology, geography, dermatology, linguistics, biology, physical or cultural anthropology, physiology, paleontology, phrenology, and craniology—along with witnessed, reported, or fabricated accounts of peoples around the world. In many early discussions, race was one of several terms deployed in a discourse that aspired to comprehensiveness with no sense that boundaries were being transgressed or a necessary precision sacrificed. An instrument rather than an object of analysis, the concept of race was used by people who were not focused on the subject or even necessarily convinced of its existence but found it useful to think about or with.

The problem of race did not begin to attract attention as a separate subject that could be approached by specialized methods until the mid-nineteenth century. We can actually see this trend toward specialization taking root in Morton's 1839 *Crania Americana*, which begins with a ninety-five page introduction, "On the Varieties of the Human Species," that is entirely generalist in its travelogue approach. This is followed by two hundred pages of diagrams and instructions on how to read representations of skulls in a way that would enable one to understand the relations among the parts, and to compare them with skulls from other groups. Following this are nearly ten pages of closely printed measurements, an

appendix by a professional phrenologist, and seventy-one detailed lithographs. Phrenology, already moribund, died a quiet if prolonged death over the course of the nineteenth century, and craniology did not survive long into the twentieth, but as we will see, the fields of biological and physical anthropology can trace their origins to these early efforts to understand the large topic of human variation through the systematic study of skulls.

As mid-century approached, societies in ethnology and anthropology were founded in Paris, Berlin, New York, and London, with the Paris society explicitly devoted to craniology.⁴² At first, these societies had a philanthropic dimension—the London group, for example, had been incubated in the Aborigines' Protection Society that had been headed by James Cowles Prichard. But these learned societies quickly became professional organizations, sponsoring lectures, debates, meetings, and publications by scholars or scientists including Prichard, William-Frédéric Edwards, Hunt, Knox, Alfred Russel Wallace, Jean-Louis Armand de Quatrefages de Bréau, Carl Vogt, Broca, Paul Topinard, Rudolf Virchow, and Huxley.

After 1859, these societies led the debates about the implications of Darwin's *Origin of Species*, which placed the study of race on an entirely new, predominantly anthropological footing. If race was, as Stocking has written, "the central theoretical concern of pre-Darwinian anthropology," it was also a primary concern of post-Darwinian thinking, which, however, assumed a more modern and disciplinary aspect.⁴³ While the polymath Ernst Haeckel might deal with race in the course of a massive *History of Creation* (1868), a more restricted and empirical approach is signaled by titles such as *On the Phenomena of Hybridity in the Genus Homo* (1860) by Broca, "Formation of Human Races Under the Sole Influence of Conditions of Life and Heredity" (1877) by Quatrefages, and "Heredity and the Formation of Races" (1896) by Virchow.⁴⁴ Such titles announce a segmented approach to knowledge that renounces any grand holistic or synthetic ambitions—the history of creation is, in these works, nowhere in sight—in favor of a research-based approach to a limited and carefully framed set of questions about a single aspect of the whole.

The premise of the discipline is that focused studies on defined problems will contribute their mite to a growing archive of information that could one day constitute a comprehensive understanding that would by design always remain beyond the reach of the discipline. Within a discipline, no work however magisterial, comprehensive, or authoritative is conceived as a final word; there is always more to say, always the possibility of improvement or advance. Even the greatest monuments of modern

scholarship are still provisional and preliminary, intended as contributions to a final synthesis whose realization lay in the future. This understanding of the organization and aims of knowledge was ideally suited to the subject of race, which, never having been satisfactorily defined, could not be studied frontally, in itself, but could be broken down into manageable bits—not just nigrescence and nostrility, but skeletal measurements; the fertility of hybrids; the numerous indexes, angles, arches, dimensions, and proportions of the skull; the influence of geography, diet, culture, or language—that could sustain a program of research. In this way, more general questions about the origin, depth, or purpose of human variation could be suspended while secondary information could be gathered in the expectation that the accumulation of many different forms of data would eventually confirm the existence of the thing—race—of which these were aspects.⁴⁵

The power of the disciplinary approach is that it can proceed in a systematic and empirical way even before larger and more speculative questions receive an answer. The weakness of the disciplinary approach is that it can grind out data and information about nonexistent objects. The history of the concept of race bears witness to both.

In the end—the end of the nineteenth century—the sheer mass of statistics and other facts being accumulated overwhelmed all efforts to synthesize and organize them into a coherent understanding. While the prospect of a science of race had driven the development of disciplines, the failure of scientists to identify the essence or even the physical site of race exposed its phantasmatic nature. Confronted with this failure, scientists and others were left to face the effects of their reification of the concept and consider the ends it—and they—had served. At century's end, many of them, including several considered to be leaders in the scientific community, concluded that race, having taken the form of a scientific problem, had contributed to and arguably worsened a number of nonscientific problems, and had become a problem for science itself. A fully scientific science, having shed its former philosophical commitments, theological anchorage, and polymathic aspirations, could only be embarrassed by a continued investment in the subject of race.

But that is the end of the story, and we should begin at, or near, the beginning.

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