

Values, social ideals, and science

The Cranky Professor

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J. Philippe Rushton, a professor of psychology at the University of Western Ontario, says that Asians tend to be more intelligent, less lascivious, and more concerned for the well being and long-term success of their children than are whites, and that whites, in turn, tend to be more intelligent, less lascivious, and more concerned for the well being and long-term success of their children than are blacks. Rushton says that these differences are genetically, not environmentally, based.

Are you upset? Should you be? What do you think would be put at risk by these contentions were they true? What do you think would be put at risk were our politicians or policy makers to get wind of them?

The questions whether these contentions are true and whether the available data support them are, of course, of lively interest to researchers. Some researchers accept that the differences Rushton describes are real but deny that they are genetically based. Other researchers hold that Rushton's evidence that there are such differences was flawed or incomplete or that he interpreted his evidence improperly. Some of these researchers go on to contend that really there's little if any correlation between race and characteristics like intelligence, lasciviousness, or concern for one's children. Some researchers accept Rushton's work as sound.

More than a few scientists, social scientists, and other intellectuals critical of Rushton's work take a different approach. They deny that race exists or that what IQ tests measure is intelligence or that intelligence exists. Rushton, they hold, views the world through the smudged and distorting lenses of confused or empty concepts. These critics are, of course, right that many of the concepts Rushton employs are unfit for use in hard scientific theorizing. The races are too diffuse and amorphous and changing for the concept of race to figure in any strict law. Intelligence, lasciviousness, and the rest are just as unfit for hard science.

This approach misses the fact that Rushton's work concerns phenomena right on the surface, and not phenomena at the deeper structural levels hard science investigates. When Rushton speaks of Asians, whites, and blacks in his work, he means those people we readily enough see as Asian, white, and black, with all the borderline cases and exceptions that go along with that. Race might well not be salient for researchers investigating things at deeper levels, but it exists for ordinary perception and that's existence enough for it to be possible to say true or false things about it. If Rushton is wrong, then, he is wrong not because of the concepts with which he works. If he is wrong, he's wrong because either the differences he thinks he sees are not there or his explanation why these differences exist is wrong.

Let us imagine that Rushton is right. Imagine that Asians tend to have certain admirable traits to a higher degree than whites have them, and that whites tend to have them to a higher degree than do blacks. Imagine also that to a great degree people have or lack these traits innately, that it's largely a matter of their genes whether they have them. What follows for those things you value, such as political and social equality, equality of opportunity? What follows for your endeavours to see that everyone is free and able to pursue their lives as they see fit? Should you change your attitudes and values?

Nothing at all follows from these claims with regard to your values and social ideals. You ought change none of your attitudes and values. The task of creating a just and open society would still be with us and would still command our allegiance even if Rushton is right. What we want is that people are treated fairly, that people, as individuals, get what is proper and their due. We are disgusted when a person is denied what is properly hers on the basis of the colour of her skin or her ethnic or national or religious heritage. We want that everyone has rich opportunities to make the most of their lives, and that means that we support good education and meaningful work and good pay for all.

Nothing at all follows from Rushton's claims and yet many people are upset by them, taking them to threaten their social projects or their world view. They seem to think that if Rushton's claims are true, it would make sense, say, to reduce funding for education for black people. But that thought is false. People, we hold, are entitled to a good education just in virtue of their being individuals with aspirations and dreams, if not also in virtue of our desire that everyone contribute to the prosperity of our society.

Rushton and other researchers into race pose no real danger, whatever their results. What does pose a danger, I contend, is the thought that one's values and ideals are hostage to results from empirical science. That's a danger because no one knows what empirical science might turn up. If you think that your values and social ideals rest upon a firm understanding of what science and social science tell us, then you are apt to be robbed of your values and ideals as your understanding is rendered false and obsolete by developments in the field. How to change society for the better, of course, is a matter that depends on getting the empirical facts right. But no science will help us with the matter of what's better.

This thought, the thought that if the facts are a certain way, then some values are in and some values are out, is widespread. Recall the most recent discussion you have had about homosexuality. I'll bet someone made the point that gays and lesbians don't choose to be homosexual, and offered this point in defence of treating gays and lesbians well. Now suppose that tomorrow science revisits the question and researchers determine that gays and lesbians do, after all, choose homosexuality. Would that really mean that it's all right to treat gays and lesbians poorly? No, of course not. But that implies that the point that we don't choose our sexual orientation is not a reason for treating homosexuals well. Whether sexual orientation is innate or chosen or something that emerges out of both, we support gay liberation in all its aspects just because we don't want people to suffer or to be sad. The facts about the origin of homosexuality can be however they please.

Don't tie your values and ideals for society to empirical science! They can find no mooring there—and your thought that their soundness requires they be moored there can put you out to sea.