



# Quayshawn Spencer: Is Race Real?

S. Joshua Swamidass

<https://peacefulscience.org/articles/quayshawn-spencer-race/>



Is race real? Or is it an illusion? With the death of George Floyd in the custody of a police officer, we are once again asking questions about race. In our last episode, we invited Adam Rutherford to discuss his book, *How to Argue with a Racist*. This episode, we invite Dr. Quayshawn Spencer to a conversation with two biologists, Dr. Nathan Lents and Dr. S. Joshua Swamidass.

Dr. Spencer is a philosopher of biology at the University of Pennsylvania. In two papers, he maps out the debate over the last few decades on the reality of biological race and “folk” conceptions of race.

## Racial realism I: Are biological races real?

In this article, I discuss and critique how metaphysicians of race have conceived of and defended racial realism according to how biologists use “race”. I start by defining “racial realism” in the broadest accepted way in the metaphysics of race. Next, I summarize a representative sample of recent attempts from metaphysicians of race and biologists to defend racial realism and the main criticisms against each attempt. I discuss how metaphysicians of race have defended racial realism according to how ordinary people use “race” in Part II.

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## Racial realism II: Are folk races real?

This article is Part II in a pair of articles on racial realism. In Part I, I defined “racial realism” and discussed the major attempts in the

past twenty years among metaphysicians of race and biologists to defend racial realism from the viewpoint of what biologists mean by “race.” In this article, I continue discussing and critiquing how metaphysicians of race have conceived of and defended racial realism, but with a focus on how ordinary people use “race.” I focus on two broad groups of racial realisms in this article: biological racial realism and social racial realism. After defining each one, I summarize a representative sample of recent attempts from metaphysicians of race to defend both types of racial realism. I also discuss major criticisms against each attempt. I end by sketching a new, radical pluralist way of being a racial realist, and I provide some empirical motivation for why it’s promising.

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Dr. Spencer argues that there are many distinct meanings of “race,” and depending precisely what we mean, it can be either an illusion or real. The right answer to the question, then is “it depends.”

This contingent answer raises a whole new set of questions. In what ways is the concept of race legitimate and not? Is recognizing any legitimacy to race dangerous? These are difficult questions of ancestry. They are contentious and they are important.

*Peaceful Science* seeks to engage these questions with rigor and honesty, with courage, curiosity, and empathy. Join the conversation with us.

## References

<https://peacefulscience.org/articles/rutherford-racist/>

<https://philosophy.sas.upenn.edu/people/quayshawn-spencer>

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