

Terence Keel's Divine Variations: A Symposium

with Terence D. Keel, "The Religious Preconditions for the Race Concept in Modern Science"; Yiftach Fehige, "In What Sense Exactly Did Christianity Give Us Racial Science?"; Ernie Hamm, "Christian Thought, Race, Blumenbach, and Historicizing"; Jonathan Marks, "The Coevolution of Human Origins, Human Variation, and Their Meaning in the Nineteenth Century"; Elizabeth Neswald, "Racial Science and 'Absolute Questions': Reoccupations and Repositions"; and Terence D. Keel, "Response to My Critics: The Life of Christian Racial Forms in Modern Science."

RACIAL SCIENCE AND "ABSOLUTE QUESTIONS": REOCCUPATIONS AND REPOSITIONS

by Elizabeth Neswald

Abstract. In *Divine Variations*, Terence Keel cites Hans Blumenberg's concept of "reoccupation" as way to approach the relationship between science and religion in racial science. This article explores the potential of a Blumenbergian framework for interpreting the changing forms of this science – religion nexus. It pays particular attention to the shift to quantitative methods, measurement, and descriptive statistics in physical anthropology and the social sciences in the late nineteenth century, which seem to be emphatically secular. Asking whether they too, have a place in the Blumenbergian framework, it proposes that Blumenberg's "reoccupation of the answer position" has as its counterpart a "repositioning of the question."

Keywords: Hans Blumenberg; physical anthropology; reoccupation; secularization; statistics

REOCCUPYING

Studies on the history of science and religion often tend to assume that both appear in a relatively undisguised form. Although historians have developed a flexible approach to what characterizes an activity that can be described as science, in these debates science is seen largely through the lens of the history of ideas. Religion tends to be viewed through a similarly traditional and simplified lens as a combination of divinity and doctrine, with knowledge of both forming the basis of argument. Western science and religion are portrayed as representing two different kinds of knowledge. Historians

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debate, sometimes with great ferocity, whether the relationship between science and religion is one of conflict or accommodation and whether the two are reconcilable or irrevocably opposed (Turner 1978; Lightman 2012, 2015; Harrison 2015; Gingras 2017). Nonetheless, they are generally seen as two sets of historically intertwined ideas that have passed through phases of stronger and weaker compatibility and eventually went their separate, increasingly antagonistic ways. God and religious doctrine disappeared as the guiding basis of knowledge of the world, and the power of truth and certainty passed to science. Science, objectivity, and realism became the dominant ways of knowing the world, and the path from a widely held religious worldview to one based on science was called “secularization.” Although this very abbreviated and admittedly over-simplified summary cannot do justice to the breadth and depth of these discussions, at base there is an assumption that, whatever relationship there might be between them, science and religion represent two different ways of knowing.

In *Divine Variations*, Terence Keel argues, in contrast, that race concepts and conceptions of human origins in Western European and North American thought grew out of Christian intellectual history and remained deeply indebted to it, despite claims to being scientific knowledge and using scientific methods. There was, he argues, no tidy shift from biblical stories of creation and generation to secular narratives; religious assumptions about human origins and human difference did not disappear in a so-called process of secularization, to be replaced by scientific approaches and explanations. From the first expressions of “race science” in the Enlightenment through to contemporary genetics and maps of human migration, conceptualizations of human difference drew from both sources to create a hybrid way of knowing that Keel summarizes with the term “mongrel epistemology” (Keel 2018, 16). Scientific and Christian thought are the cross-fertilizing base of the so-called “sciences of race.”

Keel looks for support for this thesis in what seems at first glance an unlikely place, the philosophy of Hans Blumenberg. Although influential in Germany, Blumenberg’s philosophy is underappreciated elsewhere, due perhaps to its “untimeliness” and its linguistic challenges. For a late twentieth and early twenty-first century philosopher, Blumenberg’s work is singularly imbued with the kind of deeply humanistic intellectual historical heritage that seems to belong to a bygone era in the multilingual history of Western ideas. As with much writing in the history of ideas, the material realities of human bodies and interactions have no place in this history. Nonetheless, Blumenberg’s near-to encyclopedic knowledge of the Western intellectual history canon from the pre-Socratics to the twentieth century made him an expert in recognizing recurrent patterns of thought in this canon and in identifying the course of their shifting transformations through the centuries. For Blumenberg, intellectual history is a process of searching for answers to deeply fundamental questions pertaining to the

human condition, questions that need to be answered in some form or other.

In his landmark early work, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (Blumenberg [1966] 1988), Blumenberg reinterprets the process of secularization in this direction. What seems to be a process of religion and theology losing their hold and being replaced by science and objectivity is for Blumenberg an example of “the reoccupation of answer positions that had become vacant and whose corresponding questions could not be eliminated” (Blumenberg, cited in Keel 2018, 15). The questions are the constants, and the history of thought can be traced through the different institutions and modes of thought that emerged as attempts to answer them.

Keel argues that the question of human origins and human difference is one such question. Blumenberg’s reassessment of the secularization process provides Keel with a conceptual apparatus to capture the continuity behind the concerns expressed in this question, despite shifts from a theologically based to a science-based surface of reasoning. Citing the “reoccupation-thesis,” he steps back from looking for explicitly religious or theological arguments in the historical development of race concepts in science, and instead traces the trajectory of the question. This approach enables Keel to excavate elements of the Biblical creation story and Christian theology in theories about human origins and race from the Enlightenment race science of Blumenbach to the human paleontology and genetics of the late twentieth century. While some of these theories reference Judeo-Christian creation stories and theological discussions, many do not, and Keel’s argument is that they nonetheless emerged from these creation stories and carry these origins with them as a theological genetic heritage.

While *Divine Variations* uncovers the way that theological positions infused scientific explanations about race to formulate provisional answers to the question of origins and diversity, as the preceding description implies, Blumenberg and Keel are, each in their own way, at least as concerned with the question that “could not be eliminated.” It is thus helpful to look more closely at the question position, as a means to understand the dynamics of occupation and reoccupation in the answer position. When Blumenberg wrote about “reoccupation” and the ambivalence of secularization, he described the problem as a question that needed answering, and an answer that was no longer adequate. A few years earlier, he had approached this problem from the other side in his “Paradigms for a Metaphorology” (Blumenberg 1960). In this work, Blumenberg introduces the concept of “absolute metaphors.” For Blumenberg, these metaphors are not figurative language in the sense of formal rhetoric. They are poetically epistemological, that is, they are the only language through which the answers to a unique kind of question can be expressed. One could call them “absolute questions.” These questions are, to paraphrase

Blumenberg, those supposedly naïve, principally unanswerable questions that are fundamentally relevant, because they are inescapable. They are not asked so much as they are found at the base of human existence (Blumenberg 1960, 19). They are, in other words, existential, and pertain to the most central questions of human self-conceptualization and self-assertion in an indifferent and incomprehensible world (Blumenberg [1971] 1986). What makes particular metaphors and questions absolute is that they are untranslatable into terminological language. There are things that cannot be contained within the strictures of definitions, neither in the expression of the question nor in that of answer—time, life, death, infinity, identity. The way these questions are expressed and, in particular, how they are answered, is historically contingent, and through the formulation of the questions and the framing of the answers historical perceptions and horizons of meaning become visible. As in the historical semantics of Reinhart Koselleck (Brunner et al. [1972] 1997; Koselleck 1979), subtle shifts in the words used to describe abstract ideas and structures provide a window into historical repositionings and reoccupations. While Blumenberg focuses on the process of secularization as a “reoccupation of the answer position” in *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, what emerges more clearly in “Paradigms for a Metaphorology” and in several of his later works (e.g., Blumenberg 1981), is that not only are there shifts in the answers, but the questions themselves are shifting and unanswerable, and the way they are formulated and understood is deeply historical.

REPOSITIONING

The permeable boundaries between theological and scientific thought and the incomplete nature of reoccupation are easily excavated in the early chapters of *Divine Variations*. Figures like Johann Friedrich Blumenbach did not turn to explicitly religious argumentation to ground their assumption that all human beings share a common ancestor and, indeed, historians have interpreted them as proponents of secular arguments. They thought of themselves that way as well. As Keel shows, however, they could not help but see the world through the lens of theology, adapting familiar narratives to new frameworks. Similarly, American polygenists emphasized radical and irreconcilable biological differences between pale-skinned Europeans and other human kinds, but they also had their eyes on the theologically sanctioned assumption of a common human origin that they were distancing themselves from.

Most of the theories and debates that Keel discusses deal explicitly with the question of human origins, for example, with polygenesis and monogenesis, “family trees” of human diversity, the existence of different humanoid species in the past, and what the relationships between early

humans were. The exception to the theme is the third chapter, aptly titled “The Ghost of Christian Creationism.” In this chapter, which covers race science in discussions of public health, eugenics, social statistics, and physical anthropology from the late nineteenth through the early twentieth centuries, the origins narrative disappears, gone seemingly to ground. Nonetheless, it wafts through the room as a near-to invisible yet undead presence in the background.

As Keel points out, most historians looking at discussions of race in this period assume there was a general consensus about monogenesis (Keel 2018, 85). He argues, in contrast, with the anthropologist George Stocking, that “free-floating” polygenist ideas continue to inform debates about human difference, and he looks to medical debates about racial susceptibility to venereal disease to support this position (Keel 2018, 86–100). Eugenics, degeneration theories, and debates on the relative roles of heredity and environment provide the scientific context for these debates, in which the “logic of nineteenth-century polygenism” and the “conceptual anchor” of “monogenism” survive despite the lack of narrative structure or explicit theological references (Keel 2018, 110).

This lack of origins narrative and the tenuous lines that Keel draws from these debates to theological framework raise questions, however, that suggest that in this period the problem was not only a reoccupation of an answer position, but a repositioning of the question. In the decades from around 1880 through 1920, ways of “doing” knowledge of certain kinds of things changed—the knowledge of religion and the knowledge of science received a companion in the knowledge of numbers. Physical anthropology, anthropometry, and the kind of statistical data collection found in works like Frederick Hoffman’s *Race Traits and Tendencies of the American Negro* (Hoffman 1896), which is discussed in this chapter, are symptomatic of these changes. All are concerned with gathering extensive quantitative data, finding norms, averages, and types, formulating population-level generalities, presenting qualitative and quantitative statistical information. Although the “avalanche of printed numbers” (Hacking [1990] 2006, 2) had begun some decades earlier, between Alphonse Quetelet’s anthropometrics, Francis Galton’s statistics of types and heredity, the physical anthropology of Samuel Morton, and the new social data collection and interpretation methods of Ernst Engel, Charles Booth, and Carol D. Wright, by the final decades of the nineteenth century, quantitative data collection on individuals and populations, means and averages, measurements, and standardization of kinds of humans and human conditions was ubiquitous (cf. Porter 1986; Hacking [1990] 2006; Bulmer et al. 1991; Yudell 2014). But social statistics, physical measurements, and quantitative data were emphatically secular. Anyone reading these volumes of tables and case studies looking for God would be sorely disappointed, and these works, with the occasional exception of a historical introduction, did not deal with the past or with

change over time. They were reflections of the status quo, or at least, aimed to be.

The proliferation of numbers and of large numbers in the second half of the nineteenth century in medicine, social and economic sciences, and sciences of the state, to name just a few areas of application, is an important and rewarding topic, and one that has been the subject of several excellent studies (Porter 1986; Hacking [1990] 2006; Büttner 1997; Desrosières 1998; Curtis 2001). The aim here is simply to add a few considerations that are specific to the question of race science and the “absolute question” of human origins and diversity.

In 1859 Charles Darwin published his *Origin of Species*, and the *Descent of Man* followed in 1871 (Darwin 1859, 1871). The late nineteenth and early twentieth century can be fairly described as a period of post-Darwinian digestion and indigestion, as the work of Peter Bowler and many others has shown (Bowler [1983] 1989). Debates around theories of evolution, their mechanisms and challenges, and their implications for human history not only affected the way that questions about human origins were answered. They also affected how the questions themselves could be asked. The “absolute question” remained, but the position from which it could be expressed changed. In this post-Darwinian period, the framework of discussion surrounding human origins was being re-evaluated. The monogenist–polygenist divide became more porous with branching evolutionary trees; the comparative effects of environment and heredity required assessment; and then there was the problem of time—time afforded by the Bible and by geology, time required for the evolution of a single human species or for several, time necessary for the effects of environmental influences, climate, and mode of living to turn a single group of original humans into the existing panorama of human diversity. It was a phase of repositioning, not only of reoccupation. The question itself was shifting, perhaps from “how did we begin?” to “how did we become?” and “how did we become different?”

This repositioning coincided with the intense spread of statistical and data collection methods described above. Numbers were everywhere, and they were being sought as the answers to all kinds of questions, many of them carrying with them, as their “ghosts,” wisps of “absolute questions”—“how should a society be?,” “what is ‘normal?’,” “what is ‘human?’” The physical anthropologists, biometricians, and social statisticians writing in this period did not discuss human origins or religion. Although Quetelet himself rejected polygenism and thought environment was the main factor in human difference (Quetelet 1871, 16; Porter 1986, 108), and although it is possible to excavate some “pre-floating” elements of both poly- and monogenism in some of the statistical and measurement-oriented works, for the most part, if the authors had any clear beliefs in either direction, they did not express them. What they did do was to collect reams of data.

As Peter Cryle and Elizabeth Stephens note in the recent book, *Normality*, physical anthropology in the late nineteenth century “did not lend itself to philosophical disquisitions about humanity. Its leading exponents did not wax lyrical about the perfection of the human form or wonder at the height attained by human intelligence” (Cryle and Stephens 2017, 144). It was the zoological study of the human animal. Physical anthropologists looked for norms and types and tried to use data to stabilize human difference and find fixed characteristics that enabled clear differentiations, in theory at least, if the practice itself was somewhat muddy. Increasingly, however, this approach to codifying human difference was beginning to struggle. It had shown itself unable to provide the “right” answers, that is, evidence that unambiguously confirmed cultural assumptions about race. Statistics began to emerge as a new method to clear away the fog of existing diversity to get at the irreducible core of difference and to prove what was already known and unquestionable—that “other people” were fundamentally biologically different from “us,” an assumption that has proven remarkably and fatally resistant to contradicting evidence.

Numbers appear very secular, but the context in which they are embedded and interpreted does not have to be. The God of Galileo wrote in the language of mathematics. Although the kind of comprehensive data collection undertaken in the later nineteenth century was not explicitly about origins, it can be seen within a larger framework of Christian theology. It was, first, an attempt to get to the order of things. It looked for types, created categories and kinds, determined relationships between them, and defined where each belonged within the grander scheme of being and of human being. Second, it was a response to the collapse of belief in a preordained and deterministic world. Ian Hacking brings “the avalanche of numbers, the erosion of determinism, and invention of normalcy” together with the use of statistical information for social control, and the categorization and invention of new classes of people (Hacking [1990] 2006, 5–6). These are all elements of what he calls “the taming of chance.” They are ways of dealing with the uncertainty that arises, when the existence of a guiding narrative, one that can be divined through study and scrutiny, is no longer unquestioned. To point to yet another work of Blumenberg’s, the principal legibility of the world is no longer given (Blumenberg 1981). Those very secular numbers are themselves an attempt to “reoccupy” an answer position that had become vacant. They are about finding regularities and fixing categories, “nailing down the world,” gathering comprehensive information, and establishing the basis that allows the true message to emerge, the final answer to be found, that elusive question to be resolved.

Applying this lens to race science and its theological roots, one can see traditional frameworks of ideas and assumptions in flux. New theories of biological evolution challenged traditional theological origin stories, while thermodynamics and statistical mechanics were kicking away at the

foundations of determinism. Finding ways to stabilize racial categories, establish and quantify human difference through measurements, statistics, and data collection was a project that could remain largely agnostic as to the question of origins, while engaging in information-gathering as a temporary bridge to the next iteration of the “absolute question,” however it happened to be formulated, when it re-emerged.

In the twentieth century, as Keel shows in his final chapter, evolutionary narratives of human species development merged with population genetics and migrations studies to generate a new iteration of the origins narrative, it too containing racial assumptions carried from the Christian intellectual tradition. That there are “pure” genetic lineages and clear moments of “creation” for human races are just two of the ideas that survived the transition and are only slowly being dismantled. Modern humans, it seems, contain within them the genetic heritage of multiple human species in their DNA, and human populations have extensive histories of individual and group migration. We are, as Keel notes, “all mongrels.” This recognition has severe consequences. Keel writes, “To say that we are all mongrel, therefore, is to acknowledge that our ancestry will never be fully knowable” (Keel 2018, 135). It is the emphatic recognition that there is no occupation of that answer position that can fully and finally answer the question.

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