

**THE RATIONALE FOR RACIAL PREFERENCE: A REVIEW  
OF MICHAEL LEVIN, *WHY RACE MATTERS: RACE  
DIFFERENCES AND WHAT THEY MEAN* (Praeger,  
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Max Hocutt Ph.D.  
*The University of Alabama*

**I**

This book is a brave, or foolhardy, attempt to start a serious debate about the justification that is usually offered up for racial preferences. Its author, a mathematical logician and philosopher of science who teaches at the City University in New York, goes directly to the root of the argument—the assumption that personality traits and abilities exist in the same proportion in every racial and ethnic group. Given this assumption, which has never been proved but is for many intellectuals an article of faith, it follows that there are just as many *potential* scientists, businessmen, and physicians among blacks as among the same number of whites or Orientals; so, if the *actual* number is smaller, the explanation must be that some evil thing in the society—unreasoning prejudice or unjust discrimination—has created the difference and needs to be corrected by special measures designed to compensate for past wrongs and bring about a rightful balance.

Levin's reply to this deceptively simple argument is that the evidence does not support the premise. Instead, he thinks that the available evidence favors the contrary proposition—that racial groups differ in ability and temperament as they differ in skin color, physiognomy, susceptibility to high blood pressure, and other traits. Thus, Levin notes in studied agreement with the usual stereotypes, there are proportionately more blacks with athletic ability and fewer with intellectual ability; more with an inclination for violent behavior and fewer with the capacity for self control. Furthermore, Levin doubts that these differences are entirely artifacts of racial discrimination. Instead, he believes—with such as Arthur Jensen, Richard Lynn, Charles Murray, Philippe Rushton and others—that much racial discrimination is a realistic response to differences, which are not only real

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

Please address all correspondence to Max Hocutt, Ph.D., Professor of Philosophy, The University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa, AL 35487.

but also in part hereditary. If he is right, governmentally enforced preference by race is both unjustified and ill-advised.

## II

Whether Levin is right is a complicated but important question, which deserves serious consideration and calm debate that it is not getting, because it is *verboten* to take Levin's position. Every person named in the preceding paragraph has been made an object of public obloquy and private abuse for doubting the conventional wisdom, which is either that there are no important differences between the races or that the differences are not natural but socially inculcated. (It is never clear which; the two propositions are usually not distinguished.) It is frequently implied that the contrary could be believed only by redneck bigots in white sheets, not by any civilized person.

In such a climate of opinion, the topic of race sticks like a hot tar baby to any intellectual who is so imprudent as to touch it—which is why I, for one, have avoided it until now. I participated in the early sixties as a member of the ACLU in the call for abolition of Jim Crow, and I would do it again. But although I have always believed that affirmative action is as wrong as was official segregation, I have since the sixties confined myself to esoteric questions in philosophical psychology and abstract moral theory while leaving the racial tar baby to braver souls.

I would prefer to continue that policy now, but the God-damned issue will not go away. Undertake to solve, to ameliorate, or merely to think about any pressing social problem—education, work, crime, welfare, illegitimacy, drug addiction, health, etc. You will find that race is at the heart of it. Try to improve schools by weeding out incompetent teachers. The world's best experts will not be able to devise a test that does not exclude a disproportionate number of Afro Americans. Expect to pick out those who are best qualified for your job. Qualifications, however measured, will turn out to vary with skin color, even if you assiduously try to avoid noticing it. Wonder what to do about violent crime. You will soon stumble in spite of yourself on the awful fact that in the U. S. nearly half of it is the work of blacks, who compose only one eighth of the population, meaning that they offend against the law seven times as often as whites. Look at those who are on government dole, are unemployed, or are homeless. They will mostly be persons of color. Consider the correlates of infant mortality, obesity, illegitimacy, diabetes or drug abuse. Race will again turn out to be a salient factor.

When you reflect on these well-established facts, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that racial differences are both real and important. Blacks do differ

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from whites. Furthermore, they differ in ways that matter. That fact is so patent it is not open to serious dispute. What is left to debate is not *whether* the races differ but *how* they differ, *why* they differ and *what*, if anything, should be done about it. We are usually expected to accept without further ado that the differences are due to invidious discrimination on irrelevant grounds, but this conclusion is a prejudice, not a documented fact. It is maintained by what Peirce called *the method of tenacity*, not by the critical methods of empirical science. Opponents are silenced not by being refuted but by being abused or ignored.

In Levin's case, neglect is the tactic of choice. Although his book has been in print for nearly two years now and is a brilliantly argued challenge to orthodoxy, it has to my knowledge not yet received a serious review in an important organ of opinion. This is too bad. In the end, Levin may prove to be wrong; all of us can sincerely hope so. In the meanwhile, he makes a strong case, clarifies the terms of the debate, and exposes many fallacies in the reasoning of those who espouse the received view. Furthermore, he does all of this in prose that is measured, responsible, and, despite the scientific and political difficulties of the topic, clear, readable, and cogent. So, he deserves a polite hearing.

One way to avoid giving him a hearing is to say that raising the issue of race differences shows insensitivity to the feelings of blacks, who are the ones being described as defective. To this objection, Levin has a typically eloquent and incisive reply:

The topic of racial variation is admittedly disturbing, and in an ideal world might be passed over in silence, but accusations against whites have made such discretion impossible. The right of the accused to present his case includes the right to raise issues that distress the accuser. A plaintiff demanding damages for a broken leg cannot ask at the same time that his leg not be talked about, nor take offense when the defendant presents evidence that the injury was congenital. By claiming harm he opens the question of why his leg is lame. Claiming racial harm has opened the topic of race differences.

### III

Levin's discussion of this topic is divided into three parts. In Part I, Levin summarizes the empirical evidence, first clearly laid out by Arthur Jensen, for the proposition that the races differ in intelligence. Aside from casual observation, which has obvious shortcomings, the main evidence is the fact, well known to psychometricians but not yet to the general public, that the average black IQ is 85, one standard deviation below the white average, which is itself a few points below the average of Orientals.

Although Levin does a good job of summarizing and explaining the empirical evidence, he adds no studies of his own. His contribution is to address two philosophical objections—that the concept of race is not empirically well defined and that IQ tests do not measure intelligence. After pointing out that the legitimacy of the concept of race can hardly be disputed by those who base affirmative action on it, Levin counts as blacks persons with mostly African ancestry, as whites persons with mostly European ancestry, and so on. As Levin realizes, this does not give us a clear cut criterion of racial identity, but it does give the concept sufficiently clear empirical meaning to enable comparisons.

Levin addresses the second objection by defining intelligence common sensically as the capacity to learn. Then he shows that standardized IQ tests provide a good index—the best we have—of this capacity as it is made manifest in less formal measures of performance, both in school and on the job. To the obfuscating claim that other people might define *intelligence* differently, Levin makes the apt reply that anybody who means something different by this commonplace word should use a different one. To the similarly obfuscating but scientific-sounding claim that there are different kinds of intelligence—verbal intelligence, musical intelligence, basketball intelligence, etc.—Levin replies that *talent* would be a more accurate word for these abilities. All of this is clear, straightforward, and typical of Levin's no-nonsense style of argument.

Confusion about IQ having been admirably cleared up, Levin goes on to bring similar clarity and perspicuity to temperament, which correlates with IQ, perhaps for reasons suggested by Herrnstein and Wilson in *Crime and Human Nature*, where impulsiveness and disposition to violence are shown to be inversely related to IQ. In none of this, which takes up the first three chapters of his book, does Levin claim that being more intelligent means being innately so. As Levin urges, the difference in IQ is real and important whatever its explanation may happen to be.

#### IV

The task of explaining the difference is taken up in chapter 4, where the main topic is estimates of *heritability*—the correlational statistic that, in the absence of direct knowledge of gene differences, provides our best evidence for an innate basis for race differences in IQ. (Identification may come sooner than anybody has dared expect. The human genome project appears to be progressing rapidly. According to a recent newspaper report, investigators have identified a gene that controls the rate of cortical glucose metabolism, which is known to correlate

positively with IQ.) Central as it is to the issue, Levin's discussion of heritability is too technical to admit easy summary. I will note just a few points.

The main objection to heritability statistics—which are based on comparing identical twins with each other and natural siblings with adoptees—is that they do not take account of the ways in which genes interact with the environment. So, the argument goes, even though heritability statistics may be meaningful within the races, they license no inferences about races, especially when the races have different environments. Levin's reply is that this objection does not apply to estimates based on cross-racial adoption studies, where environmental differences are minimized. Nor does it explain such physical correlates of IQ as brain size. The last word on heritability has, however, not yet been pronounced. Levin and I take up the topic together in the September 1999 issue of *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*.

Of interest in some quarters is the so-called Flynn Factor—the fact that average IQ, if not also average intelligence, has been gradually increasing for years. As Levin notes, nobody understands what this means, but since the improvement in IQ has been general rather than selective, it has little demonstrable relevance to the question of racial differences. The data show at most that environmental change can enhance IQ for everybody, which nobody denies. The question is whether there is an environment which can enhance IQ for blacks without simultaneously increasing it for whites, and nothing in Flynn's data suggest that.

## V

Having summarized the empirical argument, Levin rounds out Part I by considering the complaint that his line of thought can be dismissed as determinist, reductionist, and racist. Levin's replies to the first two epithets are interesting and acute, but they are also too nuanced to summarize. So, I shall turn to Levin's reply to the third epithet, which is that use of the word *racist* has become so emotive and indiscriminate as to have lost all precise meaning.

A critic might hope to undercut this reply by *defining* a racist as someone who believes in the reality and heritability of racial differences, but Levin rightly notes that this stipulation would do nothing to settle the factual question, which is whether racism as thus tendentiously defined is true. To the charge that his belief implies the *superiority* of one race to another, Levin pleads innocent. His claim is that the races differ; not that one is superior to the other.

This distinction is explained in Part II, where Levin sets out a naturalistic theory of values that rejects as scientifically meaningless questions of superiority

and inferiority. Levin's idea is that, just as a field zoologist can note how leopards differ from lions without declaring either species to be superior, so a behavioral scientist can note how blacks differ from whites without implying that either race is inferior. He acknowledges that whites will prefer whites, as leopards prefer leopards, but he argues that, white preferences will no more prove the inferiority of blacks than leopard preference proves the inferiority of lions. Levin may have been influenced here by Rushton, who argues from an evolutionary point of view that it is as meaningless to ask which of two *races* is superior as to ask which of two *species* is superior. The answer, according to Rushton, is that, because each is a successful adaptation to the particular environment in which it evolved, each race is superior in its own way.

This may be a little too neat. I share Levin's naturalistic philosophy and find entirely persuasive his dialectical sallies against those who affirm the "objectivity" of value. As Levin insists, good and bad are matters of personal preference, not impersonal fact. Yet I do not find convincing Levin's claim that naturalism enables neutrality. Grant that we should try to separate our scientific beliefs from our personal preferences when discussing matters of empirical fact. We can do this only when we assume the stance of *detached and disinterested analysts*, not when we take the stance of *engaged and interested agents*. Thus, a naturalist can remain indifferent as between lions and leopards, but, as Levin himself acknowledges in the end, this does not mean that the lions and leopards can be indifferent to each other.

For this reason, I think that Levin's Part II might have been better left out or greatly abbreviated. Although it has much interest and merit as a treatise on values, it detracts from the main question, which is the justice of affirmative action given the probable reality of heritable racial differences.

## VI

Levin returns to this issue in Part III, where he returns to the argument that those who rest their case on heritability overlook gene-environment interaction. Grant, it is said, that blacks do not develop as fully in their environments as whites do in theirs. It remains possible that there is some untried environment in which they would match, or even exceed, white performance. In the view of such as Lewontin and Gould, this means that we should overlook questions of heritability and try to create an environment in which blacks will perform as well as whites. Levin's reply to this argument is to point out that a possibility is not a probability and to remind us that no one, including Lewontin and Gould, knows

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an environment in which the IQ of blacks would demonstrably equal that of whites; the idea is, so far, pure speculation.

All of this indicates that the likelihood of genetically based differences cannot safely be ignored. Here, in case you have forgotten, is why. As noted in the beginning, most apologies for racial preference are based on the assumption that the black shortfall is due to arbitrary discrimination on the basis of irrelevant differences in skin color. This is thought to justify compensation and reverse preference.

Levin's reply is that the thought overlooks the extent to which black failure to prosper in white society is due to deficiencies that may be rooted in genes rather than in racial discrimination. As it is usually understood in our society, *justice* requires that people be given an opportunity to succeed *when they have the ability to do so*, but no injustice has been done if someone fails because *he lacks the requisite ability*. Grant that it would be unjust to deny someone the opportunity to *develop* his abilities. It remains true that no injustice is done where opportunities cannot make up for native differences.

It will be replied that this presupposes a standard of justice that is in force only in our society, where, as Levin says, "it seems a fixed point of everyday morality that the work of human hands should go to the hands doing the work." Someone who does not accept this principle will object that, in a different society, justice would be defined differently. Thus, John Rawls has famously argued that, because nobody deserves his natural endowment of talent, we should redefine justice to require that wealth and other social goods be redistributed for the benefit of those who have been most disadvantaged by the natural lottery in talents.

Levin's reply is that this not only changes our understanding of *justice* but also overlooks the important question of *utility*. "Pursuit of equality together with awareness that few blacks can meet demanding academic standards has in recent decades led to lavish attention to inferior, disproportionately black students at the expense of abler, predominantly white and Asian ones," which is to everyone's disadvantage, including blacks. In Levin's view, a just and prosperous society will favor ability wherever it is found, whether in blacks or in whites. The right social policy is not racial preference but color blindness.

## VII

Believers in racial equality will contend that Levin says this out of a desire to justify mistreatment of blacks. They will find ammunition in his chapter on crime, where he argues that "skin color is a bearer of information" that can justify caution

in the presence of young black males, many of whom make a living preying on defenseless whites. Citing the fact that one in four black adult males is a convicted felon, Levin says that, shop owners are justified in denying late night admission to them, lone women are justified in refusing to get on elevators with them, and police are justified in paying them watchful attention.

Replying to the objection that using skin color as a basis of discrimination is as arbitrary as discriminating against persons with blue eyes, Levin acerbically notices that eye color does not correlate, like skin color, with a disposition to violent predation on others. Then he adds, perhaps too sanguinely, "Nobody would care about race if blacks and whites were alike in every way except skin color. But they aren't, and that is why race is noticed." Finally, he clinches his argument by pointing out the hypocrisy in condemning discrimination on the basis of race while defending racial preferences.

Still, what Levin aims at is not to justify unofficial preference for whites but to end official preference for blacks. Let individuals do what they wish. Levin's concern is governmental policy, which is enforced on us all. Levin puts his objection to this policy as follows.

...policies based on error must end. One such policy is affirmative action, conceived as compensating blacks for the harm done them by whites. No damages are owed when no damage has been done, and the difficulty blacks have competing in a white world are not the legacy of past wrongs—however regrettable those wrongs may have been—but a result of biology for which whites are not to blame. Affirmative action is an injustice to whites that whites legitimately resent.

Does Levin think that this resentment justifies individual mistreatment of blacks? By no means. I quote again.

Let me emphasize in this connection that race differences are no excuse for personal unpleasantness. Members of each race should continue to treat members of every other race with the same courtesy they expect to receive. No one should adopt an attitude of superiority in individual encounters. The fact remains, though, that certain distressing truths about group characteristics need to be said, and everyone, black and white must come to terms with them.

## VIII

As I hope these brief remarks indicate, Levin has written a frank and provocative but thoughtful and closely argued book on perhaps the most sensitive and important issue of our time. You should read it.