



Dr Jennifer Mensch and Dr Michael Olson

Dr Jennifer Mensch and **Dr Michael Olson** have collected historical texts relating to the scientific and philosophical ideas that led to concepts of race and human difference. In this podcast, they discuss their work and the importance of philosophy in the modern world.

Break the **podcast** down:

01:00 Mike: What we're putting together is an anthology, primarily of historical texts written in German in the 18th century. They're texts related to the history of the scientific and philosophical study of race and human difference.

We divide the anthology into three general sections. The first section looks at questions about reproduction and regeneration. Philosophical and scientific theories about why it is that dogs give birth to dogs but not squirrels, and how we would explain that kind of consistency. The things that, today, we would appeal to genetics and DNA to explain.

The second section emerges out of that, because one of the ways that people began to solve some of the problems in theories of reproduction and regeneration with respect to what people inherited from their mother and father was to look at skin colour. European scientists and philosophers observed that, in many cases, children have an intermediary skin colour between the skin colour of their parents. So then, people were interested in skin colour and that gave rise to a bunch of questions about race. So the second section is about early theories of race.

The third section is really the most interesting in a way. In that section, we pull out texts that show how the scientific theories of the first two sections are woven into conversations about European colonial expansion and the idea that European nations can benefit from the extraction of raw materials, and indeed human beings in the form of enslavement, from other parts of the world. That section shows that the history of the science of race is not just a history of science but is also a history of enslavement, expropriation and European domination.

02:55 Mike: There are a few points obviously to this anthology. One is to produce the raw materials for students and academics to study the history directly. We don't tell them what happened, we provide the documents for people to study in order to spur on future research. And particularly in this third section, to show how the history of science is not pure or above or beyond social and political facets of everyday life but is woven into them. It's coloured by all sorts of perfectly understandable but also really regrettable ways.

03:35 How does your anthology relate to philosophy, both in the past and in the modern day?

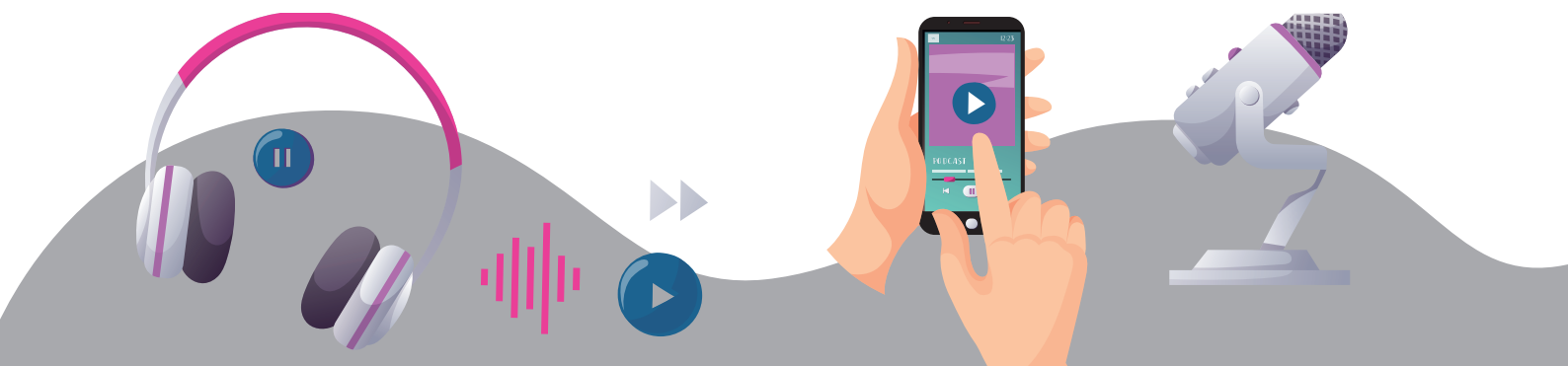
03:40 Jennifer: We've talked about the history of science but many of the people in the volume are actually philosophers who are considered first and almost only as philosophers. One of the famous names there would be Immanuel Kant. He's best known for his epistemology, his moral theory, he's a giant in history of philosophy. But he also spent 40 years teaching questions of human difference. He inaugurated the first classes in physical geography, which has to do with the shaping effects of geography on people.

As Mike said, we're not trying to push an argument but we are being inclusive and encompassing in terms of trying to put philosophers who might not be understood to be players in this area. We're now putting them in a proper historical context where you can see the influences on their work and how they in turn influenced the conversation going forward.

04:45 Why do you think it's important to uncover the idea of race and the history and science behind it all? Specifically, why is it important that young people learn about that?

04:55 Jennifer: The ideas about race, the way in which racism functions today didn't come out of thin air. It came out of a specific time and place and our project shows the way in which these ideas were formalised, they were scientised, and they became weaponised in the 18th and 19th centuries.

I think that it's so easy for us to think of racial categories as natural things in the world. Race is very naturalised in the way it operates and functions socio-culturally. We are showing that it's not a natural category, it's an invented category with a big argumentative conceptual apparatus behind it. These are some of the texts that sedimented and solidified these theories of human difference and turned them into ways in which human difference could be translated into hierarchies and power differentials. ➔



06:10 Jennifer: I think it's important for young people to understand the history and the roots of these parts of everyday modern life so that they can be better equipped to know that they are denaturalised, so these are not things that are inevitable, they are cultural products. I also think that we don't do a good job of engaging in racial literacy. We are not racially literate and don't know how to talk about it, it's awkward and embarrassing, you don't want to make a mistake, or hurt people's feelings. And yet, it's everywhere around us, it's a potent social, cultural and political force. You see that in political campaigns, the way it can become weaponised and become divisive.

So the better we can get at knowing how to talk about racial difference and understanding its pernicious functioning in society and where it comes from, that it's not natural, all these things are good. They lead to a better, healthier community and people who can interact with each other in a more wholesome way.

07:25 I guess change can be difficult and uncomfortable sometimes, but it's worth pushing through and reaching a point where we'll all be better off for it.

07:40 Philosophy is often associated with old white men or men from the past, it's thought of as antiquated. So how can young people from all backgrounds get into philosophy, how can they feel this is something they can get involved in?

08:00 Mike: I teach at a university where all of our students are required to take philosophy. This is the kind of question all my students have. We just started a new semester the other day, and all of my bright-faced first-year students are puzzled about what they're going to get out of philosophy. The thing that I tell them, which is also the thing that I believe, is that we're all doing philosophy fairly regularly even though we don't tend to identify it in those terms. We all make decisions about what we think is ultimately valuable and important in life, we prioritise our time and energy to pursue what we think will make a good life for us.

One of the central questions of philosophy in general, even though it's not at the front and centre of the anthology that Jennifer and I have been working on, is, 'What does a good life look like?' What is genuinely important and how can you organise your life in order to flourish or thrive? Whether or not we give it the word philosophy, whether or not we're reading Plato, Aristotle, Frantz Fanon or any of the other historical philosophers, we're doing these things. We do this all day every day and what the study of philosophy does is make us a little bit more intentional about that. So rather than going with the flow or taking up the ideas that we inherit from our parents, friends or society, we can think a little more deliberately about these things so that we can make choices that are a little more thoughtful and intentional.

09:35 If anyone's listening to this and wants to start thinking more consciously about the decisions they're making in their life, do you have any practical tips for doing that?

09:45 Jennifer: I think that reading is key but so is writing. I think that when you read books you start formulating ideas. But it's only when you start trying to write your ideas down that you take it to that next step of being deliberate and intentional. I'm a big fan of having a reading diary or journal. I've literally got dozens of them around my study here, devoted to different kinds of reflections and topics.

Buy yourself a little notebook and get a book. You could do one of the existentialist philosophers, Sartre's three plays on existentialism are wonderful places to start. Science fiction is great. It gets you thinking about temporality, identity and gender. When I was an undergraduate, we read Ursula Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* in one of my

socio-cultural anthropology type classes and it was great. It was so different. I'd never thought about things in our society being organised in a way like she was describing. Try something different and hard and new, and write your ideas down about it. That would be my tip.

11:15 Mike: One addition to the piece of old-fashioned books and reading and writing advice that Jennifer has to offer is that the internet provides all sorts of resources for us. There are tons of podcasts that give you introductions to various interesting philosophers. There's a British organisation called *The School of Life* that does interesting brief YouTube videos that introduce you to philosophers as a way to try out people who may be interested in reading a little bit more. There's tons of stuff on the internet, like the Futurum resources. There are lots of people producing resources to try to help younger versions of ourselves discover the philosophy that we eventually fell in love with in this career.

12:05 I guess that's quite exciting, compared to people like Kant and the people in your anthology, we've got so much access to so many ideas from all sorts of times and all sorts of places in the world, which is something that they never had. I guess that's part of the context of their ideas and how that grew up. The ideas that we're formulating now are being influenced by a whole massive range of all the other ideas that come before us, in a way that philosophers in the past might not have been able to do.

12:30 Talking about books, if you could both give me a favorite book, from when you were younger or a recent book that you've just read, how it's influenced you, and if you'd recommend it to any of our listeners.

12:50 Jennifer: I liked any book that had talking animals. I loved the *Narnia* books by C.S. Lewis because I loved the idea of going through the back of a wardrobe and ending up in a different world and having lots of cool talking animals to go on adventures with, then you can pop back in and your old life would pick up exactly where you left off, even though you'd been a king or queen for decades. I always liked fantasy books. I loved a book when I was a child called *The Phantom Tollbooth* by Norton Juster. I think it's a forgotten gem, but I've never known a person not to be delighted by that adventure when he goes into the warring kingdoms of Dictionopolis and Digitopolis, the two brothers – numbers verses words. It's great!

13:40 Mike: Jennifer and I have more similar tastes than I realised, because the book I was thinking about is my favorite book when I was a kid, called *Redwall* by British author Brian Jacques. It's about talking animals, it's a fantasy of sorts, the main character is a mouse. What I like about it and what it did for me, was that this small mouse found its way into a world that didn't fully make sense and then through the mystery of the plot you manage to put the pieces together. It strikes a chord with me that people are trying to figure out how to put the pieces together in their life and then when you eventually manage to put them together in a way that makes sense even if it's not entirely what you expected, it's a deeply satisfying process. I guess this has something to do with the fact that I ended up doing what I do. And talking animals are probably important too!

