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Title: (How Much) Do the Semantics of “Race” Matter? A Note From a Parochial Perspective

Abstract:

One part of the on-going debate over the reality of human ‘races’ centers on the applicability of the concept, RACE, to extant human populations. If, one line of reasoning goes, the very meaning of the term “race” entails that the concept refers to biologically real entities, then, since the human populations identified as “races” do not comprise biologically real entities, there simply are no races and “race,” as a concept, fails to refer to anything at all in the world. I argue that this line of reasoning relies on an ambiguity in our understanding of what it is for an entity to be biologically real. Biology cannot provide meaningful support of, nor a justification for, our beliefs and practices surrounding “race,” but “races” may nevertheless be (loosely) individuated on the basis of (real) biological features. If that is the case, it is plausible that dismantling the conceptual framework around “race” requires not the recognition that there are no entities to which the concept refers, but rather the recognition that those entities are contingent, contestable but nonetheless very powerful ways of categorizing people, and that since these ways of categorizing people do real harm (and no real good), we should work to ensure that they are no longer employed in ways that do harm, and work to (try to) repair (some of) the harms done.

## (How Much) Do the Semantics of “Race” Matter?

### A Note From a Parochial Perspective

#### I: Introduction – Glasgow on Reconstructing the Concept of Race

In his compelling “A Theory of Race” (2009) Joshua Glasgow argues that RACE<sup>1</sup> (the concept) includes as part of its ordinary (folk) meaning (part of the conception of “race”) that ‘races’ are biological entities. Since (among other reasons) there is no non-arbitrary way of identifying biological populations that could successfully pick out the ‘races’ privileged in folk discourse as biological entities worthy of special attention, ‘races’ are *not* biological entities. Glasgow argues that “race” (the term) cannot refer to a socially constructed entity because the meaning of the term “race” includes that the entity in question *not* be socially constructed, but rather be *biological*. So, Glasgow concludes, ‘races’ don’t exist – the concept RACE does not in fact refer to anything in the world.

Nevertheless, Glasgow recognizes that the morally important task of addressing the inequalities that have arisen, and continue to be reinforced and recreated, because of racist attitudes will require that we *not* simply give up talking about ‘race.’ Pretending that because RACE does not refer to anything real in the world, we don’t have to address the real harms of racism, would, Glasgow argues, be a mistake (and morally bankrupt). Glasgow finesses this problem by suggesting that we cease talking about RACE and instead deliberately start talking about a “near-by” concept (call it RACE\*) that picks out (much) the same populations that RACE points towards, but does so on the basis of e.g. particular social relationships (including history, SES, power, etc) and the like.

By way of analogy, Glasgow suggests (2009 124, 130-131, and personal communication) that we consider the term “witch” as it was used in e.g. 17<sup>th</sup> Century New England. Certainly, Glasgow argues, we all now agree there *were no witches*. No one actually cavorted with devils. No one actually cast effective spells. Being a “witch” was not a social construct, because it wasn’t actually a *thing at all*. Whatever social practices identified “witches,” they did not pick out entities that actually were witches, because there *were no witches*. Nor does it make sense to say that witches in fact existed, but just lacked all of the powers and other features associated with witches; the

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<sup>1</sup> The conventions used are as follows: RACE (small caps) names the concept; “race” (quotes) refers to the word; ‘race’ (scare-quotes) is the ordinary use, with the scare-quotes signaling a discomfort with the ordinary uses.

people picked out as witches simply weren't witches at all. So, WITCH, conceptually speaking, could not be a social construct. NOTARY PUBLIC, by contrast, *is* a social construct – there really are notary publics, who really do have the powers we associate with them (whatever those powers may be). And the reason that there are notary publics, with notary-public powers, is *because* of the social conventions surrounding them. We create notary publics through our social lives, and they really have the powers that they claim to have because of those social practices that they are wrapped up in. 'Races,' Glasgow argues, are in this sense more like 'witches' than they are like 'notary publics.'

While I find this line of argument tempting, I am not compelled by it. While I agree with Glasgow that biology cannot provide any *justification* for or *support* of our current racial categories, and that RACE, as concept, demands some appeal to biology, I yet want to say that 'race' is fundamentally a social category, and that we can talk about the importance of 'race' in people's lives without having to resort to the near-by discourse of RACE\*. While, at least when properly understood, biology provides no support to the concept RACE – it does not and cannot justify it – 'races' can (and do) still exist, even if an essential part of the conceptualization of RACE is that it is (in part) biological.

While this may reveal a weakness on my part – a lack of serious concern with semantics and theories of meaning, for example – I'm not yet convinced that this analysis of my position is to be preferred. In what follows, I will argue that one can consistently argue that a) the concept RACE demands, in its ordinary usage, implications about the biological nature of the groups identified as 'races' b) biology, properly understood, provides no *justification for or meaningful support* of our particular racial categories, c) the groups we identify as 'races' are so-identified for social reasons, and yet d) for all that, they are still best thought of as 'races' (the concept RACE is properly applied to them). Races are social categories, the members of which are thought to (and may well) share biological features. But race is not justified by biology, nor is its use grounded in biology, because the shared biological features that do the work in ascribing racial identity to people (or assigning people 'partial' membership in various 'races') are in no way privileged. Race is social because it is our particular social history and practices that determines what 'races' we will identify, and hence it is the social that determines which biological facts (of the more or less unlimited number available to us) we will pick out as salient.

II) The Concept RACE, in Contemporary Usage, Entails Biological Differences

Glasgow notes that most attempts to unpack the meaning(s) of “race” rely either on the analysis of historical texts (cf Appiah 1994, 2005; Appiah and Gutmann 1996) or on armchair conceptual analysis; he argues that to understand what the current uses of “race” in fact entail, one should attend instead to the best contemporary research on the ways that competent speakers in the cultural context of interest in fact use the term (2009, chapter 2). This, he argues, reveals that, in the U.S. at least, while there are likely no necessary and sufficient for the proper application of “race” (or the proper sorting of individuals into racial categories), that sorting individuals into “races” *almost always* involves *some* biological component or other. It may be clusters of phenotypes, or it may be ancestry, or some genetic clustering, but if there are *no* biological correlates *at all*, most people seem reluctant to consider the population in question to be a “race.”

When coupled with the conclusion, reviewed below, that race, as it is usually understood, is not a biologically meaningful category, it is easy to see how the conclusion that race is merely an illusion would follow. The only other option, Glasgow suggests plausibly, is that race is a social category (like notary publics). But the very meaning of ‘race’ prevents that move. So Glasgow suggests that RACE – the concept – has no referent, and is indeed merely an illusion. It is an illusion that does great damage via our mistaken belief in it, and one that will require real work to dismantle without creating more injustices – hence the move to RACE\* . But, he argues, for all that, it is just an illusion. Below, I hope to show why this conclusion does not quite follow.

### III. Biology Can't Justify Race

I will be brief here, as the arguments for rejecting the claim that our current use of the term “race” can be supported or justified by biological facts are reasonably well-known. Here is a rough summary of the main lines of argument against the biological reality of race: 1) humans are not terribly diverse, either phenotypically or genetically, so further sub-dividing us into even more homogeneous categories makes little sense (the “to a first approximation, we’re all pretty much the same” argument – see e.g. Smedley and Smedley 2005 and cites therein), 2) what little extant variation there is, both phenotypic and genetic, within any given sub-population of humans is much much greater than the average differences between populations (the “most variation is within and not between populations” argument – see e.g. Lewontin 1972), 3) the populations we identify as ‘races’ in contemporary social discourse do not map neatly onto any legitimate biological populations (the “mismatch” argument – see e.g. Root 2003), 4) the variation that we happen focus on does not pick out uniquely distinct populations with

respect to the total variation available (the “arbitrariness” objection – see e.g. Weiss and Fullerton 2005 ), and finally 5) what was meant by “race is biological” was a strong essentialist claim that we now know to be false, not just of human populations, but indeed of most biologically respectable populations (Appiah’s “detritus” argument – see Appiah 1994 and related). From a ‘broad brush-stroke’ perspective, all this is true (though some researchers have quibbled with (3), and Glasgow for example wonders whether (5) is really part of what is generally meant by the biological nature of race).

The upshot of this is that while there may be *some* biological differences between the groups identified as ‘races’ within the context of contemporary U.S. discourse, these differences cannot be used to justify our current practices regarding racial classifications. While one can, with sufficient effort, find some biological measure or other on which the ‘major races’ as identified in contemporary U.S. discourse turn out to be (more or less) biologically respectable entities, there is nothing *special* about those measures, and hence, nothing special about those entities. The same techniques (the same basic measures) can be used with equal success to identify biologically respectable entities that are *not* identified as ‘races’ within current discourse. That is, the same techniques that can be used to identify biological groups that correspond (roughly) to (some of) what we now call ‘races’ can equally well identify groups smaller than races, larger than races, and simply orthogonal to our current racial discourse. (see Kaplan 2011, Kaplan & Winther 2012 for review.)

I take it as obvious that the ability of particular biological measures, applied to very particular populations, where both the measures and the populations in question are chosen explicitly with the intent of picking out the groups we have already pre-identified as ‘races,’ to more or less successfully pick out those very groups, does *not* mean that those particular ways of categorizing humans are justified by biology, or that biology can underwrite our use of those categories. The race with which someone is identified *matters* – it has, for example, a profound influence on their life-prospects, including health (see e.g. Kaplan 2010 for review). That a person belongs to a ‘biologically real group’ – a group we can pick out using some measure or other, given some population or other – does *not* matter in this sense; we all belong to many many biologically real groups, most of which are of no interest at all, and a very few of which are of some limited interest to biologists interested in, e.g. tracking human migrations, or understanding adaptations to local environmental conditions, but to more or less no one else.

The populations we identify using our best biological theories and methods are *not* entirely arbitrary, but neither are they sufficiently few in number or sufficiently uniquely specified to provide any justification for our appeal to and use of categorization of people into those ‘races’ that we identify in our ordinary social lives. (see e.g. Weiss and Fullerton 2005 for review)

IV: RACE is Not a Social Concept... But 'race' is created and maintained via social mechanisms (as are the 'races')

I accept Glasgow's analysis of the meaning of race – races, unlike notary publics, are not groups whose membership is social as a matter of meaning. (Ethnicities might be, but if so, that is one reason not to treat the words “race” and “ethnicity” as interchangeable.) And I accept that biology cannot justify our choice of racial categories, nor is biology causally implicated in our choice of racial categories. Nevertheless, I argue that A) real biological features are used in our attribution of 'race', but B) race, as an organizing schema, is held in place by our social discourse, as are the particular racial categories we use. The upshot of this is that we can affirm both our “common-sense” understanding of the race that we attribute to people being so-attributed at least in part on the basis of biological (phenotypic) features, and our understanding of 'race' – both its existence as a category and the particular populations picked out as 'races' – as having been socially constructed, contingent upon the particular social / political context, contestable, and not something forced upon us by our best understanding of the biological world.

A) Real (but unimportant and rather arbitrary) biological features are used in our attribution of 'race'

That real biological features are used in our attribution of 'race' should, on the one hand, seem completely obvious, and should also, on the other hand, seem to be something that has been soundly refuted by our best science. The difficulty, as is so often the case, is that the evidence cited in support of one claim simply misses the point of the other. In this case, the arguments and evidence that have been marshaled to show that race, as it is ordinarily understood, is not biological in nature do not address the more simple attribution issue. Glasgow's position has the resources to deal with this gap, but he fails to take seriously enough the variety of ways in which something can be 'biologically real' but not biological in nature. An example is perhaps in order.

John Dupré, in his *The Disorder of Things*, asks us to consider the difference between *rabbits* and *hares*. Rabbits live in burrows, and generally make good eating. Hares do not burrow, and are generally less nice to eat. But the 'rabbit' life-style and the 'hare' life-style evolved independently several times in Lagomorpha order, so rabbits don't form a clade – they are *not* a phylogenetically respectable biological group. Some rabbits are more closely related to some hares than they are to some other rabbits, and some hares more closely related to some rabbits than to other hares. But, and here is where Dupré really wants us to pay attention, if you want to know whether your horses

are likely to break their legs in a particular pasture, and/or whether killing the cute hopping things will yield something tasty, you want to know whether you've got *rabbits* or *hares* – you really don't give much of a damn what is more closely related to what. "Rabbit" is a perfectly respectable natural kind; it just isn't one that phylogeny maps onto.

But for all that, the things that makes rabbits *rabbits* are biological things – they give birth in burrows, their life-styles encourage a kind of tenderness, etc. And note well that given a bunch of lagomorphs, a reasonably skilled folk-naturalist will be able to sort them competently into rabbits and hares, and other reasonably skilled folk-naturalists will for the most part agree with the first's assessments (*for the most part*, because there will be, as always, borderline cases, cases where the criteria employed conflict, etc.). But if we didn't care about our horses tripping on rabbit burrows, and weren't fans of eating small hopping creatures, we would have *no reason whatsoever* to lump rabbits into one category and hares into another. We would see *nothing special* that was shared by all (or most) rabbits, as opposed to hares.

In a similar way, forensic anthropologists can often, in the context of particular populations with particular racial classifications, do a reasonably good job of classifying bodies on the basis of those particular racial classifications (see Ousley, Jantz, and Freid 2009). Sesardic (2010) mistakes this ability for evidence that races are real biological entities, and not "socially constructed". But the forensic anthropologists in question are quite clear that they are good at identifying the 'race' of a body in the exact same way that some folk-naturalists are good at identifying 'rabbits' – in short, they admit that there isn't anything special about the populations identified as 'races' and that the 'clusters' of traits that they focus on are only important insofar as what they are trying to do is a match a body to one (or more) of the 'races' selected as important by the society that they happen to practice in (see Cox, Tayles, and Buckley 2006 for an example of how and why this matters). In other societies, the assignment of bodies to race-like populations might be very different, but no less robust, and neither more nor less "real."<sup>2</sup>

But why then do we recognize as races those populations that we in fact so recognize? The *how* is in part biological – there are real biological features we can latch onto – but *why* we pay attention to the features we do, and make the divisions that we do, cannot be answered by appeals to biology.

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<sup>2</sup> If you don't care about or recognize the distinction between "rabbits" and "hares" and I tell you that, based on this skeletonized lagomorph, I think you've got a "hare" on your hands, you will quite justifiably look at me as if I were a bit crazy. Similarly, if a forensic anthropologist trained to recognize the 'races' identified on the 1920 census (see IPUMS database for details) told us that our body was that of a "Hindu" man, most of us would be a bit of a loss when it came to where to look in the missing persons files for a match...

B. Race, as an organizing schema, is held in place by our social discourse, as are the particular racial categories we use

Again, I will be very brief here. One we recognize that biology does not (and cannot) uniquely specify the division of populations of humans into subpopulations (that biology does not “make race”) it is obvious that the only source of categorization schema deployed must be social. Here it is important to remind ourselves that the particular “racial” categories into that we use in the U.S., at this particular point in time, and that it is often claimed represent the “major” races, have not always nor everywhere been considered the populations of interest (see e.g. Hudson 1996 and cites therein). Nor do the (quasi-) populations that “we” identify as the “major” races (that is, the populations that are generally claimed to correspond in a rough and ready way to “major continents of origin” and fall out of genetic clustering programs *if* you choose the right population as an input and select the correct number of populations as the output) actually correspond all that well with the way that many (perhaps most) people in the U.S. in fact sort individuals into “races” in their everyday practices (for some reflections on the importance of this, see Braun et al 2007).

In the context of the U.S., our particular history of slavery is surely part of the answer to “why” we keep the categories that we do, and why those categories have had, and continue to have, the power that they do. But just a part of it. There is an extensive literature outlining our changing ways of categorizing people in the U.S., including the ways that concept of ‘race’ has changed over time; I will not review that literature here, but will note that a pervasive theme is ways in which power – political, economic, and social – has influenced the categorizations based on ‘raced,’ and how those categorizations have been deployed (see e.g. Omi and Winant 1986 for review).

## V. Some Conclusions

RACE, as the concept is currently deployed, does perhaps entail that the categories appealed to be differentiated on the basis of at least *some* biologically “real” features or other. But in part because of the plethora of biologically real features in the world, the options for sorting populations into groups on the basis of biological real features are (nearly) limitless. If the ‘races’ currently identified in the ‘folk-practices’ of a particular population at a particular time happen to approximate biologically real populations, that is no reason for the biological racial realist to take comfort, unless that realist is willing to embrace the equal reality of the countless other (approximately) biologically real populations that go mostly unremarked upon and unnoticed. So we can recognize that the populations appealed to on e.g. contemporary census forms can be

“re-discovered” by clever genetic clustering software without losing sight of the fact that those populations only exist *as populations we care about* because of our social practices and history.

We can, and should, talk about those races that we recognize in social discourse as races, understanding that insofar as these categories require that the populations picked out be biological entities, they are not *interesting* entities qua biological entities; they are interesting entities, they are so because our social practices *make* them interesting. On this view, while RACE, as a concept, may entail that the populations picked out be biological in some sense, the races that exist only do so because of our social practices, and race, as a category of organization, and the particular races identified, remain contestable, contingent, social constructions.

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