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In Defense of the Metaphysics of Race

Adam Hochman

Abstract In this paper I defend the metaphysics of race as a valuable philosophical project against deflationism about race. The deflationists argue that metaphysical debate about the reality of race amounts to a non-substantive verbal dispute that diverts attention from ethical and practical issues to do with ‘race.’ In response, I show that the deflationists mischaracterize the field and fail to capture what most metaphysicians of race actually do in their work, which is almost always pluralist and very often normative and explicitly political. Even if debates about the reality of race turn out to be verbal disputes, they are substantive, and worth having.

Keywords Metaphysics; deflationism; racial naturalism; social constructionism about race; anti-realism about race; metametaphysics

1. Introduction

The metaphysics of race has been critiqued in recent years for diverting attention from—even foreclosing investigation into—the normative dimensions of ‘race.’ Deflationism about race is a position which aims to subvert metaphysical debate about the nature and reality of race. While deflationist arguments against the metaphysics of race differ, deflationists agree that we should engage in a normative debate about ‘race’ rather than a metaphysical one.

This paper will defend the metaphysics of race against the criticisms of its opponents. As deflationism about race is a relatively new addition to the literature and has not stabilized into a univocal position, I will not be responding to ‘the deflationist argument,’ but rather the work of some leading deflationists (defining a deflationary position which genuinely contrasts with a metaphysical approach to race is part of the task of this paper). Namely, I will focus on works by Lisa Gannett (2010), David Ludwig (2015), and Ron Mallon (2006). In *Deflating Race* Lionel McPherson (2015) also argues against a certain metaphysical approach to race. However, McPherson may not be a deflationist about race in the sense relevant to this paper, because unlike the other three philosophers, he does not explicitly argue against the metaphysics of race. He does not use the term ‘metaphysics’ at all, and it is unclear whether he rejects the metaphysics of race, or rather what he interprets to be an inflated version of it.¹

I will argue that the deflationists mischaracterize the work of card-carrying metaphysicians of race and fail to undermine the metaphysics of race as a philosophical project. Collectively, the deflationists understand the metaphysics of race to involve the following commitments. First, to monism about race (Gannett, 2010; Ludwig, 2015). That is, to the view that there is a

¹ While finalizing this paper another deflationist article has been published: Olivier Lemeire’s (2016) *Beyond the realism debate: The metaphysics of ‘racial’ distinctions*.

single fundamental definition and ontology of race. Second, to a non-normative approach to the debate (Mallon, 2006; Gannett, 2010; Ludwig, 2015). Third, to a dichotomy between social and biological causation, on the assumption that they are distinct causal spheres that do not interact (Gannett, 2010). Fourth, to a dichotomy between folk and scientific conceptual schemes, again on an assumption that they do not interact (Gannett, 2010).

The deflationist interpretations of the ‘metaphysics of race’ fail to capture the state of the field. Most of the work done by metaphysicians of race is pluralist, much is normative—even explicitly political—and there is nothing about the metaphysics of race that would lead one to dichotomize the biological and the social as distinct causal spheres or to cause blindness to the interactions between folk and scientific conceptual schemes.

There is a standard—and perfectly good—definition of the metaphysics of race that the deflationists deviate from. Rasmus Winther captures the standard definition (*and* the possibility of metaphysical pluralism about race) when he describes the metaphysics of race as having to do with whether “race is taken to exist or not—and in which sense (e.g., biological and/or social)” (Winther, 2014, p. 213). In his monograph *A Realist Metaphysics of Race* Jeremy Pierce explains that “the main questions this book deals with include whether there are races and what sorts of things races are” (Pierce, 2014, p. ix). Similarly, Paul Taylor explains that “the questions of racial metaphysics” include “Do races exist” and “What are they like if they do exist” (Taylor, 2004, p. xi). The metaphysics of race is thus standardly defined as the philosophical study of the nature and reality of race, with the caveat that ‘race’ may have many natures and realities or no reality at all.

What, then, is deflationism about race? There is disagreement among the deflationists about what deflationism about race actually entails, but the metaphorical use of the verb ‘to deflate’ is instructive. The deflationists want to let the air out of the metaphysical debate about race. For Gannett and Ludwig this means foregoing the ‘*really* real’ of metaphysics for

the ‘real’ of the sciences. Mallon takes deflationism a step further: he argues that we should forego ontology altogether and focus on whether the linguistic practice of race-talk is morally permissible.

If the metaphysics of race is best understood as the study of the nature and reality of race, and is not necessarily about whether race is ‘*really* real’ in Gannett and Ludwig’s sense, then the deflation they recommend is superfluous: one cannot deflate something to its original size. The corollary to this is that Mallon has the right approach to deflationism about race. While all three theorists deflate an *inflated* notion of the metaphysics of race, puffed up with unnecessary commitments, Mallon is right to characterize deflationism as the move from racial ontology to ontologically silent race-talk. However, while Mallon properly characterizes deflationism, his argument for it is unconvincing, or so I will argue.

While I am partly concerned with properly defining metaphysical and deflationary approaches to ‘race,’ this is not only a semantic disagreement: it is also a practical debate about the kind of philosophy of race we ought to pursue. Philosophy of race is still a young field. As Charles Mills writes, “the “metaphysics” of race has not at all been an obscure topic but... one of the central themes of recent philosophical literature on race” (Mills, 2005, p. 550). There has been extensive debate about whether race is biologically real, socially real, or not real at all (the three main metaphysical positions about race). Arguments against the metaphysics of race are likely to be understood as calling an end to such debates. What ‘race’ is and whether or not it is real is of tremendous importance across a broad range of spheres: from the academic to the political, and of course the personal. Indeed for most philosophers of race the study of the nature and reality of ‘race’ joins these spheres together. We should be careful not to end metaphysical debate about race prematurely, and certainly not without good reason.

First, I will describe how the deflationists understand the metaphysics of race. Second, I will explain why they believe it should be abandoned. Then I will defend the metaphysics of race against their criticisms. Finally, I argue that while Gannett and Ludwig's deflationism does not properly contrast with a metaphysical approach to race, Mallon's does, but is unconvincing. I suggest a possible reason, different to those provided by the deflationists, for why some metaphysicians of race approach such a politically charged and morally relevant topic with dry, apolitical arguments. The role that normative arguments *ought* to play in the metaphysics of race is an open question, and not one that I seek to answer here. Note that I will not defend any particular metaphysical position in this paper; rather, I will respond to arguments against practicing the metaphysics of race.

2. What is the Metaphysics of Race?

Deflationism about race has enough momentum to warrant a paper in response, but it is not clear that the deflationists are presenting a unified position. In this section let us look at how the metaphysics of race is understood by those who would like to see the end of it.

Mallon uses the term 'metaphysics' in relation to 'race' in two ways: he discusses metaphysical *positions* and metaphysical *facts*. He begins his article by describing the main metaphysical positions about race: *racial skepticism*, *racial constructionism*, and *racial population naturalism*. Racial skepticism, also known as anti-realism about race, is the metaphysical position that race is not real: that human races do not exist. This position is often accompanied by an alternative to racial ontology, which accounts for the *apparent* reality of race (Glasgow, 2009; Blum, 2010). Racial constructionism, also known as social constructionism about race, is the metaphysical position that race is socially constructed. As Mallon observes, social constructionism is sometimes understood to mean that race does not

exist at all, and that it only gains an illusory reality through racialized social practices. Like Mallon, I think that social constructionism is best understood as the view that race is *socially real* (after all, social reality is no less real than biological reality). Last, racial population naturalism is the metaphysical position that races are real, biological populations (and somehow deserving of the epithet ‘race’). Racial naturalism is often referred to as ‘racial realism,’ but this is a problematic name for the position, as social constructionism about race can also be understood as a form of racial realism.

After introducing us to the main metaphysical *positions* about race Mallon begins to write about ‘metaphysical facts.’ “Much of the apparent metaphysical disagreement over race,” he contends, “is an illusion. Skeptics, constructionists, and naturalists share a broad base of agreement regarding the metaphysical facts surrounding racial or racialized phenomena that suggests their views are complementary parts of a complex view incorporating biological, social, and psychological facts” (Mallon, 2006, p. 527). The ‘metaphysical facts,’ for Mallon, are those biological, social, and psychological facts relevant to this debate (what makes these facts ‘metaphysical’ is unclear). As we will see in the following section, Mallon’s claim that there is agreement about the metaphysical facts is key to his rejection of the metaphysics of race.

Ludwig writes his critique of the metaphysics of race under the following assumption: “I assume that metaphysicians of race are committed to the ideal of one fundamental ontology of race” (Ludwig, 2015, p. 245). In other words, he assumes metaphysicians of race are monists about race. As Ludwig explains, “deflationism regarding the metaphysics of race... allows at least two legitimate ways of interpreting the question whether races exist in the sense of commonsense and scientific concepts. This position is deflationist because it implies that (anti)realist positions that rely on a commonsense concept of race are entirely compatible with positions that have opposing ontological consequences but rely on a scientific concept of

race” (Ludwig, 2015, p. 253). Ludwig is assuming here that a metaphysical approach to race is incompatible with the pluralist position that race is real in some senses but unreal in others. For Ludwig, metaphysicians of race are committed to a single fundamental racial ontology that travels across contexts.

We could, however, reconstruct Ludwig’s monist assumption so that it is less radical. There are, as Quayshawn Spencer has helpfully pointed out, multiple race debates (Spencer, 2013b, pp. 247–249). There are debates, for instance, about whether race is real in a biological sense or in a social sense, and there are related debates about whether race is real in some sense held by ordinary folk. With this in mind, we could reconstruct Ludwig’s monist assumption along the following lines: “[metaphysicians of race] insist on the ambitious claim that there is exactly one fundamental specification of “race” [within each race debate] that leads to a nonambiguous ontology of race [within that debate]” (Ludwig, 2015, p. 251). While this reading is inconsistent with some of Ludwig’s claims, it is sometimes suggested by his approach. For example, he contrasts purely biological notions of race with each other, rather than with social definitions of race.

Ludwig justifies his monist assumption by pointing out that in a number of other contemporary debates in metaphysics (he lists debates about composed objects, personal identity over time, and vague objects) there are realists, anti-realists, and deflationists, but no pluralists. Ludwig is therefore using the phrase ‘metaphysics of x’ in a similar way to many other contemporary philosophers, according to whom doing the metaphysics of x and being a pluralist about x just do not mix.

What, then, does Gannett mean by the ‘metaphysics of race’? On her account, it is when we turn from the ‘real’ to the ‘*really* real’ of natural kinds that we begin to do metaphysics. This distinction is drawn from a comparison of how scientists and philosophers understand the reality of kinds. “You might say that while scientists are about the ‘real,’ we philosophers

are about the ‘*really* real’” (Gannett, 2010, p. 364). The really real, that is, of natural kind theorizing. There are three dichotomies involved in natural kind theorizing that Gannett associates with the ‘*really* real’ and critiques: a dichotomy between monism and pluralism, a dichotomization of the biological and the social as distinct causal realms, and a dichotomization of scientist-expert and nonscientist-commonfolk conceptual schemes. For Gannett, the metaphysician of race is the race theorist who is committed to these dichotomies. She does not describe these commitments and assumptions in terms of necessary or sufficient conditions for the metaphysics of race. Rather, they signify degrees of metaphysical investment.

3. What’s Wrong with the Metaphysics of Race?

Mallon, Ludwig and Gannett all have different understandings of the metaphysics of race. What they share, however, is the conclusion that it is a bad idea. In this section I discuss why.

Let us begin again with Mallon. He argues that despite their differences there is a broad ontological consensus among anti-realists (skeptics), race naturalists, and social constructionists about race. “If this is correct,” he writes,

it is mistaken to view disputes among constructionists and naturalists as primarily metaphysical in character. Skeptics say race does not exist, employing the term ‘race’ to mean something that everyone agrees does not exist. Constructionists insist that race does exist, again employing the term ‘race’ to pick out phenomena that everyone agrees exist. And naturalists insist that races existed and might still exist, using the term ‘race’ to pick out biological populations that are substantially different from the kinds whose existence eliminativists deny. (Mallon, 2006, p. 547)

Recall that Mallon makes a distinction between metaphysical *positions* about race and metaphysical *facts*. In the quote above, and throughout his article, we can see that for Mallon differences in metaphysical positions are not *really* metaphysical differences unless there are also disagreements about the underlying ‘metaphysical facts.’ Since there is—according to Mallon—agreement about the metaphysical facts, the disagreement about metaphysical positions must be some other kind of (non-metaphysical) disagreement.

From Mallon’s analysis the disagreement appears to be semantic. Metaphysicians of race are using different definitions of ‘race.’ He shows how these definitions can be seen as the products of different theories of reference. Some metaphysicians of race use a descriptive theory of reference, some use a causal-historical theory. These differences related to reference lead to alternative definitions and alternative ontologies of race, even when there is agreement about the relevant facts.

Mallon is skeptical about the possibility of solving the debate about the reality of race by appeal to a determinative theory of reference. Drawing on influential work by Stephen Stich (1996) he argues that “The semantic strategy makes discussions over the correct account of race hostage to issues in the philosophy of language and metaphysics about which there is little agreement” (Mallon, 2006, p. 548). Mallon suggests that we put aside our semantic differences, focus on our metaphysical *agreements*, and transform the debate into a normative one about the value of racialized discourse.

Ludwig also argues that the debate about the existence of human races should be reinterpreted as having to do with normative, and not metaphysical, classificatory issues. He argues that the ontology of race is underdetermined by the empirical evidence gathered by scientists, and the non-empirical arguments offered by philosophers (see also Kaplan & Winther, 2013).

Biologists with different research interests will find different biological patterns meaningful. They will, in turn, posit different biological kinds. We can expect the cladist to be interested in whether or not humans form—or formed—clades, just as we can expect the population geneticist to be interested in genetic populations. These scientists may or may not identify these biological groupings as ‘races.’ After all, sometimes a clade is just a clade; sometimes a genetic population is just a genetic population. We do not have to call these groups, if they exist, ‘races.’ And the empirical evidence can’t help us decide whether we ought to do this.

Which is why philosophers have joined the debate. If it can’t be solved by empirical evidence, then perhaps non-empirical evidence can help. The kind of non-empirical arguments discussed by Ludwig, like those discussed by Mallon, draw on philosophy of language. It is easy to see why some philosophers of race draw on this part of philosophy: if we can work out how words attach to the world, then we should be able to work out whether the word ‘race’ attaches to anything in the world, or fails to refer. However, arguments from reference may fail generally; they may be bad sorts of arguments. Mallon, following Stich, suggests that this might be the case (Mallon, 2006). Ludwig argues, more cautiously, that arguments from reference may fail in the case of ambiguous terms such as ‘race.’

Ludwig notes that “One common realist strategy applies “causal theories of reference”... in the tradition of Kripke and Putnam to debates about the referent of ‘race’” (Ludwig, 2015, p. 249). Yet, as he points out, this strategy allows for too much flexibility in the meaning of terms:

...in the Renaissance, many cabinets of curiosity included “unicorn horns,” which were in fact narwhal horns. Of course, we could come up with a “scientific confirmation” of the existence of unicorns by identifying unicorns with *Monodon monoceros*, that is, narwhals. The obvious problem with this scientific confirmation of the existence of unicorns is that this account of unicorns has little in common

with what we actually mean by “unicorn.” Clearly, it is less misleading to insist on the existence of *Monodon monoceros* but to reject the existence of unicorns. (Ludwig, 2015, p. 250)

There are, we may want to insist, some core components to the unicorn concept—one being that unicorns live on the land, and not in the sea. But how do we work out what is at the core of a concept? Even if we can work that out, how much concept revision is allowable before we’ve changed the topic? When have we stopped talking about unicorns, and started talking about narwhals? When have we stopped talking about race?

This necessary question puts the metaphysician of race in an uncomfortable position, argues Ludwig. Recall that for him the metaphysics of race involves a commitment to monism, to finding a single definition and ontology of race. Metaphysicians of race would have to make a case for a set of criteria according to which we could determine the limits of meaning change for the race concept, and also show that only their preferred account of race were allowable. Given the diversity of potential specifications of race he suggests that finding one fundamental specification is unlikely (see also McPherson, 2015). For Ludwig, this raises doubts about the viability of the metaphysics of race.

Let us move on to Gannett’s critique of the metaphysics of race. As mentioned above, Gannett sees the metaphysics of race as inheriting a range of problematic dichotomies from natural kind theorizing: monism vs pluralism, social vs biological causation, and scientific vs folk conceptual schemes. The more committed to these dichotomies one is, the more metaphysically invested one is, and the further one departs from the scientific realm of the real and enters the metaphysical realm of the ‘*really* real.’

Let us look, now, at why Gannett finds these dichotomies problematic, starting with the monism vs pluralism dichotomy. Like Ludwig, she argues that “philosophers focused on the ‘*really* real’ will gravitate towards those biologists who share their interests” (Gannett, 2010, p. 369). For example, she questions Robin Andreasen’s(1998) deference to cladistics as the

arbitrator of the '*really* real.' "[I]n order to address questions concerning race's validity as a biomedical category and its biological reality at the level of the genome, philosophers of biology need to familiarize themselves with what race concepts are in actual use in *various* areas of the biological and biomedical sciences" (Gannett, 2010, p. 369, emphasis added). It may seem, then, that Gannett favors pluralism over monism, given that there are indeed many approaches to 'race' across the biological and biomedical sciences. However, her position isn't that simple.

In one sense, Gannett does favor a pluralist approach. This is clear from her discussion of Massimo Pigliucci and Kaplan's (2003) work. "Pigliucci and Kaplan (2003) are pluralists," she writes: "they attend closely to ways in which biologists use the term 'race' in practice and therefore do not forego the 'real' of biology for the '*really* real' of metaphysics" (Gannett, 2010, p. 369). However, it isn't monism but rather the monism vs pluralism debate itself that is her real target. She argues that "deciding the metaphysical debate in favor of pluralism does not solve the problem. Privileging theoretical questions leads to questions of practical (including social and political) importance concerning race and genetics to be not just overlooked but systematically ignored" (Gannett, 2010, p. 374).

On the dichotomy between biological and social causation, Gannett argues that metaphysicians of race treat the biological and the social as if they were distinct causal spheres, which they are not. The problem with this dichotomy can be nicely illustrated by examples from the lives of social insects, such as termites. Consider this question: is the 'caste system' in termites—which includes a worker caste, a soldier caste, and a reproductive caste, who determine the roles of the two former castes by the pheromones they produce—a product of biological or social causation? These categories fail us because the distinction between biological and social *causation* is a false dichotomy. Of course applying this dichotomy to humans is going to be no less problematic. Social factors—although 'social' is

surely too narrow a concept—such as racism, for example, affect reproductive relations. The social can create, sustain, or dissolve biological differences. Our biology is shot through with the social. This fact, argues Gannett, throws into question the way metaphysicians of race have framed race as either socially constructed or biologically real.

Gannett also questions the dichotomization of scientific and folk concepts of race, another conceptual mistake she attributes to metaphysicians of race. This dichotomy forecloses investigation into how scientific and non-scientific accounts of race interact and influence each other. Gannett argues that “undischarged a priori assumptions (where to draw geographical boundaries, which phenotypic characteristics matter, who counts as indigenous to a territory, etc.) are no doubt indebted to nonscientist-commonfolk conceptual schemes” (2010, pp. 375–376). In short, Gannett argues that by dichotomizing scientific and folk taxonomies, metaphysicians of race have ignored the mutual influences between scientific and non-scientific understandings of human biological diversity.

4. In Defense of the Metaphysics of Race

It is well known that ‘metaphysics’ is difficult to define. One way to defend the metaphysics of race against deflationism would be to argue that the deflationists are working from the wrong definition of ‘metaphysics’ *simpliciter*. I think this is the case, but I will not attempt to defend any overarching definition of ‘metaphysics’ in this paper, as this burden should be on the deflationists. The deflationists merely assume that metaphysics is a monist, non-normative enterprise.² They do not engage with defenses of metaphysical pluralism (e.g. Dupré, 1995). Nor do they engage with defenses of normative metaphysics (e.g. Haslanger, 2000). They all cite Sally Haslanger approvingly as the right kind of race theorist, without

² Note that Mallon does not make the monist assumption, only the normative assumption.

acknowledging that she understands herself as a metaphysician. Given that the deflationists rely on particularly limiting and perhaps outdated approaches to metaphysics, which radically depart from the approaches taken by card-carrying metaphysicians of race, they bear the burden of showing that most metaphysicians of race are not really doing metaphysics.

In this section I will respond in turn to the claims about monism vs pluralism, the normative vs the metaphysical, biological vs social causation, and scientific vs folk conceptual schemes. First, however, there is something else calling out for a response: Ludwig's plea not to engage in a debate about the characteristics of the metaphysics of race, the part of philosophy of race that he is arguing against.

Ludwig foresees that not all will agree with his interpretation of the metaphysics of race. "I do not want to engage in a verbal dispute about the meaning of "metaphysics of race"," he writes, "and one could also use a less restrictive definition. Given a sufficiently liberal definition, this article only challenges a certain type of metaphysics of race while proposing an alternative deflationist and normative metaphysics of race" (Ludwig, 2015, p. 245). This concession, placed in a footnote, shows that Ludwig sees the possibility of a less restrictive understanding of the metaphysics of race, but he attempts to foreclose any serious discussion of this possibility on grounds that it would amount to a non-substantive verbal dispute.

It is ironic that we are asked not to enter a debate about what the metaphysics of race should mean on the grounds that it would be a purely verbal dispute. Recall that it is the claim that the debate about the reality of race is a verbal dispute that motivates Ludwig and Mallon to argue that we ought to reinterpret it as normative debate. Surely the same logic should apply to verbal disputes about the 'metaphysics of race' as to verbal disputes about 'race.' Using Ludwig and Mallon's own logic, verbal disputes about the meaning of the 'metaphysics of race' should be understood as normative disagreements about what the 'metaphysics of race' ought to mean. After all, why should we have a normative debate about

what ‘race’ ought to mean but not have a normative debate about what the ‘metaphysics of race’ ought to mean?

Some verbal disputes are substantive, and worth having (Chalmers, 2011). On the one hand, people will always use their preferred vocabularies: a little interpretation and even translation is often a necessary part of genuine communication. On the other hand, the words and labels we use are important. To most philosophers, how we understand ‘metaphysics’ is important. To most philosophers of race, how we understand the ‘metaphysics of race’ is important. That philosophers of race use this phrase in demonstrably different ways, and that this is causing confusion, is reason enough to think about how we ought to be using it. If we are going to work out which kinds of philosophy of race we ought to be doing, we had better get clear about which kinds are on offer.

Let us turn now to the deflationist claims about monism vs pluralism, the normative vs the metaphysical, biological vs social causation, and scientific vs folk conceptual schemes.

4.1 Monism vs Pluralism

Recall that for Ludwig the metaphysics of race ought to be understood as a monist enterprise because other contemporary debates in metaphysics—in which the project is to do the metaphysics of x—are monist. It is true that doing the metaphysics of x may imply monism for some, or in some debates, but such an implication is far from universal. Take, for instance, the metaphysics of species. Pluralism about species is a common position in philosophy of biology (Dupré, 2002; Brigandt, 2003). We might require distinct species concepts for sexual and asexual species, for instance. So here is a metaphysical debate which does not imply monism, and which has similarities to our own (‘race’ and ‘species’ are both taxonomic concepts). There are also pluralists about gender (Goldenberg, 2007), about art

(Uidhir & Magnus, 2011), and about truth (Lynch, 2006), to name just a few other debates. Metaphysical pluralism is common.

Almost all current card-carrying metaphysicians of race are pluralists, in some sense. They are either what we might call *meaning pluralists*, who accept more than one definition of race, or *reference pluralists*, who accept more than one racial ontology.³ Gannett primarily targets meaning monism, whereas Ludwig targets both meaning monism and reference monism: “the ambitious claim that there is exactly one fundamental specification of “race” that leads to a nonambiguous ontology of race” (Ludwig, 2015, p. 251).

Race naturalists tend to accept meaning pluralism. They either allow that there is more than one legitimate biological definition of race (Pigliucci & Kaplan, 2003) or that race can be defined socially as well as biologically (Andreasen, 1998; Hardimon, 2013). Most also accept reference pluralism. They either allow that race has a social reality as well as a biological reality (Andreasen, 1998; Hardimon, 2013), or that there is more than one legitimate biological taxonomy of race (Pigliucci & Kaplan, 2003; Leroi, 2005). Probably all social constructionists are reference pluralists, as they believe that racial taxonomy differs in different societies (Root, 2000). Almost all would also count as meaning pluralists, as they would accept that race has a biological, as well as a social meaning, just not a biological referent.

Anti-realists about race are reference monists by definition. Scholars such as K. Anthony Appiah and Naomi Zack helped to launch debates on the metaphysics of race by defending anti-realism (Appiah, 1985; Zack, 1994), but both have since shown some sympathy with social constructionism about race (Zack, 2002, p. 106; Appiah, 2006, p. 381), and Appiah has written that he has “no problem with people who want to use the word “race” in population genetics” (Appiah, 1998, p. 73). Few philosophers are actively defending comprehensive

³ I thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this distinction.

anti-realism about race (but see Blum, 2010). Joshua Glasgow, who defended anti-realism in his *A Theory of Race*, has recently argued for a view he calls ‘basic racial realism’ (Glasgow, 2009; Glasgow & Woodward, 2015). I do not mention this to cast doubts on anti-realism (recall that I am not defending any particular metaphysical position in this paper). Rather, I mention the dearth of active anti-realists to highlight a consequence of a monist interpretation of the metaphysics of race: the few active anti-realists may turn out to be the only real metaphysicians of race in virtue of being the only monists. Everybody else would not be doing the metaphysics of race, or they would be doing it wrong. This seems implausible. Pluralism about race is one of the metaphysical options, and some version of pluralism is preferred by almost all metaphysicians of race.

Recall, however, that there is an alternative reading of Ludwig’s monist assumption, according to which monism is definitional of the metaphysics of race only *within* each race debate. This reading of Ludwig does little to help his argument. The task of the metaphysician of race is substantially easier on this interpretation of Ludwig’s monist assumption, as she does not have to defend a single definition and ontology of race across each race debate, only within her own.

Take the biological race debate. Here is what Ludwig believes the metaphysician of race, on his restrictive definition, is up against:

Any attempt to justify a substantive metaphysics of race will... have to engage with the vast number of possible specifications of “race” in terms of (1) genetic clusters at $K = 5$ in the sense of Spencer (2014); (2) genetic clusters at a finer grain of analysis in the sense of Leroi (2005); (3) human ecotypes in the sense of Pigliucci (2013); (4) human subspecies in the sense of Hochman (2013a); (5) human groups with visible traits, common ancestry, and geographic origin in the sense of Hardimon (2003); (6) human groups with visible traits that correspond to meaningful biological differences in the sense of Glasgow (2009); (7) human groups with relevant cognitive differences in the sense of Feldman and Lewontin

(2008); (8) human groups with essential intrinsic properties in the sense of Appiah (2006); and so on.
(Ludwig, 2015, p. 251)

The reference monist within the biological race debate certainly has her work cut out for her. However, those familiar with the debate will notice that the articles cited for (4), (6), (7) and (8) are all written *against* the reality of race on the respective definitions. For my own part, I have elsewhere argued against (1), (2), and (3) (Hochman, 2013b, 2014, 2015, 2016). Glasgow (2009) has offered a skeptical response to (5). For the sake of argument, let's assume that the critics are convincing. Anti-realist reference monism within the biological race debate would be the most appealing position.

The monist in the debate about the reality of race as understood by ordinary folk cannot be so easily dismissed either. In *Color Conscious*, Appiah engages in the debate about whether race, as understood by ordinary folk in the U.S., is real. He argues that "American social distinctions cannot be understood in terms of the concept of race" using a proof by exhaustion method (Appiah, 1998, p. 32). He makes the case that whichever theory of reference we adopt, ordinary race concepts in the U.S. fail to refer. Appiah is, at this point, a monist anti-realist about race within his race debate, so he fulfills Ludwig's stringent conditions for a substantive metaphysics of race on my reconstruction of his argument. Appiah might be wrong, but that is beside the point. These wouldn't be debates if everyone agreed. It would be defeatist (rather than deflationist) to think that a consensus couldn't be reached eventually, especially given the radical shifts in thinking about race over the last century.

The plausibility of within-debate monism aside, there is still no good reason to assume that monism is definitional of a metaphysical approach within each race debate. Indeed, there are both meaning and reference pluralists *within* particular race debates. Contributing to the debate about the social reality of race Michael Root endorses reference pluralism: "Race does

not travel. Some men who are black in New Orleans now would have been octoroons there some years ago or would be white in Brazil today” (Root, 2000, pp. 631–2). Contributing to the biological race debate Armand Leroi argues that “there is nothing very fundamental about the concept of the major continental races; they’re just the easiest way to divide things up. Study enough genes in enough people and one could sort the world’s population into 10, 100, perhaps 1000 groups, each located somewhere on the map” (Leroi, 2005, p. 4). Leroi endorses a pluralist ontology of race, which allows for minor as well as major biological races.

There are meaning pluralists within race debates as well. For instance, Pigliucci and Kaplan (2003) accept multiple definitions of race—they just argue that there are only human races under the ‘ecotype’ approach. Turning to social constructionism, Esa Diaz-Leon describes a number of interpretations of social constructionism about race as legitimate (Diaz-Leon, 2015). Namely, she distinguishes between *constitutive* social constructionism and *causal* social constructionism, and also *idea* constructionism and *object* constructionism. Diaz-Leon is a meaning pluralist within the social constructionist debate.

We should reinterpret Ludwig’s challenge as directed toward monists about race, not all metaphysicians of race. He does raise a genuine challenge for the monists, who must reply to competing metaphysical positions about ‘race.’ Note, however, that Ludwig does not fulfil his promise to show that there is “a plurality of equally permissible candidate meanings of “race”” (Ludwig, 2015, p. 244). All he shows is that there is a plurality of candidate meanings; how permissible they are is a matter for debate.

Like Ludwig, Gannett argues—quite rightly—that monists about race need to justify their preferred accounts of race over competing accounts. For Gannett, however, it is the monism vs pluralism debate which is the real problem. It is a problem because the debate takes us

away from questions of practical importance, and she is specifically interested in “race’s validity as a biomedical category” (Gannett, 2010, p. 364; see also Lemeire, 2016).

However, ‘validity’ in this context refers to whether what is being classified is what we think is being classified. On my reading of Gannett’s pragmatist approach, she is willing to accept that race is real insofar as it is useful in biomedicine and insofar as we do not fall into the trap of thinking that it is ‘*really* real.’ Yet this approach avoids the question of validity altogether. Rather, it is focused on finding *reliable* connections between conventional ‘racial’ groups and disease. Furthermore, such an approach is unnecessary in order to achieve pragmatic biomedical goals. Take, for example, the anti-realist position endorsed by Sandra Soo-Jin Lee, Joanna Mountain, and Barbara Koenig in their article on ‘race’ and health. “Race does not exist,” they argue, “but racialized groups do, and the effects of this racialization are real” (Lee, Mountain, & Koenig, 2001). Among philosophers, this position has been most notably developed by Blum (2002, 2010).

A metaphysical commitment to anti-realism doesn’t have to be a distraction from practical questions. Rather, it may open up a range of questions which are more precise. If race is not real, but racialization and its effects are, then knowing how an individual has been racialized will be useful in biomedicine, in that it will sometimes support some specific inductive inferences. Ancestry, which is a more specific category than ‘race,’ may also be scientifically useful. Or ethnicity might be appropriate when cultural differences—or the health costs of ethnoism—lead to differential medical outcomes.

If we fail to make the distinction between a ‘race’ and a ‘racialized group,’ not only will we not know whether a group is indeed a race, we risk racializing a group that may not be a race, and spreading the belief that race is real when we have not even asked this question. While Gannett’s criticism should be taken seriously, a metaphysical approach can actually

open up practical questions in biomedicine, and sharpen the theoretical tools we use to answer them.

4.2 The Normative vs the Metaphysical

Mallon argues that race naturalists, social constructionists, and anti-realists about race are in agreement about the relevant facts, and that they are simply using different definitions of race to support their respective metaphysical positions. McPherson makes a similar argument: “At this late stage in the race debate,” he writes, “believers will discover no new facts about human beings that could objectively resolve controversy in favor of a master concept of race” (McPherson, 2015, p. 691). Mallon—but not McPherson—concludes from this that “debates about ‘race’ talk are normative, not metaphysical” (Mallon, 2006, p. 550; see also Lemeire, 2016). This seems confused. What Mallon and McPherson’s argument actually shows is that *the metaphysical debate about race turns on the semantics*.

That is not to say, contra Mallon, that the debate is metaphysical *rather than* semantic or normative. As Spencer observes, “At a bare minimum, one would need to adopt both semantic and metaphysical assumptions in order to legitimately draw ontological conclusions about race from biological theory or data” (Spencer, 2013a, pp. 114–120). Concerns such as those raised by Stich (1996) about the impossibility of finding a single true theory of reference have given many—including Mallon and Ludwig—reason to be wary of arguments to do with reference (see also Lemeire, 2016). However, even if there is no single true and thus determinative theory of reference we still need to adopt some approach to reference when we define our terms. We might define a kind term by associating it with some phenomenon (‘let’s call this thing race’). Or we might stipulate that a particular kind term refers if the world contains the entities that answer to its associated description (‘this thing,

race, must have the following characteristics...'). The former kind of definition is implicitly aligned with the causal-historical theory of reference, the latter with the descriptive theory of reference. We can't avoid making assumptions about reference when we define our terms: it is a part of the act of defining. But that does not mean that metaphysicians of race must defend a particular theory of reference as the one true account of reference relations. Rather, it means that they must work out the conditions under which 'race' should be said to refer. So metaphysicians of race might argue that we ought not to be tied too tightly to some historical definition of race, in order to allow for some flexibility of reference, but at the same time they might argue that definitions of race should not be so flexible that we risk changing the topic and trivializing successful reference.

The metaphysical and the semantic are not in opposition. The same is true of the metaphysical and the normative. As I have argued, one does the metaphysics of race when one asks what race is and whether it is real. This leaves open the possibility of normatively engaged metaphysics of race. Indeed, this is not just a conceptual possibility. As I will show, much of the metaphysics of race literature is normatively engaged—even explicitly political.

In the final sentence of Mallon's article he implores us to "ask, with Sally Haslanger, what do we want our racial concepts, terms, and practices to do?" (Mallon, 2006, p. 551). Mallon sees this as an alternative to a metaphysical approach. However, Haslanger is a self-described feminist and anti-racist *metaphysician* (see Haslanger, 2012). She writes that, on her preferred approach,

the questions "What is gender?" or "What is race?" require us to consider what work we want these concepts to do for us; why do we need them at all?... neither ordinary usage nor empirical investigation is overriding, for there is a stipulative element to the project: this is the phenomenon we need to be thinking about. Let the term in question refer to it. On this approach, the world by itself can't tell us what gender

is, or what race is; it is up to us to decide what in the world, if anything, they are. (Haslanger, 2012, p. 224)

And for Haslanger race is a real, but social kind. “Both gender and race are real,” she writes, “and both are social categories” (Haslanger, 2012, p. 246). Haslanger endorses a normative form of metaphysics, and is of no help to the deflationists, despite their appeals to her.

Perhaps Haslanger is unique in her approach, and worthy of being set apart from other metaphysicians of race. Even if this were the case, the deflationists could no longer present their arguments as *against* the metaphysics of race, but rather as *for* a particular kind of normative metaphysics (a possibility that Ludwig does acknowledge at one point). However, a normative focus is not at all unique to Haslanger. For example, Charles Mills explains that he will “examine the “metaphysics” of race... to make plausible the idea of race as “ontological” and to sketch, correspondingly, a set of background realities that need to be taken more seriously by mainstream social and political philosophy” (Mills, 1998, p. xvi). Mills is a metaphysician of race with normative outcomes squarely in mind.

Contrast Mills with Appiah. Appiah argues that “you can get various possible candidates” for the referent for ‘race’ (e.g. genetic population), but “none of them will be much good for explaining social or psychological life” (Appiah, 1998, p. 74). This is, of course, a normative consideration. Appiah has normative desiderata for racial ontology. While they defend different metaphysical positions, Mills and Appiah both take a normative approach to the metaphysics of race.

Paul Taylor is another normatively engaged metaphysician of race. He sounds, at times, very much like a deflationist about race. For example he writes that “very real and important ethical concerns can no longer hide in the shadow of metaphysical speculations... We’ll have to talk openly about the benefits and drawbacks of racial politics and about the use of racial categories in public policy, because the option of implying answers to these questions by

gesturing at the illusory character of race will no longer be available” (Taylor, 2000, pp. 103–128). Yet Taylor is a metaphysician of race, defending a realist position inspired by W. E. B. Du Bois, according to which “we can meaningfully and reasonably say that races exist” (Taylor, 2000, p. 127).

Taylor defends a political approach to the metaphysics of race in his reply to Appiah’s anti-realism. He writes that Appiah’s

conviction that race is dangerous and limiting, that the construct of race serves the cause of racism more easily and often than it advances the campaign for emancipation, is what motivates his eliminativism. And in the wake of his failed arguments against Du Boisian racialism, ethical conviction is all he has left.

At this point, then, arguments about racial ontology should shift to the terrain of the ethical and practical, to the question of whether it is in fact more dangerous than not, more obscurantist than not, to talk of race. (Taylor, 2000, p. 128)

Taylor believes that we have reached the point in the debate where racial ontology should depend on ethical and practical considerations because he is confident that his metaphysical position about race is correct. He is not a deflationist, but a metaphysician of race who is willing to allow ethical and practical considerations to influence his ontology.

“Race is real,” writes Ronald Sundstrom, another normatively engaged metaphysician of race:

That proposition is the only one that does justice to the experiences of people at those sites where race is present as a *living* social category... Nonetheless, saying that race is real at some site is not to commend or legitimate it. Metaphysical pluralism separates not only questions of origins and ontology, but also ones of legitimacy. Constructed kinds can be either legitimate or illegitimate – whether or not a kind is legitimate rides on further arguments. (Sundstrom, 2002a)

The deflationists contrast a normative with a metaphysical approach to race. However, there are normative approaches *within* the metaphysics of race, so it is hard to see how a non-normative approach could be definitional of the field.

4.3 Biological vs Social Causation

The distinction between the biological and the social as distinct causal spheres is mistaken. On this point I agree with Gannett. I also agree with her that there are “research questions that cannot be satisfactorily addressed unless allowance is made for the causal interactions that occur among biological and social factors” (Gannett, 2010, p. 370). Furthermore, she is right to observe that “socio-cultural factors—differences in language, religion, nationality, etc.—determine reproductive relations and thereby structure the distribution of nucleotides in space and time” (2010, p. 370). However, while I agree with all of these points, they do not amount to an argument against the metaphysics of race. If there are biological races then social causes are surely a part of their formation and maintenance. However, only by making the metaphysical assumption that biological races are real can we make sense of the idea that they are the product of social causation.

While most metaphysicians of race have not been especially focused on how social factors influence biology—Lucius Outlaw (1996) and Philip Kitcher (1999) are notable exceptions—I am not convinced that this is because they dichotomize biological and social causation. Only race naturalists need to account for how biological ‘races’ are formed, and they first need to establish that ‘race’ is the right way to capture human biological difference.

Gannett is not only concerned with the dichotomy between biological and social causation, but also with the framing of race as either biologically or socially real. She argues that this dichotomy risks fueling an unproductive debate. However, when she raises this objection the

unproductive debate she has in mind is between racial naturalism and so-called *mere* social constructionism. According to this view there is no correlation whatsoever between how a person is racialized and any biological trait, genetic or phenotypic. However, as I have argued elsewhere, this is a position without adherents (Hochman, 2016). The social constructionist who is also an anti-realist about biological race does not claim that there is no human biological diversity or that it is randomly distributed, only that it is relatively meagre and is not distributed in a way that is well characterized as ‘racial.’ Framing the debate as between those who believe that race is biologically real or ‘merely’ social is, as Gannett argues, unproductive. But ‘mere’ social constructionism is a straw-man position, so this is to be expected.

The real problem with contrasting racial naturalism and social constructionism is that biological and social ontologies of race are, in principle, compatible (Hardimon, 2013). Also, framing the debate as between race naturalists and social constructionists ignores anti-realism. So the standard dichotomous framework is problematic, but the metaphysical debate about ‘race’ should be improved and refined, not abandoned.

4.4 Scientific vs Folk Conceptual Schemes

The last of the dichotomies attributed to the metaphysics of race is between scientist-expert and nonscientist-commonfolk conceptual schemes. Gannett is right that they are not as different as many metaphysicians of race seem to assume, and that they interact. This is a criticism of some particular metaphysicians of race, however, and not of the metaphysics of race as a legitimate subfield of the philosophy of race. David Serre and Svante Pääbo argue for anti-realism about biological race, and their empirical work demonstrates how folk assumptions about race can affect the sampling schemes used in worldwide population-

genetic studies in a way that then feeds back into their results, and ultimately into how their work is interpreted in relation to the reality of race (Serre & Pääbo, 2004). They observe that in worldwide studies of the structure of human populations, genetic samples tend to be taken from geographically distant locations, reflecting the folk assumption that human biological diversity is distributed in discrete ‘racial biopackages,’ rather than being smoothly distributed across geographic space (in what is called *clinal* distribution). By doing this, researchers do not test the hypothesis that the structure of human populations is clinal, and thus not well described as ‘racial.’ Their work demonstrates that when sampling schemes better represent the geographic distribution of humans across continents, human population structure is *predominantly* clinal. I have used this argument elsewhere as evidence against the reality of biological race (Hochman, 2013a, 2013b). There is no tension between being a metaphysician of race and being sensitive to the influence folk conceptual schemes have on scientists and those who interpret their work.

5. Conclusion/Rapprochement

Given the mismatch between what most metaphysicians of race actually do and how the deflationists describe the metaphysics of race, we should prefer the standard, broad definition of the metaphysics of race to one that narrows the field by defining it as monist, as non-normative, and as committed to false dichotomies. The metaphysics of race is best understood as the philosophical study of the nature and reality of race, with the proviso that ‘race’ may have multiple natures and realities, or no reality at all. The metaphysics of race, properly understood, is a valuable philosophical project. Whether race is biologically real, socially real, or not real at all is important to scientists, to humanities scholars, and to non-specialists alike. These questions are central to understanding human biological diversity, our

social world, and our own identities. How we answer them has far-reaching consequences: in policy, in medicine, and in countless other areas.

The deflationists have been deflating an *inflated* notion of the metaphysics of race. If the metaphysics of race has to do with the nature and reality of race, and not necessarily with whether race is ‘*really* real’ in the sense Gannett and Ludwig have in mind, then deflationism about race ought to be understood as Mallon recommends. That is, deflationism is the position that we should stay silent on racial ontology, and determine whether or not we should try to continue or end race-talk (and presumably also race-thoughts and racialized structures and practices).

Interestingly, on the standard definition, both Ludwig and Gannett count as metaphysicians of race. Ludwig argues that “the ontological status of race depends on normative and not metaphysical issues,” so he is clearly interested in whether race is real (2015, p. 245). Gannett is also interested in whether race is real—she is only against trying to determine whether race is, as she puts it, ‘*really* real.’ Gannett and Ludwig are likely to be interpreted as calling an end to the study of the nature and reality of race—because this is how the metaphysics of race is standardly defined—but they actually make much less radical claims about how ‘race’ ought to be studied.

McPherson is also best understood as a metaphysician of race. While he would prefer race-talk were eliminated and replaced with talk of socioancestry, he endorses pluralism about race. He writes that “We could say that races exist, depending on the meaning of ‘race’ different partisans use to capture their respective ideas” (McPherson, 2015, p. 686). For those who think of the metaphysics of race as a monist enterprise, McPherson will be seen as arguing against a metaphysical approach to ‘race.’ However, as he does not target the metaphysics of race specifically, he is most charitably understood as critiquing what he sees as an inflated version of the metaphysics of race, not the metaphysics of race itself. Mallon, I

have argued, is a genuine deflationist, as he wants to discuss race-talk rather than racial ontology—a position which does contrast with a metaphysical approach to race. As the deflationist case against the metaphysics of race fails, or so I have argued, we have no reason to deflate discussions of racial ontology into ontologically silent discussions about race-talk. Ontologically silent debates about the linguistic practice of race-talk can take place *alongside* metaphysical debates about the reality of race, but they will not be able to replace a metaphysical approach, as they are open to metaphysical critique.

Mallon argues that under certain conditions we are morally obliged to ignore the metaphysics of race. As he points out, there is no direct entailment between a metaphysical position about race and particular practices of race-talk. He argues that, “If, for example, we decide that the use of ‘race’ talk is deeply oppressive, no argument to the effect that such talk refers to a biological population or a social construction would be of sufficient weight to merit the continuation of this practice. In contrast, if we decided that the use of ‘race’ talk is morally required, or carries enormous epistemic benefits, skeptical arguments that racial terms do not, strictly speaking, refer to anything would be appropriately ignored in deciding how we use these terms” (Mallon, 2006, p. 549). While this approach appears praiseworthy, it is only a distant hope that there could be widespread agreement about whether race talk is “deeply oppressive” or “morally required.” To talk about race as if it were real on ethical grounds, while believing that it is not real (or vice versa) is an invitation to one’s political opponents to cry “political correctness.” Those who believe that race is real, but that it is deeply oppressive to even talk about it, may do better to try to work out why this is the case, and to fight for change, rather than to ignore the reality of race. On the other hand, those who believe that race is not real, but that it is sometimes useful to speak of ‘races,’ might find that race-talk can actually be replaced by reference to racialized groups, to ethnicity, or to ancestry, depending on the group, and depending on the context.

My analysis suggests that there is less distance between self-titled metaphysicians of race and their critics than we might have thought, and that a rapprochement may be possible. Bearing in mind that many already do these things, metaphysicians of race can reject the semantic strategy of appealing to a determinative theory of reference to decide the meaning and reality of race; they can either accept pluralism or defend their monism; they can reject the dichotomy between biological and social causation; and they can pay attention to the ways in which folk and scientific conceptual schemes interact.

The remaining issue is the role that ethical considerations should play in the metaphysics of race. The deflationists argue that the field ignores or even forecloses investigation into the ethical dimensions of ‘race.’ Aimed at the field, rather than at some select metaphysicians of race, this critique fails. As I have illustrated through the work of Appiah, Haslanger, Mills, Sundstrom and Taylor, some metaphysics of race engages with the normative and ethical issues. Gannett and Ludwig focus primarily on philosophers of biology, and their worry may apply to more scholars working on the natural rather than the social metaphysics of race—a point to which I will return momentarily.

Some metaphysicians of race are indeed silent on the ethical and political issues surrounding their work, and there is reason to worry about this. There is a concern that a small minority of race naturalists who present their work as independent of social concerns may actually be pushing a racist agenda. There is a related concern, here expressed by Sundstrom, about “a naive form of “racial” skepticism that has become popular in U.S. conservative politics” that is used to justify ‘colorblind’ ideologies, according to which there is no need to make reparations for past ‘racial’ injustice because, after all, ‘race’ is an illusion (Sundstrom, 2002b, p. 194).

Metaphysicians of race should be careful not to be complicit with those who use metaphysical argument to push a racist agenda while at the same time veiling that agenda

behind their seemingly apolitical arguments. However, some metaphysicians of race may be engaging in a kind of strategic silence on matters of a political nature. I suspect that this approach may be most common in the biological race debate. For instance some anti-realists about biological race may believe that their position is the one most likely to bring about social justice, but still argue that races are not real in the same way that unicorns aren't real: they just don't exist. They may worry that to voice their political opinions or to claim that biological race is not real because it is, say, a dangerous category, will be met with accusations of political correctness, and is furthermore unnecessary given other powerful arguments against the reality of biological race. Some may also worry, rightly or wrongly, that allowing ethics to influence ontology would involve a conflation of fact and value. It is likely that it is concerns such as these, and not the mistakes discussed by the deflationists, which explain why political and ethical considerations are not discussed by some metaphysicians of race.

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