

A Framework for the Metaphysics of Race

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Philosophers have appealed to a wide variety of different factors in providing a metaphysics of race: appearance, ancestry, systems of oppression, shared ways of life, and so-called ‘racial essences’. My aim in this paper is to distinguish four importantly different questions about racial groups that one may be answering in appealing to these factors. I’ll show that marking these distinctions promises to have a substantial impact on on-going debates in the metaphysics of race. In particular, marking the distinctions will be shown to breathe new life into an old debate between racial realists and antirealists, rendering it a substantive metaphysical, as opposed to merely verbal, debate. Moreover, we will see how marking the distinctions reveals new avenues for addressing challenges to biological and constructionist accounts of race, including the charge that constructionism wrongly implies that no one could be Black or Asian in the absence of racialized oppression.

1. The Factors

In this section, I provide a brief survey of the different sorts of factors that figure in the different approaches to answering metaphysical questions about race. Subsequently, I’ll distinguish four types of questions these factors may be invoked to answer (§2), and I’ll examine some representative attempts to formulate answers to the different questions in terms of those factors (§3).

Biological approaches answer metaphysical questions about race in terms of biological features. *Racialist* biological approaches answer metaphysical questions about race in terms of ‘racial essences’, where a racial essence is meant to be a heritable inner state that gives rise to a distinctive set of innate intellectual capacities and behavioral tendencies, shared across all members of a given race. There certainly are no such things as racial essences, so construed, but the notion of a racial essence has historically played a significant role in theorizing about race.¹ *Deflationist* biological approaches answer metaphysical questions about race in terms physical

¹ See Appiah (1996: 66-98) on the history of racialist thinking, and see Hardimon (2017: 19-25) for the case against racial essences.

appearance and/or ancestry. They are deflationary insofar as the biological features they invoke are, in comparison to racial essences, of relatively minimal (if any) biological interest or importance.²

Constructionist approaches answer metaphysical questions about race in terms of social phenomena. *Political* constructionists answer metaphysical questions about race in terms of systems of oppression: people being marked for and subjected to privileged or subordinate treatment on account of their appearance or ancestry. *Cultural* constructionists, by contrast, answer metaphysical questions about race in terms of participation in, or identification with, distinctive shared ways of life.³

Readers familiar with this literature will be accustomed to seeing a tripartite distinction drawn here, listing *antirealist* approaches—according to which there are no races—as an alternative to biological and constructionist approaches.⁴ In the present context, however, the realism–antirealism distinction is largely orthogonal to the biological–constructionist distinction. Antirealists can (and often do) offer biological answers to metaphysical questions about race, contending that a group counts as a race only if its members share some distinctive biologically significant property, and going on to conclude that there are no races on the grounds that no groups meet the specified biological conditions for counting as a race. (More on this in §4.)

2. The Questions

I'll now distinguish four types of metaphysical questions that a given account might be invoked to answer: *category questions*, *existence questions*, *membership questions*, and *property questions*. I'll call proposed answers to these questions *category theses*, *existence theses*, *membership theses*, and *property theses*, respectively. I avoid referring to racial groups with terms like 'Asians' or 'White people', since these plausibly refer plurally to the members of the group, whereas (as we

² See Andreasen (1998), Kitcher (1999), Hardimon (2003, 2017), Gracia (2005: 85), Spencer (2014, 2019), and Glasgow and Woodward (2015).

³ See Omi and Winant (1986: ch. 4), Mills (1998), Haslanger (2012, 2019), and Boxill (2001: 29-38) for political constructionist accounts. Jeffers (2013) defends a reading of Du Bois as shifting from cultural constructionism in his (1897) to political constructionism in his (1940), and Jeffers himself defends a political/cultural hybrid (2019: 54-72). For other constructionist accounts, see Mallon (2004), Alcoff (2006), Pierce (2015: 79-83), and Ásta (2018: ch. 5).

⁴ Antirealists include Zack (1993: ch.2), Appiah (1996: 71-4), Blum (2002: 137-41), and Hochman (2013, 2017).

shall see in §2.1) the racial groups themselves purport to be something over and above their members. Instead, I adopt a convention of using small caps to refer to putative racial groups, like so: AMERICAN INDIAN, ASIAN, BLACK, PACIFIC ISLANDER, WHITE.

2.1 Category and Existence Questions

One key range of questions in the metaphysics of race concerns whether or why a group is properly categorized as a race. We can ask of those groups we regard as races whether they truly are races. We can ask why ASIAN is a race, or we can ask more generally under what conditions and in virtue of what a group counts as race. We can ask what it takes for a group to become a race, and what it takes for a group to remain a race. Call these **category questions**.

A second range of questions concerns the very existence of the relevant groups. We can ask, of those people we ordinarily take to make up a racial group, for instance the 2.3 million living Pacific Islanders, whether there truly does exist a group consisting of those people, and if so why it exists. Existence questions can be asked in a particularized way—we can ask why ASIAN exists—or we can ask more generally, of those groups that count as races, why they exist. We can ask why the groups come into existence, and what it takes for the groups to remain in existence. Call these sorts of questions **existence questions**.

Category and existence questions are conflated by such phrasings as ‘Why are there races?’ or ‘Why do races exist?’ This could mean: why do groups like BLACK and WHITE (which if they exist are races) exist? Or it could mean: why do groups like BLACK and WHITE (if they exist) count as races? The former question is asking for *ontologically significant* factors, by which I mean factors that explain why there is something (with those people as members) rather than nothing (apart from the people themselves). This is an existence question. The latter question is asking for *racially significant* factors, by which I mean factors that explain why the group in question counts as a race. This is a category question.

The difference can also be brought out by considering IRISH, the group consisting of all and only Irish people. On some accounts, IRISH became a race sometime in the nineteenth century, on account of the oppression of Irish Americans.⁵ Proponents of such accounts will likely want to give different answers to the category question of when IRISH came to be race and the existence

⁵ See Haslanger (2012: 238).

question of when IRISH came into existence. They will say that IRISH existed both before and after acquiring and then losing the property of being a race.

I take existence questions to be substantive questions. Not just any old people together constitute a group, and when some people do constitute a group, there is a substantive question of why they do.⁶ There plausibly is no group whatsoever consisting just of Zendaya, my aunt Ethel, and all people with a prime number of hairs on their head. Nor is it a foregone conclusion that there is a group consisting of the aforementioned 2.3 million Pacific Islanders.

Some may find this puzzling. Aren't Ethel, Zendaya, and the prime-hairs a group of people? Aren't the 2.3 million Pacific Islanders a group of Pacific Islanders? More generally, so long as there are some Fs, isn't it trivial that they are a group of Fs? And if making up a group is trivial and automatic in this way, how could there be a substantive question of why there exists a group consisting of these or those people?

This puzzlement can be addressed by attending to the ambiguity of the term 'group'. In one sense of 'group', a group is just a plurality or set of things. In this thin sense of 'group', it's trivial to say that there is a group of Pacific Islanders, since 'the group of Pacific Islanders' is just a roundabout way of referring to the Pacific Islanders themselves (or the set of them), and there indeed is no sensible question of why there is a group of them.

When we talk about racial groups, however, we are not using 'group' in this thin sense. Racial groups (if they exist at all) are capable of gaining and losing members, whereas sets and pluralities have all of their members essentially.⁷ A racial group itself is supposed to be something that long pre-dates the particular plurality or set of people who now make up the group. Racial groups (if they exist) have a different history, different membership conditions, and different persistence conditions from the plurality or set of their members. PACIFIC ISLANDER, if it exists, is supposed to be a group in this more robust sense, and when I say that we can sensibly ask whether or why a putative group exists, it is groups of this sort that I have in mind.

If a racial group isn't simply the plurality or set of its members, then what is it? One natural answer is that—as Haslanger (2012) and Ritchie (2020) contend—a racial group is a *kind* or a *type*. This fits well with my contention that not just any old people make up a group, since plausibly

⁶ Cf. Ritchie's (2020: 403) 'Goldilocks Constraint'.

⁷ Cf. Ritchie (2013). Though see Horden and López de Sa (2021) for a spirited defense of the plurality view.

(though not uncontroversially) not just any old things form a kind or a type.⁸ To be sure, some metaphysicians may still prefer an ontologically profligate view on which any arbitrary people make up a robust group, even while recognizing that this would have to be something over and above the (set of) people themselves. This is not the place to address their reservations. I am content simply to have shown that existence questions aren't obviously wrongheaded.

2.2 Membership and Property Questions

The next two questions I wish to distinguish are more directly about individuals, and they tend to be conflated by such phrasings as 'What determines a person's race?'

On the one hand, there are what I'll call **membership questions**. One can ask, for instance, whether a given individual is a member of ASIAN. One can ask more generally for the conditions under which an individual belongs to ASIAN. One can ask, more generally still, what determines which individuals belong to which racial groups.

On the other hand, there are **property questions**. One can ask whether a given individual is Asian. One can ask more generally for the conditions under which an individual counts as Asian. More generally still, one can ask what determines which individuals have which racial properties. Unlike category questions, which address whether or why a whole group has the property of *being a race*, what I am calling property questions address whether or why an individual has such properties as *being White* or *being American Indian*.

The difference between membership and property questions is admittedly subtle, turning on a subtle distinction between (e.g.) being American Indian and being a member of AMERICAN INDIAN. But it is a genuine distinction nonetheless (and, as we will see in §5, a consequential one).

There is, for instance, a formal difference between the questions. An affirmative answer to a membership question logically entails an affirmative answer to a corresponding existence question. If an individual is a member of WHITE, then—since one cannot very well be a member of a group that does not exist—it follows that there exists such a group as WHITE. An affirmative answer to the corresponding property question, by contrast, carries no such logical entailment.

⁸ Haslanger (2012: 148-50 and 300-2) maintains that it is only when some things are unified in some way that there is a kind corresponding to them, though she herself is fairly permissive about what counts as sufficient unity. Khalidi (2013: 78-9) and Ritchie (2020: §5), by contrast, maintain that there are only those kinds that figure in a special class of causal generalizations or inductive inferences.

That an individual has the property of being White does not logically entail the existence of any group to which that individual belongs. Rather, it entails this only together with the substantive assumption that an individual is White only if there exists a further entity, a group of White people, to which that individual belongs.

More generally, to get from a property thesis (e.g. that x is American Indian) to the corresponding membership thesis (e.g. that x is a member of AMERICAN INDIAN), one would need some bridge principle connecting racial properties with racial membership. One such Property–Membership bridge principle is:

(PM) x has P_G at t iff x is a member of G at t .

(Here, P_G stands for the property corresponding to racial group G , for instance *being Black* corresponds to BLACK.) But other bridge principles are possible, for instance PM':

(PM') x has P_G at t iff, at some time t' , x is a member of G at t'

According to PM', one could be White without being a member of WHITE, so long as one was once a member of that group.

The simpler principle PM is likely taken for granted by parties to the debate, though explicit endorsements of the principle are hard to find, let alone arguments in defense of PM or against alternative bridge principles.⁹ Still, if PM cannot plausibly be denied, then the distinction I'm drawing between membership and property theses threatens to be a 'distinction without a difference'. So let me say a few words about the plausibility and coherence of rejecting PM in favor of a principle like PM'.

To see the attraction of a principle like PM', it is helpful to consider scenarios in which your racial group dissolves around you, ceasing to exist in the middle of your lifetime. By the lights of certain constructionist theories, this might happen if racial oppression is eradicated during your lifetime. Or, by the lights of certain biological theorists, it might happen if the degree of reproductive isolation between races drops below a certain threshold during your lifetime.

⁹ The closest I was able to find to an explicit endorsement is Zack (1993: 70): "since neither races nor mixed races exist, black, white, and mixed black and white people do not exist."

Suppose, then, that you are Black, and that—for one of these reasons—the group BLACK will cease to exist tomorrow, but that you will still be alive. Trivially, you will no longer be a member of BLACK, since that group (by hypothesis) won't exist tomorrow, and you can't very well be a member of a group that doesn't exist. I, for one, find it highly plausible that you will still be Black, despite undergoing this 'Cambridge change'. This suggests that retention of properties like being Black, contra PM, does not require that there continue to exist a *group* of Black people (viz. BLACK). There is, then, at least *prima facie* reason to reject PM in favor of an alternative principle like PM', which permits the retention of such properties in the absence of the associated group.

Some, I suspect, will still have their doubts about whether it is even coherent to suppose (as PM' allows) that one can remain Black after BLACK ceases to exist. After all, one might reasonably wonder, if BLACK is one's race, and that race ceases to exist, then how can one still have a racial property like being Black? But there is nothing incoherent here. The idea that people can remain Black after BLACK ceases to be a race is no less coherent than the aforementioned view that people remained Irish after IRISH ceased to be their race. Just as a group can lose its status of being a race without ceasing to exist, a racial property like being Black can lose its status of being a *racial* property without you ceasing to have it. How one *positively* characterizes the property when it ceases to be a racial property will depend (among other things) upon one's background metaphysic. One possibility is that that very property, that was once a racial property, comes to be only a cultural or ethnic property. Another is that it is merely a morphological or genealogical property, now devoid of social significance.

In sum: Membership questions and property questions are different questions. Group-membership by itself logically entails the existence of the associated group, whereas possession of a racial property entails it only together with a substantive bridge principle like PM. It's one thing to ask whether you are Black, and quite another to ask of a supposed additional entity—a group consisting of all and only Black people—whether you stand in the membership relation to it.

I certainly don't mean to suggest that these four questions are the only questions, or even the most important questions, about race that one might wish to answer in biological or constructionist terms. There are also identity questions, about what it is for someone to identify as P_G, or for one's membership in G to be part of one's identity. There are sociological questions, for instance why one's race has such a substantial impact on one's opportunities or worldview. There are questions

in conceptual ethics, for instance about what ‘race’ or ‘Black’ ought to mean. There are practical normative questions, for instance about the proper beneficiaries of affirmative action or reparations. Perhaps one’s answers to the metaphysical questions should inform or draw upon one’s answers to these other, core questions in the philosophy of race. Be that as it may, these are different questions, which may be asked and answered separately.

3. The Answers

As we saw in §1, a wide range of different factors have been invoked in providing a metaphysics of race. However, as we have now seen, there is more than one question to answer in the metaphysics of race, so it’s important to know which question(s) a given theorist means to be answering in invoking those factors. A theorist may of course proceed like a straight-ticket voter, adapting their preferred factors to serve as answers to all four types of questions. I’ll provide two illustrations of what a straight-ticket metaphysics of race might look like, one constructionist and one biological. Though, as we’ll see, a straight-ticket approach is not the only option.

As will be immediately apparent to some readers, I am opting to work with simplistic and imprecise formulations of the different theories of race. I could go on at great length about the deficiencies of these formulations, including but not limited to *prima facie* circularities, omission of important formal details (e.g. temporal and modal operators), and mishandling ‘outliers’, that is, individuals who seem to belong to a given race but who do not have the features that a given account associates with that race.¹⁰ My aim in the paper is not to work out the best answer to the questions at issue but rather to illustrate the value and importance of separating the questions. Accordingly, addressing these deficiencies, and working with more nuanced and unwieldy principles, is more likely to be distracting than edifying, making it harder to see the distinctions I’m trying to draw attention to.

We’ll begin with the political constructionist, who answers metaphysical questions about race in terms of people being privileged or subordinated on account of their appearance, ancestry,

¹⁰ See Boxill (2001: 32-3) and Haslanger (2012: 237 n.17, 2019: 29) on political outliers; Gracia (2005: 86), Glasgow (2009: 78-9), Glasgow and Woodward (2015: 453 n.1), and Hardimon (2017: 34) on morphological outliers; Haslanger (2019: 25 n.15) and Jeffers (2019: 66) on cultural outliers; and Appiah (1996: 54-5) on how racialists historically tried to account for essence outliers.

or imagined racial essence—or, for short, in terms of being politically racialized. A straight-ticket political constructionist might answer our four questions as follows:

A Political Constructionist Straight Ticket

Existence	(PC _E) G exists iff members of G are politically racialized in a distinctive way
Category	(PC _C) G is a race iff members of G are politically racialized in a distinctive way
Membership	(PC _M) x is a member of G iff x is politically racialized as G
Property	(PC _P) x has P _G iff x is politically racialized as G

A straight-ticket biological deflationist, by contrast, might answer the questions as follows:

A Biological Deflationist Straight Ticket

Existence	(BD _E) G exists iff members of G have a distinctive appearance and ancestry
Category	(BD _C) G is a race iff members of G have a distinctive appearance and ancestry
Membership	(BD _M) x is a member of G iff x has the appearance and ancestry characteristic of G
Property	(BD _P) x has P _G iff x has the appearance and ancestry characteristic of G

However, while one might have reasons for embracing a straight-ticket metaphysics of race, there is nothing in principle to prevent one from adopting a hybrid account, answering some questions in terms of one range of factors and others in terms of a quite different range of factors.¹¹ I'll give two examples.

First, one might pair a political constructionist account of why those groups we count as races exist with a biological deflationist account of why those groups are races. For instance:

A Constructed Existence Hybrid

(PC_E) G exists iff members of G are politically racialized in a distinctive way

(BD_C) G is a race iff members of G have a distinctive appearance and ancestry

¹¹ Other *types* of hybrids are possible too, for instance ones that answer a single question in terms of multiple sorts of factors, e.g. Outlaw's (1996: 1-21) biological/cultural hybrid and Jeffers's (2019) political/cultural hybrid.

On such a view, the people we would today regard as Black did not constitute any group at all several thousand years ago. BLACK came into existence as a result of racialized oppression. But it counts as a race (as opposed to, say, an ethnicity) for purely biological reasons, on account of its members having a distinctive appearance and ancestry. Defenders of such a view might also maintain that a group like LATINO doesn't count as a race, since there is no distinctive appearance and ancestry shared by (e.g.) Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, and Mexicans, but that LATINO nevertheless shares much in common with racial groups insofar as it conforms to PCE: it is a social construct that exists as a result of political racialization.

Conversely, one might pair a biological deflationist account of why those groups we count as races exist with a constructionist account of why they are races. For instance:

A Biological Existence Hybrid

(BDE) G exists iff members of G have a distinctive appearance and ancestry

(PC_C) G is a race iff members of G are politically racialized in a distinctive way

On such a view, the group BLACK hasn't always been a race. It acquired the property of being a race only once its members were subjected to racialized oppression. But, the idea goes, that very group existed (without being a race) long before becoming a race—which is possible because on the envisaged view the factors responsible for the generation of the group are different from, and pre-dated, the factors responsible for its being a race.¹²

The two hybrids agree that each race is a politically racialized group with a distinctive appearance and ancestry. Where they diverge is with respect to which of these factors is ontologically significant. For the biological existence hybrid, appearance and ancestry are what's ontologically significant: political racialization merely turns existing groups into races, it doesn't bring groups into existence. For the constructed existence hybrid, political racialization is what's ontologically significant: distinctive appearance and ancestry weren't enough to bring a group into existence, but were enough to make the group (once in existence) count as a race.

¹² Cf. Pierce (2015: 89-91) and Jeffers (2019: 184-6).

The main takeaway at this juncture is simply that, when raising an objection against a deflationist account or a constructionist account, one must attend to which sort of thesis (an existence thesis? a property thesis?) one is targeting, and (correlatively) which sort of thesis one's opponent is advancing. After all, one's opponent may not accept a straight ticket and, even if she does, she may be able to escape the objection by retreating to a hybrid.

4. Making Biological Significance Matter

We are now in a position to see some of the payoffs of separating these metaphysical questions. In this section, I'll show how shifting attention from category questions to existence questions can breathe new life into the common complaint that the biological differences across races are too insignificant to underwrite a biological account of race. In §4.1, I'll examine Kwame Anthony Appiah's objection from biological insignificance, which targets biological category theses, and how one biological deflationist, Michael Hardimon, shrugs off the objection. Then, in §4.2, we'll see how the appeal to biological insignificance can be repackaged as a formidable challenge to biological existence theses.

4.1 Appiah vs. Hardimon

The biological differences between (putative) races are fairly insignificant. The degree of genetic variation between the (putative) groups we regard as races, for instance, is not even close to the degree of variation one finds between recognised subspecies of nonhuman animal species.¹³ This much is widely accepted among philosophers of race, and not up for debate. What is debatable, however, is the philosophical upshot of the biological insignificance of racial divisions.

In his classic defense of racial antirealism, Appiah (1996: 71-4) put the biological insignificance of racial differences to work in a dilemma for biological approaches. Biological approaches will either be racialist, taking the form of something like RA_C, or deflationist, taking the form of something like BD_C:

(RA_C) G is a race iff members of G have a distinctive racial essence

(BD_C) G is a race iff members of G have a distinctive appearance and ancestry

¹³ See Hochman (2013, 2014), Templeton (2013), and Hardimon (2017: 107-9) on whether races can be regarded as subspecies.

If something like RAC is true, the idea goes, then race would be a biologically significant category, but nothing satisfies the stated conditions (since there are no racial essences), so it follows that there are no races. BDC, on the other hand, cannot be true because, although there are groups that have the indicated features, those features are biologically insignificant whereas race is supposed to be a biologically significant category.¹⁴

Michael Hardimon embraces the second horn, insisting (rightly, in my view) that the biological features that make a group a race needn't be biologically significant.¹⁵ In his own words:

'In introducing the notion of *biological interest*, Appiah is changing the topic. The original subject was *existence*. [Races] might exist *and* be biologically boring. Should this turn out to be the case ... they might fail to merit the attention of biologists, but *exist* nonetheless.'
(2017: 70)

Antirealists could respond that it's built into the very meaning of 'race' that the term applies only to groups that are demarcated by biologically significant properties. But the burden seems to be squarely on the antirealist to demonstrate that the assumption of biological significance is not merely widely associated with 'race' but, moreover, figures in its meaning and application conditions. This is especially awkward for Appiah, who intends his case against biological approaches to be effective even against those who deny that 'race' has a descriptive ('ideational') meaning.

We are at an impasse: Hardimon 'ponenses' (race is a matter of appearance and ancestry, so race turns out not to be a biologically significant category) where Appiah 'tollenses' (race is supposed to be a biologically significant category, so race isn't just a matter of appearance and ancestry).¹⁶ Moreover, this impasse has the feel of a verbal dispute. Appiah and Hardimon agree that there are groups satisfying the conditions on the right-hand side of BDC. They disagree only about whether the term 'race' applies to these groups they both believe in.¹⁷

¹⁴ Cf. Zack (1993: ch. 2, 2001).

¹⁵ Cf. Gracia (2005: 81), Spencer (2014: 1035), and Glasgow and Woodward (2015: 453-4).

¹⁶ Similarly, Zack (2001: 50-1) and Hochman (2013: 334) ponens, whereas Hardimon (2017: 77-9) tollenses, on *if biologically-defined races are robust natural kinds, then there are no biologically-defined races*.

¹⁷ Cf. Mallon (2006: §4).

4.2 Appiah's Revenge: The Argument from Ontological Significance

Appiah's argument from biological insignificance targets deflationist category theses. Antirealists may be better served, however, by an argument that targets deflationist existence theses. In other words, rather than arguing that shared appearance and ancestry can't make the difference between an existing group's being or not being a race, one argues that shared appearance and ancestry aren't ontologically significant: they can't account for why these people (of common ancestry and appearance) constitute a group at all.¹⁸

We do think that biological factors can sometimes be ontologically significant. When, as a result of long stretches of reproductive isolation, some organisms end up substantially different genetically even from their closest relatives, we are inclined to think that these organisms make up a group (e.g., a species or subspecies). This is plausible to the extent that those organisms count as an importantly different *kind* of thing from their closest relatives. But, as indicated above, the genetic difference between putative races is miniscule compared to the genetic difference between recognised subspecies of nonhuman animal species. So, whereas there are biological reasons for thinking that there is a group consisting of all and only Bengal Tigers (aka the subspecies *Panthera tigris tigris*), there are no comparable biological reasons for thinking that there is a group consisting of all and only Pacific Islanders. Therein lies the cost of downplaying, as Hardimon does (2017: 77-9), the idea that racial differences mark a genuine difference in kind.

Social and psychological factors can also plausibly be ontologically significant. The explanation of why there is a group consisting of the nine Supreme Court justices is going to cite such things as the legislation that defined the roles of the justices, the appointment of each of the present justices, and the justices' performance of their duties. Similarly, a political constructionist (in line with PC_E) may point to how people of (stereo)typical American Indian appearance and ancestry are affected by systems of oppression and background ideologies in explaining why American Indians constitute a group. But this explanation of the existence of AMERICAN INDIAN won't be available to a biological deflationist, or at any rate not a straight-ticket deflationist who accepts BD_E.

¹⁸ Cf. Hochman (2014).

The challenge here can be reconfigured as an argument for the nonexistence of races. Consider some arbitrary plurality of people who intuitively do not constitute a group, for instance Bulgarians whose second toe is longer than their big toe. Let's call such people 'Toegarians', and *if* there is a group consisting, at any given time, of all and only the Toegarians who exist at that time, let 'TOEGARIAN' name that group. The argument, then, runs as follows (framed as an argument for the nonexistence of WHITE).¹⁹

The Argument from Ontological Significance

- (OS1) If there is no ontologically significant difference between two putative groups G and G*, then: G exists iff G* exists
- (OS2) There is no ontologically significant difference between WHITE and TOEGARIAN
- (OS3) TOEGARIAN doesn't exist
- (OS4) So, WHITE doesn't exist

Here's the idea behind OS1. An *ontologically significant difference* is a difference between two entities that could account for why the one but not the other exists. What OS1 is saying is that, if there's a group consisting of these people, and no group consisting of those people, then there must be some difference between these people and those people that accounts for why the ones but not the others make up a group; it can't just be a brute fact.

The idea behind OS2 is that there's no difference between WHITE and TOEGARIAN in particular that could account for why the one but not the other exists. To be sure, there are *some* differences. TOEGARIAN (if it exists) is associated with a characteristic toe-length, whereas WHITE (if it exists) is associated with a characteristic skin-color, and whereas TOEGARIAN groups people by whether they have Bulgarian roots, WHITE groups people by whether they have Eurasian roots. But those don't strike one as the sorts of differences that could make an ontological difference.

The sorts of differences that racialists invoke, by contrast, would have what it takes to undermine OS2. If there were racial essences, then they would mark a deep difference between members and non-members of a given racial group, unifying members of the group in a deep and

¹⁹ Pierce (2015: 91-5) can be read as running a version of this argument but in the opposite direction: that, on pain of arbitrariness, we must accept that, for any arbitrary plurality of people, there is a group consisting of those people.

important way. Racial essences would not only be biologically significant, but would also plausibly be ontologically significant. Yet there are no racial essences. So, the racialist fails even to identify a genuine difference between WHITE and TOEGARIAN.

In this way, we arrive at a more potent version of Appiah's dilemma. Biological existence theses will either be racialist, like RA_E, or deflationist, like BD_E:

(RA_E) G exists iff members of G have a distinctive racial essence

(BD_E) G exists iff members of G have a distinctive appearance and ancestry

RA_E identifies what would be a biologically and ontologically significant difference between WHITE and TOEGARIAN, but since there are no racial essences RA_E is no help in resisting the argument from ontological significance for the nonexistence of racial groups. BD_E, by contrast, identifies features that people do in fact have, but that aren't biologically or ontologically significant, in which case (again) they are of no help in resisting the argument from ontological significance.

One possible strategy for resisting OS2 involves embracing the constructed existence hybrid introduced in §3:

(PC_E) G exists iff members of G are politically racialized in a distinctive way

(BD_C) G is a race iff members of G have a distinctive appearance and ancestry

Here the idea is to account for the existence of WHITE in constructionist terms. It is, after all, entirely plausible that the practices, intentions, and ideologies involved in political racialization are the sorts of things that can bring a (social) group into existence, marking an ontologically significant difference between WHITE and TOEGARIAN. At the same time, one retains the deflationist category thesis, that is, the deflationist account of why the (constructed) group counts as a race. The resulting view is a radical departure from standard deflationist views, on which the relevant groups long pre-dated the modern era. Deflationists may therefore be reluctant to embrace the hybrid. It would be interesting, however, if the argument from ontological significance pushed them to it.

Finally, OS3 says that there is no group consisting of all and only Toegarians and that gains and loses members as Toegarians die and are born. This strikes me as abundantly plausible: Bulgarians with especially long second toes seem like as good an example as any of some people who don't constitute a group. Some people do together constitute a group; others don't; and this seems like a good example of the latter.

Some, however, may find OS3 not only false but *obviously* false, and be puzzled about how anyone could find it acceptable. But recall (from §2.1) that 'group' is ambiguous, and in one sense of 'group' a group is just a set or plurality. In that sense, it's true that there is a group of Toegarians, and trivially so. However, TOEGARIAN, even if it does exist, cannot be a group in this sense. As I explained in §2.1, a group like TOEGARIAN cannot be a plurality or set, since pluralities and sets cannot change their members, while TOEGARIAN (*ex hypothesi*) gains and loses members as Toegarians die and are born. If TOEGARIAN does exist, it's because a controversial and ontologically profligate view of groups is true, one that commits one to far more than a mundane ontology of arbitrary sets and pluralities.²⁰

That being said, some may reject OS3 with eyes wide open, recognizing that doing so commits them to an ontologically profligate view of groups. I won't try to convince them otherwise. My aim in this section is not to show that the argument from ontological significance is irresistible, but only that shifting focus from category to existence questions opens up new avenues for putting the biological insignificance of racial divisions to work in an argument for antirealism, and for moving away from a mere verbal dispute about the application conditions of 'race' and towards a genuinely ontological question of whether racialized people make up any group at all.

In sum: It can, at first, be hard to see why it should matter whether the factors figuring in the deflationist's analysis of race are biologically significant. This is particularly hard to see when one focuses on category questions, since it's far from obvious that a group *has* to be demarcated by biologically significant features in order to count as a race. Where biological significance begins to matter is when we turn our attention from category questions to existence questions. For the less biologically significant the differentiating features are, the less plausible it is that they are

²⁰ Cf. Griffith (2023: 240) on Glasgow and Woodward's "onerous ontology" of basic kinds.

ontologically significant, rendering them unsuitable for answering existence questions or for resisting the argument from ontological significance.

5. Arguments from Thought Experiments

We have just seen how separating various questions in the metaphysics of race reveals new ways of arguing for the nonexistence of races. Separating the questions also introduces new avenues for *resisting* arguments for the nonexistence of races, for instance Joshua Glasgow's arguments from thought experiments.

Arguments from thought experiments have two parts: the part where the targeted theory is said to have a certain counterintuitive implication, and the part where the counterintuitive implication is said to be problematic. Assessing the second part leads to thorny questions about the relevance and reliability of intuitions about far-out cases. My interest, though, is in the first part: do the relevant theories genuinely have the implications that Glasgow takes them to have? More specifically, exactly which answers to which metaphysical questions are meant to yield these implications, and can those answers be revised in such a way as to avoid the implications without abandoning the core commitments of the relevant position?

5.1 The Reboot

Let's start with Glasgow's 'reboot' thought experiment, which is meant to cause trouble for constructionist accounts of racial groups.²¹

THE REBOOT

A plague has swept the Earth, and all humans are dead with the exception of an ancestrally diverse handful of infants, who have been transported to a remote island untouched by the plague. Futuristic technology keeps the newborns alive until they can care for themselves. The newborns come of age untouched by humanity's past racist ideologies, and they do not end up organizing their lives around differences in their skin color or ancestry.

²¹ See Glasgow (2019: 133).

Here is Glasgow's explanation for why this is supposed to be a problem for constructionist accounts of race:

'Because every racial practice, along with every result of our racialized past, dies off with the adults, constructionism is **forced** to say that a (racially) Asian baby stops being (racially) Asian when the last adult dies.... That is not how race purports to work. Surely the babies would still have their races after the adults perish.' (2019: 133)

Some constructionists may be inclined to bite the bullet and concede that none of the reboot babies are Asian.²² I want to examine whether, and if so in virtue of what exactly, constructionists are 'forced' to make this concession.

One immediate obstacle to assessing this claim is that we lack a clear definition of what a *constructionist* is. (Someone who accepts constructionist membership theses? Constructionist existence theses?) Since prominent formulations of constructionism have taken the form of a category thesis (e.g., Haslanger 2012: 236-7), let's begin by seeing how one is supposed to get from a constructionist category thesis to the conclusion that none of the reboot babies are Asian. We'll take PC_C as our representative example:

(PC_C) G is a race iff members of G are politically racialized in a distinctive way

PC_C does not, all by itself, entail the property thesis that none of the reboot babies are Asian. The most one can get out of PC_C is that no group of those babies is a race. To get from there

²² 'Asian' is ambiguous between a continental use that picks out anyone living in the Asian continent, including Russians, and a racial use that excludes Russians. By '(racially) Asian', I take Glasgow to be indicating that he is using 'Asian' in the latter sense. Alternatively, it's possible to interpret Glasgow as using 'is (racially) Asian' to mean something like *is Asian and is a member of the associated race*. But this would deprive his argument of much of its bite, for he would not then be saddling constructionists with the manifestly counterintuitive conclusion that the babies are not Asian (contradicting what he says on p.134), but only with the conclusion that it is not both the case that the babies are Asian and that they are members of a group that has the property of being a race. One is not obviously 'biting a bullet' in accepting the latter conclusion.

to the conclusion that no babies are Asian we're going to need some additional premises. Here is one possible reconstruction of the missing argument:

The Reboot Argument

(RB1) If PC_C is true, then ASIAN is not a race after the reboot

(RB2) If ASIAN is not a race after the reboot, then ASIAN does not exist after the reboot

(RB3) If ASIAN does not exist after the reboot, then none of the reboot babies are Asian

(RB4) Some of the reboot babies are Asian

(RB5) So, PC_C is false

The case for RB1 is straightforward: after the reboot, no groups are politically racialized, so (by PC_C) there are no races, and *a fortiori*, ASIAN is not a race. But what about RB2 and RB3?

RB2 rests on an assumption about the persistence conditions of racial groups: that the racial group ASIAN will cease to exist if it ceases to be a race. Defenders of PC_C can resist the argument right here, by rejecting that assumption and maintaining that races are only contingently races. Just as a professor can cease to be a professor without ceasing to exist, the idea goes, a race can cease to be a race without ceasing to exist. If races are only contingently races, then one can pair a positive answer to the existence question of whether ASIAN exists after the reboot with a negative answer to the category question of whether ASIAN is a race after the reboot, thereby clearing the way to rejecting RB2.

This sort of response fits nicely with a biological existence hybrid (§3) on which ASIAN came into existence tens of thousands of years ago, and became a race only about five hundred years ago when the group was first politically racialized. Such a group would plausibly remain in existence after ceasing to be politically racialized and therefore ceasing to be a race. Moreover, many constructionists likely already accept that races are only contingently races, as evidenced by the oft-mentioned example of the Irish: IRISH (it is said) was once a race, as a result of political racialization, but continued to exist (without being a race) after the political racialization had ended (see Haslanger 2012: 238).

One might reasonably wonder whether this strategy for resisting RB2 is in tension with its stated purpose, namely securing the result that some of the babies are Asian. After all, the idea goes, if being Asian is a racial property, how could anyone still have that property once ASIAN

ceases to be a race? But as emphasized in §2.2, there is nothing incoherent here. Being a racial property, on the envisaged account, is a contingent property of the property of being Asian. Those reboot babies have the selfsame property of being Asian that their ancestors had: a property that once was, but after the reboot ceased to be, a racial property.

As for RB3, this too rests on an assumption that is not already cooked into PC_C , concerning the link between racial properties and racial membership, namely what (in §2.2) I called PM:

(PM) x has P_G at t iff x is a member of G at t

This would indeed entail that a reboot baby is Asian only if ASIAN exists, just as RB3 says. One might reject this principle, however, instead endorsing the weaker principle, PM':

(PM') x has P_G at t iff, at some time t' , x is a member of G at t'

Such a principle would say that the relevant reboot babies *are* Asian, even if ASIAN ceases to exist after the reboot, since it once existed and they were members of it when they were first born. We have already seen (in §2.2) that PM' is perfectly coherent and arguably preferable to PM. Indeed, it seems to me perfectly reasonable for a PC_C -constructionist to prefer PM' to PM *precisely because* the latter and not the former delivers the intuitively correct result that the reboot babies are Asian.

(Glasgow's argument could be fortified against this response by considering the second generation of reboot babies. PM' cannot yield the result that offspring of the reboot babies are Asian, on the assumption that ASIAN ceases to exist once racialized oppression ends. However, a revised principle can do the trick: x has P_G at t iff, at some time t' , x is a member of G at t' *or* x has ancestors who were members of G . Objection: doesn't this revised principle entail that we are all Black, on account of all having ancestors who were members of BLACK? Reply: not if the constructionist existence thesis PC_E is true. For many people, to find their Black ancestors one must go back to a time that pre-dates political racialization and thus, by the lights of PC_E , pre-dates the existence of BLACK.²³)

²³ Thanks here to Danny Underwood for helpful discussion.

What we have just seen is that it is a tortuous road from PC_C to Glasgow's counterintuitive implication, and that there are premises other than RB4 for a PC_C -constructionist to reject. To be sure, there are *some* varieties of constructionism for which the consequence that none of the reboot babies are Asian is inescapable, for instance the political constructionist straight ticket outlined in §3. The straight ticket commits one to this result in virtue of its property thesis:

(PC_P) x has racial property P_G iff x is politically racialized as G

Since none of the babies are politically racialized, PC_P will entail that none of them have the property *being Asian*—that is to say, none of them are Asian.

But straight tickets are not compulsory. A political constructionist who embraces PC_E and PC_C could reject the straight ticket, replacing PC_P with a deflationist property thesis:

(BD_P) x has P_G iff x has the appearance and ancestry characteristic of G

Here the idea would be that people have had the property of being Asian for many millennia, since that's just the property of having certain sorts of ancestors and physical characteristics. But, the idea goes, that property was unnamed and of no significance until it was rendered socially significant by processes of political racialization. The envisaged constructionist can still flaunt her constructionist credentials, maintaining that political racialization is both what makes it the case that those people now constitute a group (as per PC_E) and what makes that group a race (as per PC_C). The resulting view seems clearly to be a 'constructionist' view, and yet, once again, permits one to affirm that the reboot babies are Asian.

Glasgow's reboot argument is anything but straightforward. It applies most directly to flatfooted straight-ticket constructionists, but is ineffective against those who adopt various hybrid accounts. Whether a given constructionist is truly in a position to adopt one of these hybrid accounts depends largely on whether the hybrids are compatible with their specific motivations for adopting the constructionist answers they do, and motivations may vary from one constructionist to the next. Placing the burden back on Glasgow, however, a full defense of the reboot argument would require showing that these hybrids are somehow untenable or unmotivated.

6.2 *The Transformation*

Let's turn to a second thought experiment, wielded by Glasgow against what he calls 'genealogical theories', a form of biological deflationism according to which 'races are populations produced by the breeding patterns of our ancestors' (2019: 120). The thought experiment runs as follows:

THE TRANSFORMATION

Scientists infuse the global water supply with a chemical that causes every human being on Earth to look exactly like the Dalai Lama. Geographical and cultural forces (such as language and dress) continue to impact breeding patterns, however, and the ancestral populations existing prior to the transformation are preserved, at least for a few generations.

Glasgow offers the following explanation for why this case is meant to pose a problem for genealogical theories:

'In that world, ancestral populations have not (yet) faded away. But race *has* disappeared in that world, because we look the same. There aren't any black people in the world of only Dalai Lamas. But there are still people with recent ancestry that is entirely from sub-Saharan Africa ... [R]aces must, by definition, be *visibly distinct*, but populations need not be.' (2019: 121-122).

Glasgow is advancing two different objections here: first that genealogical theories wrongly imply that there are still races after the transformation, and second that genealogical theories wrongly imply that some people are Black after the transformation.

In order to evaluate whether 'genealogical theories' have the advertised implications, we have to know which of our metaphysical questions those genealogical theories are answering, and we need to examine the precise formulation of those answers. For concreteness, let's suppose (in line with current theories of human evolution and population genetics) that—for tens of thousands of years, due to geographical barriers—people in the Americas reproduced predominantly only with one another, and likewise for people in East Asia, Eurasia, Oceania, and sub-Saharan Africa. Call the (putative) groups that came into existence as a result of these breeding patterns *continental populations*, and call the original members of a given population *the founding plurality*. Let's

suppose that the genealogical theorist identifies BLACK with AFRICAN (i.e., the population that came into existence in sub-Saharan Africa), WHITE with EURASIAN, and so on.²⁴

Now let's see what exactly the genealogical analysis might amount to, beginning with a flatfooted genealogical straight ticket.²⁵

A Genealogical Straight Ticket

Existence	(GE _{E1}) G came into existence because its founding plurality emerged from a sufficiently long period of reproductive isolation (GE _{E2}) G continues to exist iff descendants of the founding plurality reproduce predominantly with one another
Category	(GE _C) G is a race iff members of G are descendants of members of a continental population's founding plurality
Membership	(GE _M) x is a member of G iff x has ancestors in G's founding plurality
Property	(GE _P) x is P _G iff x has ancestors in G's founding plurality

If this is Glasgow's intended target, then he's entirely right. GE_{E2} entails that BLACK still exists after the transformation; GE_C entails that it's still a race; and GE_P entails that some people are Black after the transformation.

Straight tickets, as we have seen, are not compulsory. The primary motivation behind genealogical theories, as I understand it, is to demonstrate that there are real groups, recognized by biologists, that are poised to serve as referents for the names of races in ordinary discourse. To secure this end, it is enough to accept something like the genealogical membership thesis and existence theses stated above. But a genealogical theorist, compatibly with these motivations, can place further constraints on what it takes for a continental population to qualify as a race, requiring for instance that its members also have a distinctive appearance. In other words, they can reject GE_C in favor something like GE_{C'}:

(GE_{C'}) G is a race iff members of G are descendants of a continental population's founding plurality and have a distinctive appearance

²⁴ See, e.g., Andreasen (1998), Kitcher (1999), Hardimon (2017: ch.5), and especially Spencer (2014, 2019: §4) for views along these lines.

²⁵ Like the straight tickets presented in §3, this genealogical straight ticket is certainly in need of some fine-tuning. Among other things, since we all have ancestry tracing back to sub-Saharan Africa, some modification is needed in order to avoid the result that all humans are Black (and members of BLACK). See Spencer (2019: 89-92 and 100-1) for some discussion.

On such a view, BLACK (i.e., the continental population AFRICAN) came into existence many tens of thousands of years ago; it was a race prior to the transformation; and it ceases to count as a race—but remains in existence—after the transformation. Indeed, on such a view, all continental populations cease to be races after the transformation, despite (as mandated by the core existence and membership theses) continuing to exist as groups. Such a view thereby avoids the counterintuitive implication that there are races after the transformation.

How about the second alleged implication of genealogical theories, namely that there are Black people after the transformation? It is open to genealogical theorists to insist that, whereas *membership* in the relevant groups (BLACK, ASIAN, etc.) is entirely a matter of ancestry, the possession of racial properties is not just a matter of ancestry. Rather, having racial properties is at least partly a matter of belonging to a race. Accordingly, genealogical theorists may wish to replace GE_P with something like $GE_{P'}$:

$(GE_{P'})$ x has P_G at t iff (i) x has ancestors in G's founding plurality and (ii) G is a race at t

If $GE_{P'}$ is correct, then the mere fact that there are descendants of past members of BLACK after the transformation does not suffice for there to be Black people after the transformation. BLACK would additionally have to still be race after the transformation. Which it isn't, if $GE_{C'}$ is true. Accordingly, genealogical theorists who pair their core genealogical commitments (the existence and membership theses) with $GE_{C'}$ and $GE_{P'}$ avoid the counterintuitive implication that some people are still Black after the transformation.

To be fair, at least one prominent genealogical theorist—Quayshawn Spencer (2019: 93)—disavows any requirement that races must be visibly distinguishable, and would reject the escape routes ($GE_{C'}$ and $GE_{P'}$) I have outlined. My point here is simply that these escape routes are in principle available to the genealogical theorist and are entirely compatible with the usual motivations for such views.

6. Conclusion

I have drawn attention to a range of different metaphysical questions about race: existence questions, category questions, membership questions, and property questions. We have seen that

careful attention to the differences between the questions, and the in-principle possibility of invoking different factors in answering different questions, has the potential to fortify some arguments in the metaphysics of race and undermine others. And while I certainly don't take myself to have settled any of the hard questions in the metaphysics of race—least of all whether races are biological, social, or nonexistent—I do hope to have provided a framework that philosophers of race will find useful for developing their own views and evaluating challenges to those views.

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