

Joshua Glasgow, Sally Haslanger, Chike Jeffers, and Quayshawn Spencer,

*What Is Race?: Four Philosophical Views*

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‘Race’ is a highly contested category. *What is Race? Four Philosophical Views* brings together four leading philosophers of race to advance their theories and engage with each other. The result is a must-read for any philosopher of race and a highly valuable resource for anyone trying to understand this important and complex topic.

The four philosophical views (or is it five?) are as follows: Sally Haslanger defends *political constructionism*, according to which races are racialized groups (groups believed to be races) that have been placed in a hierarchy; Chike Jeffers defends *cultural constructionism*, the view that races are racialized groups that we ought to value on cultural grounds; Quayshawn Spencer defends *OMB race theory*, according to which races are biological groups that roughly match U.S. census “race” categories and populations identified in certain genetic studies; Joshua Glasgow defends (1) *basic racial realism*, according to which races are appearance-based groups that are not scientifically valid but are real nevertheless, and (2) *anti-realist reconstructionism* according to which racialized groups are real, but “races” are not.

I will discuss each view in turn, starting with Haslanger’s. According to Haslanger, race is a social kind. She compares the transition from a biological to a social interpretation of ‘race’ to the reinterpretation of ‘slave’ from a natural to a social category. Aristotle, she reminds us, believed that certain individuals were slaves by natural disposition. We now understand that slavery is a social relation, and Haslanger recommends an analogous reimagining of race as a social kind.

There is, I believe, a disanalogy between ‘slave’ and ‘race’ that throws doubt on a social kind interpretation of race. Haslanger names the social relation that is unique to slavery and that makes it a social kind: the ownership of one person by another. However, she does not name the social relations that are unique to “race.” For Haslanger, hierarchy is an essential part of “race,” but there are many hierarchically organized groups—nobody believes that all such groups are races. The rest of her definition of race focuses not on what “races” are, but what they are not: biological races. Haslanger does not appear to defend a social kind approach to race, but rather a form of *conferralism* about race (Ásta 2018; for a social kind definition of race, see Msimang 2019). That is, Haslanger sees race as property that is conferred when people are *believed* to belong to biological races and are treated inequitably.

As I’ve argued elsewhere, conferralism reifies race (Hochman 2020). When we agree that money is valuable it *becomes* valuable, but when groups were racialized they did not take on their imagined properties. There are cases where attempted conferrals fail. Belief in witches is not enough to make witches real, even when a hierarchy is created. The same applies to “races.” Haslanger’s view entails the existence of racialized groups, but not necessarily races.

One advantage of Haslanger’s theory is that it directly highlights racism by embedding hierarchy in the definition of race. However, this move renders the idea of racial equality nonsensical. Under Haslanger’s definition, the moment “races” became equal they would no longer be races. Jeffers takes

issue with this: he believes that races would continue to exist so long as racial classification persisted, and that we should want this because we should value (some?) racial cultures.

Jeffers is interpreted by his co-authors as claiming that races are cultural groups, but this is not his considered view. “I can even envision a circumstance,” he explains, “in which both racial hierarchy and racial cultures have faded away but race lives on as a legal distinction that is mainly of bureaucratic significance” (2019, 194). From a metaphysical perspective, Jeffers—like Haslanger—endorses a form of conferralism. This helps him avoid difficult questions about what counts as a racial culture or “way of life” and whether “races” really share such things. However, his view is left open to the criticism of conferralism briefly outlined above.

Spencer defends a form of biological racial realism. He explains that he does “not require a biologically real entity to ‘exist objectively’ or ‘independently of human interest’” or “to be a ‘primary or fundamental category in human population genetics,’ or otherwise be very important to biology” (2019, 94–95). He justifies this deflated notion of biological reality by observing that, for instance, “trivial alleles, such as the 93C allele from the TYRP1 gene” are obviously real (2019, 95).

There is a disanalogy here. Nobody questions whether the 93C allele is an *allele*. However, it is highly controversial to call the genetic clusters Spencer appeals to “races.” They are not called races in the study by Noah Rosenberg and colleagues (2002) that he cites as evidence for his view. What justifies a racial interpretation of these genetic clusters?

For Spencer, the clusters are races because they roughly align with the OMB’s census categories of race, and OMB race-talk is one way in which U.S. citizens understand ‘race.’ So it is not the biological characteristics that make the clusters racial: they do not represent human subspecies, highly genetically differentiated populations, deep cuts in the gradients of human genetic diversity, or some privileged grain of analysis (one of the studies Spencer cites identifies up to 12 clusters). Rather, they are “racial” clusters because of their rough fit with *historical* racial classification.

If Spencer’s biological racial realism doesn’t fall out of the biology, is it defensible? After all, biological racial realism has been, and continues to be, incredibly destructive. Spencer foresees this concern and focuses on the possible benefits of biological racial realism for medical genetics. He acknowledges, though, that “OMB race theory does not imply that OMB races differ in medically relevant allele frequencies” (2019, 104). What it does imply is that “medical scientists who investigate whether there are genetic explanations for racial disparities in health are *not* making a metaphysical mistake provided that the races they are using are OMB races” (Spencer 2019, 104). As such, Spencer gives the green light for “race-based” medicine without evidence directly in its favor.

In response, Glasgow argues that “to whatever extent there appears to be a correlation between races and medical conditions, this correlation is ultimately best explained by social, rather than biological, causes... it is very hard to find medical conditions that correspond to ordinary races” (2019, 119). In a similar vein, Haslanger asks, “On the assumption that the goal is to organize ourselves into meaningful (or potentially meaningful) biological categories for the purposes of medical research, wouldn’t a more fine-grained (or differently grained) classification system be better?” (2019, 154). Excepting studies on how *racism* affects health, the answer is surely “yes.”

Glasgow’s basic racial realism is the view that races are groups that share some visible, physical features. Such groupings are vague, arbitrary, and non-scientific, but that’s alright because not every real category is a scientific category. However, as Jeffers observes, “if basic realism is true... each of us are members of an infinite number of races” because there are countless ways in which the species could be divided by appearance (2019, 187). Insofar as Glasgow wants to capture “how the term ‘race’ is used by ordinary, linguistically competent people in the contemporary United States,” the explosion of “races” on basic racial realism is a big strike against the position (Glasgow 2019, 115).

Moving to his anti-realist reconstructionism, Glasgow's deference to ordinary U.S. citizens in defining race plays a key role in motivating the view. He argues that social and biological racial realism fail because of discrepancies between what ordinary U.S. citizens believe about race (specifically, that there would still be races in a post-racist world and that races are distinguishable by their looks, not just their genes) and what the experts (such as Haslanger and Spencer) believe. In an ordinary sense of the term, then, "races" don't exist. But racialized groups do: "all sides in the race debate can agree that people have treated one another differently based on the belief in race" and "this treatment has impacted real lives in enormous and morally significant ways" that are "implicated in massive injustices that require repair" but that have also created "meaningful practical identities" (Glasgow 2019, 247).

Glasgow's anti-realism relies on his deference to an ordinary concept of race. But is there such a thing? Spencer argues, I think convincingly, that discussions about "race" are so complex that distilling them into "a single meaning of 'race' would not accurately capture what was going on" (2019, 229). While this may be a problem for Glasgow, anti-realists need not adopt his methodology. One might simply argue that racial realism is theoretically untenable—e.g. that "race" isn't really a social kind (Hochman 2019b), and that contemporary biological racial realisms trivialize 'race' to the point of changing the topic (Hochman 2019a).

Haslanger struggles to defend her view against anti-realist reconstructionism. When considering 'racialized group' as a replacement for race in social ontology, she writes that "this is a practical and political issue that is best answered by well-informed activists at a specific historical moment" (2019, 32). However, she defends racial realism without deference to activists, so it is unclear why their contribution is suddenly necessary. Haslanger then points out that "most neologisms don't catch on" (2019, 32). But some do, and they won't if we don't try to make them. Next, she writes that it is "very difficult to cast off an identity without offering another in its place," but reconstructionism requires only minor adjustments to identity (except in the case of biological racists). Reconstructionism doesn't say there are no black people, white people, etc., just that such people constitute racialized groups.

For Haslanger, "it is not at all obvious what is at stake in distinguishing races from racialized groups" (2019, 163). Jeffers explains one of the central issues when he writes, correctly, that there is "good reason to think that it is hard to separate talk of race from traditional biological essentialism" (2019, 44). Jeffers remains unconvinced by Glasgow's anti-realist reconstructionism, though, because he thinks it collapses into social racial realism.

He has a point. Glasgow argues that "'a race' should be redefined to mean something like a socially racialized group" (Glasgow 2019b, 138). If this were to happen, race would *become* real, because an ordinary concept of race would align with reality. But to make this change would seem to first require the adoption of social racial realism, which Glasgow tells us is currently false. This seems like a problem for Glasgow, but not for anti-realist reconstructionism in general. Few reconstructionists see racial realism as a long-term goal. I don't understand why Glasgow does, given his convincing arguments that the view "does not require us to compromise identity, invalidate experience, or undermine progress" and that it can "capture every moral phenomenon that racial realism can" (Glasgow 2019b, 137).

Philosophy of race is an important and exciting field, and *What is Race?* is an excellent introduction to the metaphysics of race in particular. The authors prove themselves to be not only astute critics, but also generous and charitable readers of each other's work. This is the new gold-standard for academic dispute on a socially fraught topic. *What is Race?* left me curious about what each author would say in "another round," and I highly recommend it.

## References

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