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Beyond the realism debate: The metaphysics of ‘racial’ distinctions



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ABSTRACT

The current metaphysical race debate is very much focused on the realism question whether races exist. In this paper I argue against the importance of this question. Philosophers, biologists and anthropologists expect that answering this question will tell them something substantive about the metaphysics of racial classifications, and will help them to decide whether it is justified to use racial categories in scientific research and public policy. I argue that there are two reasons why these expectations are not fulfilled. First of all, the realism question about race leads to a very broad philosophical debate about the semantics of general terms and the criteria for real kinds, rather than to a debate about the metaphysics of racial categories specifically. Secondly, there is a type of race realism that is so toothless that it is almost completely uninformative about the metaphysics of race. In response to these worries, I argue that the metaphysical race debate should rather be focused on the question in what way and to what extent ‘racial’ distinctions can ground the epistemic practices of various scientific disciplines. I spell out what I mean by this, and go on to demonstrate that trying to answer this question leads to a more fruitful metaphysical debate.

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1. Introduction

Currently, the debate amongst philosophers, biologists and anthropologists about the metaphysics of human races is very much focused on the question whether races *exist*. Anti-realists claim that races do not exist (Atkin, 2012; Glasgow, 2009; Graves, 2005; Zack, 2002), sometimes adding that races are nothing but illusions, much like unicorns (Gracia, 2005) or witches (Appiah, 1992). In their view, the fact that this illusion is so widespread just goes to show how powerful a social construction (Fredrickson, 2002; Omi & Winant, 2002) or the cognitive architecture of our minds can be (Cosmides, Tooby, & Kurzban, 2003; Gil-White, 2001; Hirschfeld, 1996).

Realists, on the other hand, believe that races do exist. Several *biological* race realists have claimed that anti-realists are just out of touch with current biological research (Sesardic, 2010; Sarich & Miele 2004). Especially recent studies on human population structure have been used to reinvigorate biological race realism (Risch, Burchard, Ziv, & Tang, 2002; Spencer, 2014). *Social* race realists, on the other hand, argue that human races are socially constructed, but that these constructions have a social reality nonetheless (Haslanger, 2000, 2008; Sundstrom, 2002). In a society in which one’s perceived race affects one’s health prospects and job

opportunities, races are very real indeed, or so the social realist argues. According to Sundstrom, “[w]hatever reality race can lay claim to results singularly from the social practice of individuals and groups classifying others and themselves into races. Race is a real, socially constructed kind, a real human kind” (Sundstrom, 2002, p. 102).

Why, however, are so many philosophers, scientists and lay people interested in finding out whether races exist? Why, that is, is this realism question at the center of the metaphysical race debate? There appear to be two reasons. One reason is that the question whether human races even *exist* seems to be the most fundamental metaphysical question one could ask about them. Hence one might also think that answering this question will yield a very fundamental and substantive insight about (the differences between) the people that are being categorized as belonging to a particular race.

A second reason is that the existence of human races is thought to have important normative implications. In the end, what many in the race debate really want to know is whether it is epistemically and morally justified to use racial distinctions in public policy and scientific research (Atkin, 2012; Glasgow, 2009). Knowing whether races exist is supposed to help one decide on these delicate issues, exactly because it is supposed to tell you something substantive about the metaphysics of racial categories.

In this paper I argue against the importance of the realism question about race. According to me, philosophers, anthropologists and biologists should not ask or debate the question whether

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racism exist. After all, or so I will argue, knowing whether races exist, will not tell you something substantive about (the differences between) people who are racially classified, nor will it help you to decide on the normative issues concerning the use of those classifications. Instead, I will argue that one should prioritize the following epistemic-metaphysical question: in what way, and to what extent, do 'racial' distinctions provide the metaphysical ground that is required for the epistemic practices of various scientific disciplines?

The paper will be divided into two main parts. In the first part I start by elaborating on the structure of the realism debate about race and I present two reasons (2.1, 2.2) why focusing on the reality of race has led to a debate that is uninformative about the metaphysics of race. In the second part of the paper, I explain why asking about the way in which racial categories allow us to trace the metaphysical grounds required for various kind-based epistemic practices is a better alternative (3.1) and I go on to demonstrate this by providing a partial answer to this question (3.2).

2. Two problems with asking whether races exist

So far, the metaphysical race debate has been dominated by the realism question, which is generally understood as asking whether race terms refer to real kinds. Understood in this way, the reality of race is not just a metaphysical issue, nor is it an issue that only concerns race in particular. One cannot decide whether race terms refer to real kinds without knowing what terms like 'race', 'White' and 'Black' are supposed to refer to in the first place. Nor can one ask whether races exist in this way without first having established metaphysical criteria for the existence of kinds more generally. Thus, the current debate about the reality of race can be presented by the following step-by-step questionnaire.

- (Q1) What are race terms supposed to refer to?
- (Q2) What does it take to be a real kind?
- (Q3) Do race terms refer to real kinds?

To present the debate in this way is not to say that the answer to the third question would follow as a conclusion from answering the first two questions. Rather, it intends to make clear that asking about the existence of race is also a semantic question about the meaning and reference of race terms (Q1), and a more general metaphysical question about the reality of kinds (Q2). Only when both these prior questions have been answered, is it possible to determine whether race terms refer to real kinds based on additional empirical information (Q3). In the following two subsections (2.1, 2.2) I will argue that this step-like structure of the realism debate has resulted in two distinct problems.

2.1. A general philosophical debate

According to Joshua Glasgow, a philosopher, the reality of race is an issue that cannot be left to biologists or other scientists to answer, since there are deep philosophical issues at stake (Glasgow, 2009, p. 13). Although this is certainly true of the current race debate, the question is whether it *should* be true. Granted, determining whether something exists will always remain underdetermined by the data to some extent and therefore a philosophical problem. The debate about the reality of race is an extreme case however. Race realists and anti-realists often agree on all the empirical facts, while just having different philosophical views on how to interpret those facts (Ludwig, 2015; Mallon, 2006). As a result of this, the realism debate about race has become a debate that is for a large part about very general philosophical

issues, rather than about the metaphysics of race in particular. Let us look at some of these broader philosophical disputes.

There are, first of all, disputes about the *semantics* of general terms that are at stake when discussing the reality of race. After all, in order to decide whether races exist — that is, whether race terms refer to real kinds (Q3) — one must first know what race terms like 'White' or 'Black' are supposed to refer to (Q1). In turn, this question requires that one has some idea about how the reference of general terms is determined. Needless to say there are countless philosophical theories to answer this question. One general issue dividing these theories has also impacted the race debate.

This general semantic issue is the dispute between internalists/descriptivists and externalists/referentialists. Perhaps these positions need no introduction, but as a rough sketch one might say that descriptivists believe that the meaning of a general term is the description, or concept, associated with it, and that a term refers by virtue of the fact that this description applies to things in the world. On the referentialists' point of view, however, the semantic value of a term is (at least in part) just its referent, and this reference is not determined by an associated description but rather, according to one theory, via a causal-historical link with an initial 'baptism' (Kallestrup, 2013). Sally Haslanger, who is herself a referentialist, aptly summarizes the debate in the following way:

Roughly, on the pure reference externalist view, what we are referring to takes priority in our use of language to how we think about it. Language is used primarily to refer to things in the world, and having latched onto the world we find multiple ways to describe it. Sometimes our descriptions are accurate and sometimes not. On the descriptivist model, in contrast, thought takes priority. We have a thought and it turns out that there are things in the world that match it. We communicate, according to the externalist, by talking about the same things; according to the descriptivist, by expressing the same thoughts (Haslanger, 2010, pp. 175–176).

This fundamental dispute in the philosophy of language has been important for the race debate as well. Quayshawn Spencer's recent defense of biological race realism, for example, also depends on his claim that we should be referentialists about 'race' (Spencer, 2014). Very roughly, he argues as follows. First, he explains that in the US meaning of 'race', this term is not associated with a logically consistent set of descriptive criteria. Nevertheless, it does appear to have a robust extension, tied to the racial discourse of the US census. Despite having no consistent description of 'race' in mind, most Americans use the five racial labels that are also used by the US census — 'Black', 'White', 'Asian', 'American Indian', 'Pacific Islander' — and tend to agree on their extension. Thus, it appears that 'race' in the US does refer to something, but refers directly rather than through an associated description.¹ Secondly, Spencer argues that population geneticists have shown that there is one particular level of worldwide population structure, consisting of five genomic clusters, that corresponds to the extensions of these US census categories. There is a large amount of overlap between the extensions of US race terms and, as he calls them, 'Blumenbachian population terms' used in population structure studies. Thus, in the US, 'race' does refer to something biologically real.

¹ This still leaves open the question how this reference is actually determined, if it is not through a description associated with the term. According to Spencer, 'race' in the US just refers to whatever the 'Office of Management and Budget' (OMB) intends to pick out with this term, since the US census has to defer to them by law. As it turns out, the OMB does not define 'race' as a kind but rather as a 'set of categories'. That is, "according to the OMB, race is just [black, white, Asian, American Indian, Pacific Islander]" (Spencer, 2014, p. 1028).

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