Commentary on Joshua Glasgow's *A Theory of Race*

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Joshua Glasgow's *A Theory of Race* is a knowledgeable, insightful and well written treatment of a sweeping range of topics concerning race and racial classification. It is, as a result, a book that everyone interested in race or in the metaphysics of a socially significant human category should read.

At the same time, it is a book structured around a project that I think is misdirected – the project of "semantic ascent." This is the project of using the conceptual analysis of the concept *race* (and related concepts) to teach us about what race must be (if it is anything at all). And I am skeptical of this sort of project, both generally, and in the context of the philosophy

of race. The reasons for my general skepticism are many and (at least to those who follow discussions of philosophical methodology) mostly familiar. But most of my commentary will be directed at reasserting a particular argument to this conclusion that I've made elsewhere (Mallon 2004, 2006) – an argument that the semantics of "race" doesn't really matter to normative debates about our linguistic and social practices, nor does it interestingly matter to the metaphysics of race. If these claims are correct, they suggest that Glasgow's book, despite its considerable virtues, is based on a misguided strategy.

1. Three Questions

The central thread of Glasgow's discussion is his defense of answers to these three questions:

> 1. *The Normative Question:* Should we eliminate or conserve racial discourse and thought, as well as practices that rely on racial categories?
>
> 2. *The Ontological Question:* Is race real?
>
> 3. *The Conceptual Question:* What is the ordinary meaning of 'race,' and what is the folk theory of race?

While much of the debate over race has taken it for granted that answers to these three questions are tightly linked, Glasgow and I agree that these issues are conceptually distinct – that, in effect, the correct answers to the second and third questions provide at best one reason among others in a debate over the first (3-4; Mallon 2006, 25). My own view is that, in the context of race, racial theorists concerned with the first question have compelling grounds to ignore the latter two questions – a view we could call *onto-semantic quietism*.[1] And I have suggested replacing existing racial discourse with a more highly articulated vocabulary – a naturalist strategy I

have come to call "elimination by articulation" – whose semantic relationship to existing discourse will be (because of my semantic quietism) uncertain (Jenson and Mallon in preparation).[2]

Glasgow too, is a reformer, and his project of reform may well be better than mine (I won't argue either way, here). But in contrast to my quietism, Glasgow argues for his proposal in part through the strategy of learning about what (folk) race must be by conceptual analysis of the meaning of the folk term "race." I'll spend the rest of my space here arguing that this strategy doesn't teach us anything significant.

2. Intuitions and Semantics

Glasgow's view uses intuitions about race and racial discourse as evidence for an account of the conceptual structure of race. Sometimes these intuitions are Glasgow's own (and presumably those of his many interlocutors), but he also endorses an "experimental philosophical" turn, reviewing experimental data and gathering experimental evidence about folk intuitions at large. Glasgow presents such intuitions about the meaning of "race" in numerous places throughout the book.[3] I confess that my intuitions do not line up with Glasgow's in every case. For example, it seems to me that "race" can and does easily apply to groups without differences in visible traits of the sort Glasgow alludes to. One option for me, then, would be to pit my own thought experiments against Glasgow's, or even better, to gather experimental evidence that shows the folk think about race in the way I do rather than the way he does. But I'm inclined to a far deeper dismissal of this strategy of trying to tap semantic intuitions in order to give accounts of concepts and what their referents must be like, a dismissal that I have argued for elsewhere.[4] But I mention this disagreement here largely to set it aside, for here I will argue that even a correct conceptual analysis of "race" is not important. In order to

make this case, I'm going to stipulate that Glasgow's own analysis is correct. That is, I will stipulate that:

> The folk term "race" (and related terms) expresses the concept *race* which entails an "adequate biological basis" biological reality of a certain sort.

Any concept (e.g., Glasgow's *race**) that does not entail biological reality of a certain sort is thereby a different concept.

And I will proceed by arguing that having such a correct analysis doesn't illuminate anything that we should care about. I will contrast Glasgow's substitutionist reconstructionism with a similar (constructionist) conservationist position as a case in point.

3. The Meaning of "Race" Does Not Illuminate the Normative Debate

Let's begin with the normative debate. What Glasgow shares with many he labels eliminativists, and does not share with many conservationists is a view about the meaning of the folk term "race" – to wit, that it entails something untrue, especially that it entails that race has an "adequate biological basis." In contrast what Glasgow shares with many conservationists is the idea that our current practices of labeling people by race should be, when minimally reformed, retained.

Glasgow uses the terms "eliminativism," "substitutionism" and "conservationism" to label positions that combine a stance on the metaphysics/semantics with a stance on the practice, and I want to separate out these two issues. After all, the question I'm asking in this section is: does an answer to the metaphysical/semantic question offer anything as we try to answer the question about what our practices should be?

In that vein, I simply note that both Glasgow and many conservationists endorse something we might call "practice conservationism," as opposed to more radical reform, extending at the opposite extreme to something we might call "practice eliminativism."[5]   That is, Glasgow's version of "substitutionism – one he calls "reconstructionism" – involves combining relatively conservative reform of existing socio-linguistic practices with an anti-realist metaphysics. And a (constructionist) conservationist might combine the same reform with a realist metaphysics. (By comparison with both, my own "elimination by articulation" strategy seems less conservative.)

Let me emphasize these parallels in practice. Both Glasgow and such a (constructionist) conservationist endorse a practice where we continue to use folk racial terms, and both would say things like:

> "many people falsely believe 'race' labels a biological kind, but no such kind exists,"

> "when I use 'white', (or 'black' or 'Asian', etc.) the meaning of that term is to pick out a social construction or discursive formation, not a natural or biological entity."

And both can even say,

> "'race' used to entail belief in a biological kind,"

> "'race', henceforth, means a social kind."

The only thing they disagree about is whether the folk term 'race' *already* refers to a social kind, perhaps because they disagree about whether the common but false folk belief in racial biology is constitutive of the meaning of 'race' or not.

And (even conceding Glasgow is correct on this question) this seems to be precisely a disagreement that makes no difference to practice.[6]

4. Epistemic Superiority and Metaphysical Interest

While Glasgow might not put it this way, I think he largely agrees with what I have said thus far, for Glasgow distinguishes his own position from (constructionist) conservationists in terms of it's superior epistemological position. For example, he writes that: "reconstructionism is anti-conservationist in that it does not incorrectly presuppose that racial discourse is already epistemologically legitimate" (145). I think what he means here is that his substitutionist reconstructionism is superior to (constructionist) conservationism in that it holds existing folk discourse is literally false (because it purports to refer to races that do not exist).

But notice that the (constructionist) conservationist can hold that existing folk discourse is literally false too, for the constructionist holds folk beliefs that 'race' picks out a natural or biological kind are literally false. (But the constructionist conservationist disagrees that these are constitutive of the meaning of the folk term "race".) So, even if Glasgow's account of the semantics is right, the epistemic advantage it confers his view seems very thin: it concerns only whether we locate a mistake inside or outside a concept.

Elsewhere he suggests (148) that his view better satisfies the "epistemic constraint" (EC) which holds that

> Theories of race must either demonstrate that the benefits of racial discourse override the obligation to not encourage false beliefs, or, alternatively, secure these benefits without encouraging false belief in race (138).

But when compared to a constructionist conservationist position whose practice is the same, does Glasgow's view really better satisfy EC? I think the answer is "no." In such a comparison, the only advantage it could gain is from his superior semantics of "race." But notice that, by Glasgow's own lights, the (constructionist) conservationist we have been imagining *already* uses "race" to mean something other than *race*. In using "race" in a practice in which it is explicitly accompanied by a denial of the biological reality of race, conservationists already use "race" to express (by Glasgow's lights) a nearby, race-like concept (perhaps even *race**).[7] It's hard to see how the semantic disagreement about what the folk concept "race" currently means does any work in enabling one view or the other to better satisfy EC.[8]

I suppose the right thing for Glasgow to say here is that the scope of philosophy is surely wider than the scope of normatively correct practice, and that philosophical questions about meaning and metaphysics are a surely proper part of it. But a failure to show "epistemic" superiority suggests that a correct view of the meaning of "race" is not metaphysically interesting as well. It does not add to our understanding of racial phenomena.

Consider two arguments regarding the metaphysics of race.

Anti-realists:

> 1. "Race" means *race* which entails that race is a (certain sort of) biological kind, one with an "adequate biological basis."

> 2. According to our best biology, humans have the following biological properties: $b_1, b_2, \ldots b_n$.

> 3. The biological properties listed in 2 do not satisfy the entailment in 1.

> 4. Race does not exist.

Constructionist Realists:

> 1. "Race" does not entail that race is a biological kind. "Race" could or does mean a kind constituted by certain social facts.

> 2. There are social facts surrounding human classification, skin color, identification, ascription, history, of the following sort: $s_1, s_2, \ldots s_n$.

> 3. The social facts described in 2 constitute race as a social kind.

> 4. Race exists.

All the interesting facts in these arguments are in the 2nd premise of each argument, and the interesting disagreements are about these sorts of facts too. Elsewhere, I have suggested that in the race debate, there is widespread agreement about these sorts of facts (Mallon 2004, 2006). And there is considerable agreement on the further sorts of facts that could resolve disagreements.[9] This is just to say that the disagreement between these positions is not substantial – it is only a disagreement about the meanings of words (and not one that makes a difference to practice). We can thereby easily leave behind this disagreement simply by abandoning these semantic arguments without impoverishing the understanding that we need to understand contemporary social life – understanding that we already have much consensus on. And we can, in turn, focus our attention more closely on the sorts of normative arguments for eliminating, reforming, or conserving existing racial practices that are at the center of our philosophical interest in race.[10]

Metaphysical superiority of Glasgow's view over a realist alternative (with whom there is broad consensus on the non-semantic facts) must stem from its correct semantics, but a correct semantics is just not the sort of thing that expands our understanding of non-semantic facts. Instead, it simply projects our intuitive differences onto the world in a way that makes our disagreements seem more substantive than they are.

Conclusion

Glasgow's methodology of conceptual analysis and semantic ascent is perhaps the dominant philosophical methodology of our day, and it is a methodology he shares with many others in the race debate (and host of eminent philosophers as well). Given this, some may find my own suggestion of onto-semantic quietism too radical. These same readers will find considerable comfort in Glasgow's careful and thoughtful execution of this methodology throughout his book.

In contrast, I have tried to show that Glasgow's claim that "it's hard to overstate the importance of [the Conceptual Question]" overstates the importance of the Conceptual Question (10). Pursuing normative and metaphysical disagreement via conceptual analysis (even allowing that successful analyses can be found) leads us away from questions that are normatively and metaphysically substantive and towards questions that illuminate nothing else.

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[1] This terminology echoes Glasgow's "onto-semantic constraint" (125).

[2] Here's how I put my view a few years ago:

> Instead of focusing on defending an account of what race is or what racial concepts mean, we should ask: what kinds of conceptual apparatus do we need to discuss racial classification and racially associated phenomena in historical and contemporary life? We thus exchange the question of whether and how race exists for the project of developing an adequate metaphysical theory distinguishing as many accounts of race or racial phenomena as are needed to serve all our functional needs – including the various dimensions of racial identification, experience, appearance, and folk classification – so that their practical, social, and ethical significance can be discussed. Only in such a project of theoretical refinement are we likely to shed the persistent mistakes of ordinary racial thinking while continuing to refer to the world in ways that satisfy a multiplicity of theoretical needs (2004, 668).

[3] For example: (a) In Chapter 2, he uses the thought experiment of Racial Twin Earth to argue that race is a relatively thin concept involving visible differences. Here the intuitions concern whether there is agreement or disagreement between earthlings and Racial Twin Earthlings

in their talk using "race."   (b) In Chapter 4, he presents experimental data that shows that folk judgments about race are quite complex, involving a variety of factors that are possibly at odds with one another. (c) In Chapter 5, in the course of discussing mismatch objections against population accounts, he uses correspondence with ordinary racial categories (96-7) as an argument against biological populationist views of race. (d) In Chapter 6, he argues that race must have "an adequate biological basis" (114) and uses a series of thought experiments to argue against versions of constructivism (120ff).

4 E.g., Mallon *et al* 2009; Mallon 2007; Mallon 2006; Alexander *et al* forthcoming. This dismissal is born of naturalist critiques of the methodology of conceptual analysis (e.g., Cummins 1998; Ramsey 1998; Stich 1998; Stich and Weinberg 2001), and extends those critiques to some parts of contemporary experimental philosophy (Alexander *et al* forthcoming). One ground of naturalist critique has been that philosophical intuitions may not be *representative* of folk intuitions. For example, philosophers may not be representative of the folk – perhaps because of philosophical training, and because there are cultural and individual differences among the folk (Weinberg *et al* 2001; Machery *et al* 2004; Mallon *et al* 2009; Nichols and Ulatowski 2007; Cokely and Feltz 2008). One response to these concerns – sometimes labeled "positive experimental philosophy" – has been a turn to experimental work by naturalistic philosophers in order to gather a proper data set for constructing our theory of the folk concept. I take it that Glasgow's experimental work (and reading of the experimental work of others) is of this sort, and while other philosophers are working to produce experimental evidence about racial cognition (Machery and Faucher unpublished data), Glasgow is the first to connect the conceptual analysis of *race* with the emerging "experimental philosophy" movement.

But other naturalists, the group of so-called "negative experimental philosophers" that includes me, find themselves far less sanguine about empirically supplemented conceptual analysis, and for a range of reasons, many of which (as I noted above) are continuous with older, naturalist critiques. For example, we suspect that concepts may have a more complex structure than the sort supposed by – even empirically informed – philosophical discussion (e.g., prototype structure) (e.g., Ramsey 1998; Stich and Weinberg 2001), we worry that order effects, and other sorts of framing effects, undermine the status of intuitions as evidence (Alexander *et al* forthcoming; Sinnott-Armstrong 2008; Swain *et al* 2008), we worry intuitions vary with apparently irrelevant features of content like affective content (Alexander *et al* forthcoming; Nichols and Knobe forthcoming); we worry that motivated cognition may pollute conceptual analysis (Mallon 2007), and perhaps most venerably, we worry that there simply is no understanding or consensus about how to individuate concepts or meanings that would enable us to know how to resolve question (Quine 1953; Mallon 2006, Machery 2008; Stich 1996; Alexander *et al* forthcoming). Such considerations lead myself and others to suspect a more radical break with the tradition of conceptual analysis is necessary.

5 For simplicity, I'm making the assumption that racial practices can be individuated independently of their semantics of "race." I take it that while this assumption is independently contentious, it may not question begging in the present context for Glasgow may needs something like it to explain why substitutionism is not a form of eliminativism (despite eliminating practices that express *race*. His answer, it seems to me, is that unlike eliminativism, it retains a practice (not individuated by its semantics of "race") with which eliminativism would do away.

⁶ Now it can seem here like I'm simply insisting that philosophical questions about meaning and metaphysics don't matter normatively or politically, and so they shouldn't be pursued, and that isn't my position at all. The preceding isn't meant to presuppose that *any* portion of one's life should be politically engaged. Rather, it is only meant to argue that one question doesn't substantively bear on another.

⁷ In fact, I think this is the right way to interpret some actual constructionist conservationists, but for present purposes it is enough that a possible constructionist conservationist holds this view to show that a correct semantics of "race" does not contribute anything.

⁸ A similar argument, mutatis mutandis, suggests that Glasgow's substitutionism fairs no better than conservationism in the satisfaction of his "morality, politics, and prudence constraint" (137).

⁹ As this might suggest, it's misleading to group me with "exclusionists" that believe that "the only business philosophers have in the race debate is to tackle normative or evaluative problems: we do ethics and politics, but we should leave biology to the biologists, anthropology to the anthropologists, and so on" (10). I am a philosophical naturalist of the sort that thinks philosophers should concern themselves far more with the findings of the empirical sciences. The normal accusation against us is not that we ignore science for philosophy, but that we ignore philosophy for science.

¹⁰ See, for example, Glasgow's interesting discussion of his disagreements with Blum (Section 7.4). This sort of discussion is needed not only among "substitutionists," but among everyone who wants to reform existing practice (which is, really, everyone in the race debate).