
Symposia on Gender, Race and Philosophy

Volume 5, number 2. Fall 2009

<http://web.mit.edu/sgrp>

Glasgow and the Empirical Gap in Racial Eliminativism

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

NAOMI ZACK

Department of Philosophy
University of Oregon
Eugene, OR 97403
nzack@uoregon.edu

In *A Theory of Race*, Joshua Glasgow examines the question of racial eliminativism from an analytic philosophical perspective.¹ The result is a well-constructed bridge between recent philosophy of science and cultural-critique treatments of the subject, on the one hand, and more traditional ongoing philosophy of language, on the other. The book will secure a broader readership for the question of racial eliminativism in philosophy than exists based on the work of specialists in racial theory. Moreover, Glasgow shares the same progressive commitments as those specialists, namely, that the continuing social disadvantage of people and groups who are not white should be corrected. I would quibble with Glasgow's explication of the current meaning of "race" in folk

discourse, on the grounds that it remains more genealogical than the empirical data he accesses suggests (chapters 3 and 4) but this is a small and variable point. I think that his analysis of and subsequent rejection of contemporary reconstructions of race by philosophers (chapter 6) is dead-on for the reasons he gives, namely, that the proposed reconstructions do not resemble the folk meaning. However the linguistic resolution Glasgow offers, namely, that the meaning of race be purged of its biological connotations among educated speakers, has empirical gaps that we simply do not know how to fill at this time. In this commentary, I will first briefly summarize Glasgow's analysis and then invite the reader to consider those gaps.

Glasgow's analysis

Glasgow takes the current intellectual and cultural issue in contemporary race debates to come down to this normative question: Should we eliminate or conserve racial discourse and thought, as well as practices that rely on racial categories (2)? The "we" is the linguistic community of "competent English speakers in the United States" (3). The answer to this normative question depends on an answer to the ontological question, Is race real? An answer to the ontological question depends on an answer to this conceptual question, What is the ordinary meaning of 'race' and what is the folk theory of race? We then have the methodological issue of how to identify the folk theory and concept of race (6-8).

Glasgow outlines the book's trajectory early on (9-10) and successfully argues for key claims as the work progresses. In chapters 2-4 he presents the case that an analysis of folk racial discourse should be empirically informed. The folk discourse has both a biological and a social component, i.e., sometimes race means biological things, sometimes social. The conclusion in chapter 5 is that, because there are no biological races and social races are not relevantly races, race is not real.

Glasgow reasons that what we do with racial discourse depends on moral, political, and practical constraints. Although race is not real, racial discourse has real social, psychological, and political values. Therefore, and this is Glasgow's major conclusion, we ought to reconstruct race, but in a special way. Race should be reconstructed by retaining in our meaning of the term, and the intent of our discourse, all of the positive values of racial discourse. This means that our old concept of race, which is partly biological, has to be replaced by a new concept of race that is wholly social. We should keep all of our present racial groupings and the discourse related to them. But,

...there will be one key difference that separates current racial discourse from post-reconstruction discourse: by 'race' we will, post-reconstruction, intend only to refer to social kinds, and we will get rid of any conceptual implication that there are even partially biological races. That is racial reconstructionism (139).

The Empirical Gaps

I call them empirical *gaps* to bring attention to what we do not know at this time. The first empirical gap may also be part of the problems generated by a history of disadvantage, current white racism, and perceived racism by nonwhites. It is the gap between Glasgow's "we" and ordinary people, both white and not white, who presently use racial discourse. First, we don't know that all members of "we" will agree to the reconstruction, because we don't know how knowledgeable they are about the biological unreality of race. Second, if all members of "we" are re-educated and convinced about the biological unreality and also, as a result, become eager to eliminate racism, then how will "we" influence everyone else? Glasgow's identification of "we" with "competent English speakers in the United States" may be somewhat elitist. While this may not be an altogether bad

thing in terms of epistemic values, it is a very bad thing if "we" are disproportionately white and more linguistically competent, according to our own standards, than those outside our group. Changes in racial discourse need to be broad and inclusive of those who are most disadvantaged on account of their racial identities.

But let's suppose that "we" could be inclusive and racially egalitarian. How will the change in discourse be effected so as to not violate free speech? Actually, Glasgow's proposal is not a matter of speech but of what people mean by speech. So it is not speech that has to be changed, but the meanings of words. Can the meanings of words be changed in the relevant way regarding race? We should remember here that Glasgow's initial question is, Should we eliminate race? What we are up against is whether we can eliminate race. That is, let's not forget that *should* implies *can*.²

One way to proceed on this question of meaning change, which respects the minds of all speakers, would be to show them the reasons for the change and see how their speech voluntarily changes when they all know what we know about the biological emptiness of race. (That is, changes in speech will presumably imply changes in the underlying meaning of race.) This process of elimination would then become a tentative project of education, first in our linguistic community and then among other groups, including school children.

It is an empirical question how people would behave and speak about race if it were an educational staple that race lacks the biological foundation it is presumed to have in folk discourse and culture, and if it were well understood why race lacks that foundation. They may choose to retain race ironically or in slang, get rid of race as they used to mean it in pre-educated discourse, or insist that their experience in ordinary life is what matters, not the underlying science.

We do not now *know* that a change in racial discourse will accomplish all or most of the desired progressive changes in the lived reality of race. The change in discourse will not change past history or its ongoing effects. Although, if the change is inclusive and based on education, it would likely improve practically everything now associated with race.

Finally, we should remember that the problem with race is not so much that educated speakers lack clear, uniform meanings for racial words – although that is a widespread problem – but that all of the false biologically-based ideas of race were created in the first place. Family histories are real, differences in racialized skin color are real and hereditary, and so are the hair types associated with what we think of as racial groups. But the system of racial groups as imagined in the West has no scientific foundation. That is, no new information or elevated goals result from attaching the imaginary taxonomy of race to real groups and their members. We do not know if disabusing people of these false ideas as attached to what they now think of as race will extinguish the bad ideas or the malign taxonomy. Perhaps the force and intent of the bad ideas and malign taxonomy will cause them to reattach to something else. This is of course a much more general empirical question than those already raised, but it is prudent to consider. The social alchemy of race and racism may not be a unique phenomenon of human-human demonization, exploitation, aversion, and hatred. This does not mean that the educational project concerning race is not worthwhile. It means that the kind of critical vigilance that has been developed in anti-racist thought and practice might need to become more general beyond its historical focus on race and racism. It might become necessary to apply what has been learned about racism to other forms of social injustice.

To recap my remarks, here: I agree with Glasgow's analysis of the lack of a biological foundation for race in the sense that folk discourse presupposes. And I agree that race has positive moral, psychological, and political values and uses, in social terms. But I do not think a case has been made that the way to preserve and further those values is to change what is meant by race. Rather, the analysis of the biological lack should be made common knowledge through broad education that changes people's understanding of race. And if such education results in different racial discourse, as well as greater justice regarding race, then the motivation for having constructed and retained the false biology of race requires further critical study; and vigilance is needed against the reattachment of such bad ideas to other human traits.

References

Glasgow, Joshua. 2009. *A Theory of Race*. New York: Routledge.

¹ I should disclose that I reviewed this manuscript twice, before publication, wrote an endorsement for the back cover, and have benefited from in-depth discussion of its key ideas in a graduate seminar on race that I taught during the Spring 2009 term in the Philosophy Department at the University of Oregon.

² Thanks to Grant Silva, a PhD student in my seminar on race this term, for reminding me very succinctly of this maxim, at this point.