

# 'Race': Normative, Not Metaphysical or Semantic\*

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The truth is that there are no races: there is nothing in the world that can do all we ask "race" to do for us. (K. Anthony Appiah)

For most of us that there are different races of people is one of the most obvious features of our social worlds. (Lucius Outlaw)

Eliminativist approaches have failed to recognize more subtle ways in which divisions into races *might* have biological significance. (Philip Kitcher)<sup>1</sup>

In recent years, there has been a flurry of work on the metaphysics of race. While it is now widely accepted that races do not share robust, biobehavioral essences, opinions differ over what, if anything, race is. Recent work has been divided between three apparently quite different answers. A variety of theorists argue for *racial skepticism*, the view that races do not exist at all.<sup>2</sup> A second group defends *racial constructionism*,<sup>3</sup>

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1. K. Anthony Appiah, "The Uncompleted Argument: DuBois and the Illusion of Race," in *Overcoming Racism and Sexism*, ed. Linda A. Bell and David Blumenfeld (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1995), 59–78, quote on 75; Lucius Outlaw, "Toward a Critical Theory of 'Race,'" in *Anatomy of Racism*, ed. David Theo Goldberg (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), 58–82, quote on 58; Philip Kitcher, "Race, Ethnicity, Biology, Culture," in *Racism*, ed. Leonard Harris (New York: Humanity Books, 1999), 87–120, quote on 90.

2. For example, Appiah, "Uncompleted Argument"; Dinesh D'Souza, "The One-Drop-of-Blood Rule," *Forbes* 158 (1996): 48; Donal Muir, "Race: The Mythic Root of Racism," *Sociological Inquiry* 63 (1993): 339–50; Yehudi Webster, *The Racialization of America* (New York: St. Martin's, 1992); Naomi Zack, *Race and Mixed Race* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), and *Philosophy of Science and Race* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

3. Charles Mills, *Blackness Visible: Essays on Philosophy and Race* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell

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holding that races are in some way socially constructed.<sup>4</sup> And a third group maintains *racial population naturalism*, the view that races may exist as biologically salient populations, albeit ones that do not have the biologically determined social significance once imputed to them.<sup>5</sup> The three groups thus seem to disagree fundamentally on the metaphysical character of race.

Closely related to the metaphysics of race is the normative question, "What ought we to do with 'race' talk?"<sup>6</sup> By 'race' talk, I mean the practices of using terms like 'race', 'white', 'black', 'Asian', and 'Hispanic' (and their associated concepts) to label and differentially treat persons. Typically there is a close association between metaphysical positions on race and normative positions on 'race' talk. Racial skeptics typically hold that the nonexistence of race supports 'race' talk *eliminativism*. Since race does not exist, it would be false and misleading to continue to use 'race' talk as if it does. In contrast, racial constructionists and population naturalists hold that 'race' talk picks out something real, and they typically support (implicitly or explicitly) some version of 'race' talk *conservationism*.<sup>7</sup>

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University Press, 1998); Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s* (New York: Routledge, 1994); Lucius Outlaw, "Toward a Critical Theory of 'Race,'" and "On W. E. B. DuBois's 'The Conservation of Races,'" in Bell and Blumenfeld, *Overcoming Racism and Sexism*, 79–102, and *On Race and Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 1996); Adrian Piper, "Passing for White, Passing for Black," *Transition* 58 (1992): 4–32; Michael Root, "How We Divide the World," *Philosophy of Science* 67 (2000): S628–S639; Ronald Sundstrom, "Racial Nominalism," *Journal of Social Philosophy* 33 (2002): 193–210; Paul Taylor, "Appiah's Uncompleted Argument: DuBois and the Reality of Race," *Social Theory and Practice* 26 (2000): 103–28.

4. The term "social construction" is sometimes used to identify the first view, the view that race does not exist at all (and is merely a social construction). In contrast, I use it as a label for the view defended by the second group, the view that race exists but is a social construction.

5. Robin Andreasen, "A New Perspective on the Race Debate," *British Journal of the Philosophy of Science* 49 (1998): 199–225, and "Race: Biological Reality or Social Construct?" *Philosophy of Science* 67 (2000): S653–S666; Kitcher, "Race, Ethnicity, Biology, Culture."

6. To say these questions are normative is also to imply that they are action guiding and may involve a wide range of moral, semantic, prudential, or other considerations.

7. The rough distinction between eliminativists and conservationists admits of many finer distinctions. For example, because elimination of 'race' talk takes time, theorists differ over the time frame within which they see eliminativism operating. Many political conservatives and critics of multiculturalism (e.g., D'Souza, "One-Drop-of-Blood-Rule"; Webster, *Racialization of America*) seek the immediate elimination of 'race' talk because they view it as quite harmful. More liberal skeptics, like Appiah, tend to wish that the significance attached to racial classification will decline over time (and perhaps ultimately disappear). Theorists also differ regarding the domains within which they endorse or reject the use of 'race' talk. For example, Appiah is relatively comfortable with the term 'race' being used in some discourses of population genetics, but he would like its importance decreased in marking social identity. See K. Anthony Appiah, "Race, Culture, Identity: Misunderstood Connections," in *Color Conscious: The Political Morality of Race*, ed. K. Anthony

Connecting these two issues—the metaphysics of race and the permissibility or desirability of ‘race’ talk—requires some argument. While some thinkers argue directly from, for example, genetic or social facts to conclusions about the existence or nonexistence of race, there is no direct entailment between the metaphysical facts and particular practices of ‘race’ talk. Recognizing this, recent discussions in race theory have employed a venerable strategy to connect metaphysical facts with word or concept use.<sup>8</sup> This *semantic strategy* connects metaphysical claims and linguistic-conceptual practices with the assumption of a particular theory of reference for the word or concept involved.<sup>9</sup> Schematically, the arguments proceed in three steps:

First, there is the metaphysical assumption that the world has such and such metaphysical features.

Then, there is the semantic assumption that some or another particular theory of reference is correct for racial terms or concepts.

Finally, it is concluded that racial terms or concepts appropriately refer (or fail to refer) to some or other metaphysical features of the world.

Theorists employing the semantic strategy generate different conclusions about the referents of ‘race’ talk just in case they disagree about the metaphysical features of the world or they disagree about the appropriate theory of reference for race terms/concepts.

In this article I argue for three conclusions:

1. Much of the apparent metaphysical disagreement over race is an illusion. Skeptics, constructionists, and naturalists share a broad base of agreement regarding the metaphysical facts surrounding racial or racialized phenomena that suggests their views are complementary parts of a complex view incorporating biological, social, and psychological facts.

2. The appearance of a substantial metaphysical dispute is sustained by the use of the semantic strategy, in particular, by different

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Appiah and Amy Guttmann (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 30–105. Ronald Sandstrom agrees with Appiah that the policing of racial identity can be oppressive, but he also argues for the value of using ‘race’ talk to pick out racial properties (conceived as social constructions) in understanding generalizations in the social sciences. See Sandstrom, “Racial Nominalism,” 193–210.

8. For example, Appiah, “Race, Culture, Identity”; Joshua Glasgow, “On the New Biology of Race,” *Journal of Philosophy* 100 (2003): 456–74; Kitcher, “Race, Ethnicity, Biology, Culture”; Mills, *Blackness Visible*; Zack, *Race and Mixed Race*, and *Philosophy of Science and Race*.

9. Here I describe appeal to a theory of reference as the “semantic” strategy. If you prefer to distinguish the theory of reference from semantics, feel free to think of it as the “reference strategy.”

assumptions about the appropriate theory of reference for race terms or concepts.<sup>10</sup>

3. The semantic strategy is problematic. Race theory ought not to rely on finding the correct theory of reference to determine the appropriate use of 'race' talk.

Here's how I proceed. In Section I, I discuss the now widely rejected view called *racialism*—the view that there are racial essences. Then in Sections II, III, and IV, I discuss racial skepticism, constructionism, and population naturalism in turn, explaining in each case how the metaphysical arguments hinge on specific (and sometimes implicit) assumptions about the theory of reference appropriate to racial terms. While these views seem to offer sharply contrasting accounts of the ontological character of race or racial phenomena, in Section V, I argue that skepticism, constructionism, and naturalism about race are compatible parts of a single metaphysical picture of racialized phenomena, and I sketch this broad basis of agreement. I go on to suggest that this broad agreement goes largely unrecognized because of semantic disagreements over the use of racial terms and concepts considered in Sections II, III, and IV. In Section VI, I conclude that the semantic strategy ought to be abandoned in race theory. Disputes over 'race' talk should be resolved by a complex evaluation of a host of practical, normative considerations.

#### I. THE ONTOLOGICAL CONSENSUS: THE REJECTION OF RACIALISM

Historically, the view that race is a natural kind has been associated with a belief in racial essences, a view K. Anthony Appiah calls racialism. It is the view that "we could divide human beings into a small number of groups, called 'races,' in such a way that the members of these groups shared certain fundamental, heritable, physical, moral, intellectual, and cultural characteristics with one another that they did not share with members of any other race."<sup>11</sup> In short, races were believed to share *biobehavioral* essences: underlying natural (and perhaps genetic) properties that (1) are heritable, biological features, (2) are shared by all and only the members of a race, and (3) explain behavioral, charac-

10. Here I am developing earlier arguments in Andreasen, "A New Perspective," and "Race: Biological Reality or Social Construct?"; Ron Mallon and Stephen P. Stich, "The Odd Couple: The Compatibility of Social Construction and Evolutionary Psychology," *Philosophy of Science* 67 (2000): 133–54; and Ron Mallon, "Passing, Traveling, and Reality: Social Construction and the Metaphysics of Race," *Noûs* 38 (2004): 644–73.

11. Appiah, "Race, Culture, Identity," 54.

terological, and cultural predispositions of individual persons and racial groups.<sup>12</sup>

While there remains substantial disagreement about whether racial classifications might be useful in, for example, medical diagnosis, there is now widespread agreement among philosophers, social theorists, anthropologists, and biologists that races do not share such biobehavioral essences.<sup>13</sup> A variety of reasons have played a role in this agreement. Perhaps the most prominent rests on studies of intragroup and intergroup genetic variation.<sup>14</sup> Over time, belief in racial essences came to be interpreted within the framework of modern molecular biology as a belief in underlying genetic difference, for only genes seemed appropriate candidates to play such an explanatory role. But studies of human genetic diversity suggest that genetic variation within racially identified populations is as great as or greater than diversity between populations. Thus, it is very unlikely that any interesting genetic "essence" will be shared by all and only members of a race. Because the rejection of racialism is now nearly universal among academic racial theorists, I call it the *ontological consensus*. In what follows, I and all the authors I discuss take this ontological consensus for granted.

## II. RACIAL SKEPTICISM

The ontological consensus holds that racial essences do not exist. Racial skeptics think that this entails a further conclusion: that race does not exist. While skepticism is as old as racialism, I will focus on two prom-

12. Racial theorists should want something stronger than the rejection of racial essences. They should want to reject the claim that race is an interesting or useful biobehavioral kind (a kind linking biology with behavior) of any sort. Because nonessentialist accounts of races are compatible with members of the race instantiating a biobehavioral kind that supports generalizations, the rejection of racialism on the grounds that there are no racial essences is too weak (Ron Mallon, "Human Categories beyond Nonessentialism," *Journal of Political Philosophy* [forthcoming]). I ignore these complications here.

13. For debate over the continued usefulness of racial classification in scientific or medical endeavors, see, e.g., *Nature Genetics* 36, suppl. (2004).

14. This sort of argument is employed by, e.g., Andreasen, "A New Perspective," 206; Appiah, "Race, Culture, Identity," 68; D'Souza, "One-Drop-of-Blood Rule"; Kitcher, "Race, Ethnicity, Biology, Culture," 87–88; Zack, *Race and Mixed Race*, 13–15; and it is rooted in pioneering work done in human genetics in the 1970s by M. Nei and A. K. Roychoudhury, Richard Lewontin, and others. See M. Nei and A. K. Roychoudhury, "Gene Differences between Caucasian, Negro, and Japanese Populations," *Science* 177 (1972): 434–36, and "Genetic Variation within and between the Three Major Races of Man, Caucasoids, Negroids, and Mongoloids," *American Journal of Human Genetics* 26 (1974): 421–43; Richard Lewontin, "The Apportionment of Human Diversity," in *Evolutionary Biology*, vol. 6, ed. T. Dobzhansky, M. K. Hecht, and W. C. Steer (New York: Appleton Century Crofts, 1972), 381–98.

inent philosophical versions of skepticism, those provided by Appiah and Naomi Zack.<sup>15</sup>

Appiah recognizes that his argument connecting the absence of racial essences to the claim that 'race' does not refer requires an account of what it is for a term or concept to refer. He groups views on reference according to the two dominant philosophical traditions of understanding reference. He calls these two traditions the *ideational* account and the *referential* account.<sup>16</sup> His strategy is to argue that, according to either tradition, racial terms and concepts fail to refer.

Appiah's 'ideational' label groups together the variety of *descriptivist* theories of reference. While the specifics of such views may vary, descriptivist views hold that:

D1: A term or concept is associated with a description: a proposition or set of propositions about the properties of the referent.

D2: The term or concept refers to the unique thing that satisfies (or best satisfies) the elements of the description.

D3: If no unique thing satisfies the elements of the description, the term or concept does not refer.

Descriptivist theories of reference have a distinguished philosophical history, playing an important role in numerous philosophical discussions.<sup>17</sup> They also underlie discussions in the philosophy of race, including Zack's investigation of racial concepts. Appiah and Zack both agree that the description associated with ordinary terms and concepts is committed to racialism.<sup>18</sup> But, as we noted above, the ontological consensus is that there are no racial essences. Thus, by D3, there are

15. Appiah, "Race, Culture, Identity"; Zack, *Race and Mixed Race*, and *Philosophy of Science and Race*.

16. Appiah, "Race, Culture, Identity," 34ff.

17. For example, in the philosophy of mind, analytic functionalists have argued that mental state terms pick out those physical states that uniquely satisfy most (or the most important) of the "platitudes" of commonsense psychology. See David Lewis, "How to Define Theoretical Terms," *Journal of Philosophy* 67 (1970): 426–46, and "Psychophysical and Theoretical Identifications," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 50 (1972): 249–58. Eliminativists like Stephen Stich and Paul Churchland have assumed something like such functionalism and gone on to argue that since nothing in fact satisfies the folk conception of beliefs, ordinary mental terms do not refer. See Stephen Stich, *From Folk Psychology to Cognitive Science* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1982); Paul Churchland, "Eliminative Materialism and the Propositional Attitudes," *Journal of Philosophy* 77 (1981): 67–90. Compare William G. Lycan, *Judgement and Justification* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); and Stephen P. Stich, "Deconstructing the Mind," in *Deconstructing the Mind* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 3–91.

18. Appiah, "Race, Culture, Identity," 38–71; Zack, *Race and Mixed Race*, 11. Some psychological evidence also suggests that people conceive of race in essentialist (although not necessarily biologically essentialist) terms. See Lawrence Hirschfeld, *Race in the Making* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Books, 1996).

no races. In Zack's words: "The ordinary concept of race in the United States has no scientific basis."<sup>19</sup>

The hegemony of the descriptivist theory of reference has been overturned in recent decades, and many philosophers now believe the theory to be mistaken for reasons made famous by the work of Saul Kripke and Hilary Putnam.<sup>20</sup> Both argue that a description associated with a term may be satisfied by a kind of thing that we would nonetheless not consider to be in the extension of the term.<sup>21</sup> More importantly for present purposes, they think it is possible for a kind term to refer to a kind of thing, even if the thing does not satisfy a description associated with the term. As Kripke explains: "*A priori*, all we can say is that it is an empirical matter whether the characteristics originally associated with the kind apply to its members universally or even ever."<sup>22</sup> The alternative Kripke and Putnam offer is a *causal-historical* theory of reference (what Appiah calls a "referential" account). We can characterize causal-historical theories of reference as holding that:

CH1: A kind term is introduced to pick out some unified kind of thing.

CH2: If the term successfully picks out a kind when introduced, it continues to pick out that same kind as the term is passed on to others (regardless of whether or not the thing satisfies the description associated with the term).

CH3: If there is no single kind of thing successfully picked out by the term, the term does not refer.

While descriptivist theories refer via a *satisfaction* relationship between the referent and the elements of the description, causal-historical theories refer in virtue of a causal-historical link between the original use of the term to identify a kind and later uses. When introduced, a kind term picks out the underlying property or properties that "give the best causal explanation of the central features of uses of that word."<sup>23</sup> Causal-historical theories have been important to the possibility of a realistic

19. Zack, *Race and Mixed Race*, 18.

20. Saul Kripke, *Naming and Necessity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972); Hilary Putnam, "The Meaning of 'Meaning,'" in his *Mind, Language, and Reality: Philosophical Papers* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 215–71.

21. Perhaps the most famous example of this is Putnam's case of a water-like substance with a different chemical structure (XYZ) on Twin Earth. Despite satisfying the description associated with 'water', Putnam argues that XYZ is not water because it has a different chemical structure.

22. Kripke, *Naming and Necessity*, 137.

23. Appiah, "Race, Culture, Identity," 39. A causal-historical approach to reference has been adopted and defended by numerous authors, e.g., Lycan, *Judgement and Justification*; Paul Griffiths, *What Emotions Really Are* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

construal of science, because they allow for the possibility that persons might be referring to the same kind (via a causal-historical link) despite having very different (and mistaken) associated descriptions.<sup>24</sup> Applied to the case of race, such theories suggest the possibility that racial terms might refer to something other than a biological essence, even if people once believed races were characterized by essences. If so, we would conclude from the ontological consensus not that race does not exist but rather that races do exist, although people have had very mistaken (because essentialist) views about what races are.

If a causal-historical theory of reference is correct, we must ask whether there are candidates to serve as the referents of racial terms and concepts. Of the two possibilities Appiah considers, the one relevant to our present discussion suggests that ordinary 'race' talk may pick out biological populations.<sup>25</sup> As we explore more fully in Section IV, modern biological thinking is dominated by antiessentialist accounts of biological taxa characterized as populations. Such populations are characterized relationally by virtue of features of the entire population and, importantly, the feature of *reproductive isolation*. Such reproductive isolation (or lack of interbreeding) is biologically important because it indicates a barrier to gene flow and carries the potential for the biological differentiation of the populations. If racial populations are isolated in this way, then they may be candidates for the referents of racial terms and concepts.

Both Appiah and Zack reject the view that races might be reproductively isolated human groups, because they are skeptical that there are contemporary groups that have the requisite reproductive isolation.<sup>26</sup> In her earlier *Race and Mixed Race*, Zack goes further, suggesting that "many biologists and anthropologists are skeptical of the concept of race as a useful scientific tool because no racial population, past or present, has ever been completely isolated from other races in terms of breeding."<sup>27</sup> Zack is correct that many scientists are skeptical of the race concept, but note the very strong condition of reproductive "complete isolation" that she imposes for biological populations. As we see below

24. For example, Richard Boyd, "Confirmation, Semantics, and the Interpretation of Scientific Theories," in *The Philosophy of Science*, ed. Richard Boyd, Philip Gasper, and J. D. Trout (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991).

25. Appiah also considers the suggestion that racial terms may refer to persons sharing sets of superficial properties prototypically linked to race—including hair type, skin color, and body morphology. The proposal is that rather than a "thick," racialist set of features, persons classified by racial terms share only a thinner and not biologically explanatory set of features. While some do defend such thin accounts of race, I know of no defenses of them as referential candidates for causal-historical uses of race terms.

26. Appiah, "Race, Culture, Identity," 72–73; Zack, *Race and Mixed Race*, 15.

27. Zack, *Race and Mixed Race*, 15.

in Section V, philosophers of biology wish to insist on a much weaker criterion of relative isolation. Appiah, and Zack in her more recent *Philosophy of Science and Race*, are more sympathetic to the claim that such relative isolation might be found among some human populations. Nonetheless, Appiah notes that “it is not at all plausible to claim that any social subgroup in the United States is such a population.”<sup>28</sup> Zack agrees, noting that she continues to worry that socially or folk-identified races “may contain members who are descendants of other races.”<sup>29</sup>

Zack and Appiah offer what we can call *mismatch* arguments.<sup>30</sup> A mismatch argument holds that the true account of the extension of a term or concept *x* would be sharply different from what is believed about the extension of *x*. In this case of race, Appiah and Zack think that the fact of the absence of reproductive isolation among major racial groups (as identified in ordinary discourse) would result in none of them being races (in the sense of being biological populations).<sup>31</sup> Thus, if we allowed that the term ‘race’ does pick out biological populations, it would turn out that none of the groups commonsensically considered races are races. Conversely, other groups that are not thought of as races (e.g., Appiah suggests the Amish, and Zack, Irish Protestants) might count as races.<sup>32</sup> Because such a mismatch would frustrate the ordinary intentions guiding the use of racial terms, a mismatch argument might support the abandonment of such terms. Let’s call a situation in which the actual extension of a term is sharply at odds with its putative extension an *extensional mismatch*. Appiah and Zack thus endorse extensional mismatch arguments. Appiah also suggests that such a referential candidate would not “be much good for explaining social or psychological life,” suggesting a different sort of mismatch argument.<sup>33</sup> Here the complaint is that while ordinary use of racial terms implies the social and psychological importance of the groups those terms pick out, there is no reason to expect biological populations to have this sort of importance. There is thus an *import mismatch* between such a referential candidate and ordinary views of race. Both objections are based on the concern that there is a mismatch between what ordinary users expect out of racial concepts and what they get.<sup>34</sup>

28. Appiah, “Race, Culture, Identity,” 73.

29. Zack, *Philosophy of Science and Race*, 76.

30. *Ibid.* Appiah thinks these mismatch arguments show that the putative referent violates what he calls “the adequacy condition” which requires that “some of what was thought to be true of what [a term] denoted must be at least approximately true of [the referential candidate]” (“Race, Culture, Identity,” 40).

31. Appiah, “Race, Culture, Identity,” 73; Zack, *Philosophy of Science and Race*, 77.

32. Appiah, “Race, Culture, Identity,” 73; Zack, *Philosophy of Science and Race*, 69.

33. Appiah, “Race, Culture, Identity,” 74.

34. Glasgow’s, “On the New Biology” also employs mismatch arguments against population accounts of race.

Cast in terms of the semantic strategy, Appiah and Zack begin with metaphysical assumptions about the failure of racialism and other facts about contemporary groups labeled as races. They then assume particular versions of descriptivist and causal-historical theories that, together with these metaphysical assumptions, entail that 'race' does not refer, and so they conclude that race does not exist.

### III. RACIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM

Like their skeptical opponents, racial constructionists infer from the failure of racialism that race is not a biological kind. But unlike racial skeptics, racial constructionists seek to develop an account on which race does exist but is a socially constructed kind of thing. A concise statement of this research agenda comes from Charles Mills, who writes of the need to "make a plausible social ontology neither essentialist, innate, nor transhistorical, but real enough for all that."<sup>35</sup> Constructionist theorists typically worry that racial skepticism leaves something causally or socially important out or, worse, that in the hands of political conservatives, it plays into the hands of a political agenda aimed at preventing racial justice.<sup>36</sup> Just what is left out is something about which constructionists differ. Some, like Outlaw, believe that socially constructed racial categories do and should form the basis of morally and socially important communities. Others, like Mills, Michael Root, and Ronald Sundstrom, seem more concerned that we understand race as real, because we need to understand the causal role of race in the world.<sup>37</sup> Here, I consider three quite different sorts of constructionist theory that give substance to this general constructionist aim in different ways—*thin constructionism*, *interactive kind constructionism*, and *institutional constructionism*—and then I will discuss different assumptions constructionists make about the reference of racial terms.

#### A. *Three Kinds of Constructionism*

Some constructionists think that we may welcome the failure of racialism while nonetheless using 'race' talk to refer to persons in virtue of superficial properties that are prototypically linked with race. This char-

35. Mills, *Blackness Visible*, xiv.

36. Outlaw, "Toward a Critical Theory of 'Race,'" "On W. E. B. DuBois," and *On Race and Philosophy*; Mills, *Blackness Visible*; Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation*; Root, "How We Divide the World"; Sundstrom, "Racial Nominalism"; Taylor, "Appiah's Uncompleted Argument." Sundstrom makes explicit the worry about political conservatives.

37. I interpret the varieties of constructionism I discuss here as what Robin Andreason has called "local" constructionist theses ("A New Perspective," 217). Local constructionists may claim that a thing or certain things or certain kinds of things are socially constructed, and they contrast with global constructionists who maintain that everything is a social construction.

acterizes a certain strand of Mills's account that I will call *thin constructionism*.<sup>38</sup> Mills proceeds via conceptual analysis to understand the criteria ordinary people use to ascribe racial membership, listing bodily appearance, ancestry, self-awareness of ancestry, public awareness of ancestry, culture, experience, and self-identification as all relevant, and he suggests that we can make sense of the objectivity of racial membership by appeal to such criteria implicit in the application of the ordinary concept.<sup>39</sup> Mills's account is a 'thin' account because it classifies persons into races on the basis of superficial features of their body and ancestry. It is 'constructionist' in the sense that it holds that such features are not of independent epistemological interest (as they would be if they were causally important) but of interest only because a community's conceptual practice makes them so.<sup>40</sup>

It is clear that some constructionists want more than thin constructionism. They want a theory on which one's race entails important facts about a person within a particular context. A plausible route for identifying such an account begins with the recognition that racial classification of persons has causal effects on the person and proceeds to suggest that racial terms designate persons in virtue of a particular sort of causal interaction between a person and the racial labels and concepts they fall under. Following Ian Hacking, we can call this *interactive kind constructionism*.<sup>41</sup> Various sorts of interactive kind accounts are distinguished by the various sorts of causal consequences they emphasize. For example, Adrian Piper writes, "What joins me to other blacks, then, and other blacks to [one] another, is not a set of shared physical characteristics, for there is none that all blacks share."<sup>42</sup> Rather, Piper goes on to assert, blacks are joined by "the shared experience of being visually or cognitively identified as black by a white racist society, and the punitive and damaging effects of that identification."<sup>43</sup> Piper's account suggests a general understanding of race, that people are members of a race R insofar as they have R-typical experiences caused by racial labeling. But notice that such experiences are only possible in a society in which persons are causally affected by the racial labels they fall under.

38. Mills, *Blackness Visible*. This reading ignores certain ambiguities in Mills's account. See Mallon, "Passing, Traveling, and Reality," sec. 2, for a more developed discussion.

39. Mills, *Blackness Visible*, 50ff.

40. For example, Mills writes that ancestry is "crucial not because it necessarily manifests itself in biological racial traits but simply, tautologously, because it is *taken* to be crucial, because there is an intersubjective agreement . . . to classify individuals in a certain way on the basis of known ancestry" (*Blackness Visible*, 58).

41. Ian Hacking, *The Social Construction of What?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

42. Piper, "Passing for White, Passing for Black," 30.

43. *Ibid.*, 30–31.

A third sort of constructionism, defended by Root, holds that race is a variety of social fact or institution. Understanding race by reference to social institutions seems promising, for social institutions seem to have many features that constructionists wish to impute to race: they are culturally and historically local, they are relationally and socially produced, and they are causally powerful. The idea behind such an account is that we require that in order for something to be an instance of a kind *k*, it must be in a community in which people regard it as falling under the related concept *K*. Root writes: "Where *R* is a race, a person is *R* at a site only if *R* is used there to divide people. Because the ancient Greeks did not divide people by race, there were no races in Athens."<sup>44</sup> While interactive accounts emphasize the causal effects of labeling, institutional accounts of race hold that labeling is conceptually or logically required. And the hope is that we can understand race as an important, efficacious, but socially constructed social institution.

#### *B. Constructionism and Reference*

These three forms of constructionism offer accounts of race on which racial terms pick out groups of persons in virtue of either superficial or culturally local features (or both). However, in the last section, we saw that Appiah's and Zack's arguments for racial skepticism seem to preclude constructionist racial terms being used in this way, on pain of their being a mismatch between beliefs associated with the term and its referent. If their arguments for racial skepticism are correct, then race does not exist. Skeptics would then be right to insist that to continue to use racial terms that (properly construed) refer to nothing is to engage in an improper and misleading linguistic practice.

How might constructionists reply to the semantic strategy as employed by skeptics? The logic of the semantic strategy suggests that they can dispute either the metaphysical details reviewed by Appiah and Zack or the semantic assumptions entailing that 'race' does not refer. But because social constructionists agree with skeptics about the failure of racialism, they choose the latter strategy. Mills's thin constructionist account offers one possibility for such a defense. Mills suggests that we can understand racial terms as applying to persons in virtue of the criteria implicit in the folk account of race, and the natural way to understand his account is as an application of a descriptivist theory of reference. He considers a series of hypothetical cases to arrive at the criteria central to ordinary racial ascription, and he suggests that races are the groups of persons that satisfy these criteria. As we have seen, Zack and Appiah would reply that the ordinary use of racial terms arises out of a history of racialism, and so racialist implications are part of the

44. Root, "How We Divide the World," S632.

description associated with ordinary racial terms and concepts. However, it seems open to Mills to insist that one may use racial terms and concepts shorn of their racialist implications or, to put it another way, that racialist theories have been associated with racial terms and concepts but are not essential to their application.

Paul Taylor offers a more explicit criticism of Appiah's choice of a description.<sup>45</sup> For Appiah and Zack, racial descriptions entail racialism, but Taylor suggests that the racial concept operating in the work of W. E. B. DuBois offers a historical example of a description without racialist implications<sup>46</sup>—a description on which races are “socio-cultural objects.”<sup>47</sup> On Taylor's account, some racial descriptions (namely, DuBois's) associated with racial terms may be satisfied by the objects produced by the causal interaction of persons and racial labels and concepts, and he presses Appiah with the question, “Why can't we just say that the processes of racial identification and ascription bring races into being?”<sup>48</sup>

Constructionists thus resist the skeptical conclusion by resisting the semantic premise of the semantic strategy. In particular, both Mills and Taylor are prepared to assume a descriptivist theory of reference, but they offer alternate accounts of what is in the description associated with racial terms.<sup>49</sup> How we proceed from here is a question we will return to below, after we have considered a third metaphysical option: population naturalism.

45. Taylor, “Appiah's Uncompleted Argument.”

46. There is ongoing dispute about whether DuBois really succeeds in avoiding a commitment to racialism. Compare Appiah, “Uncompleted Argument”; Outlaw, “On W. E. B. DuBois”; and Taylor, “Appiah's Uncompleted Argument.”

47. That is ‘racialism’ as I have used the term: a view that entails the existence of biobehavioral racial essences. Taylor employs the term differently, to label the constructionist position he attributes to DuBois—a position that is realist but not essentialist about race.

48. Taylor, “Appiah's Uncompleted Argument,” 122.

49. Another possibility for answering Appiah's skeptical argument would be to insist that a constructionist account provides a referential candidate for a causal-historical approach to racial terms. As far as I know, no constructionists have ever pursued this possibility. Perhaps this is because constructionists believe that causal-historical theories are incompatible with socially produced institutions and artifacts (as does Amie Thomasson, “Realism and Human Kinds,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 67 [2003]: 580–609). However, Taylor's suggestion of a history of employing racial terms to pick out “socio-cultural objects” suggests the possibility that such objects might also figure as referents in a causal-historical approach. In order to develop this suggestion, we would want an account of how these sociocultural objects might figure as stable kinds. For an attempt at such an account, see Ron Mallon, “Social Construction, Social Roles, and Stability,” in *Socializing Metaphysics*, ed. Frederick Schmitt (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 327–53.

## IV. RACIAL POPULATION NATURALISM

Racial skeptics and constructionists take the ontological consensus to show that race is not natural. Robin Andreasen and Philip Kitcher defend the claim that racial naturalism is compatible with the rejection of racialism.<sup>50</sup> These theorists insist that from the fact that there are no racial essences, it does not follow that race is not a natural kind. In particular, they defend the claim that races may be biological populations characterized by at least some important degree of reproductive isolation. The qualifier 'may' is appropriate, because Andreasen and Kitcher each express reservations about whether races (as ordinarily identified) are biological populations of the appropriate sort, and like those of Appiah and Zack, these reservations stem from a concern about whether contemporary populations exhibit the appropriate reproductive isolation.

Because claims asserting a biological basis of race have cyclically served as premises in arguments attempting to legitimate oppressive social attitudes and policies, we ought to be very careful in discussing such claims.<sup>51</sup> For this reason, I begin by arguing that racial population naturalism ought not to be confused with racialism. I go on to discuss the particular views of Andreasen and Kitcher, and I assess these views in light of the critiques of Appiah and Zack.

The shift to population thinking in biology is not merely compatible with the rejection of racialism. Rather, the shift to population thinking about species has been driven by a rejection of precisely the sort of essentialist thinking in biology that racialism represents. Common sense conceives both species and races as having underlying essences, but the existence of such essences is now widely rejected.<sup>52</sup> In the case of species, this rejection has occurred in tandem with a shift to thinking about evolution in terms of biological populations. The result has been a family of views of species that allow us to understand how a diverse group of organisms exhibiting considerable variation at both the genotypic and phenotypic levels could operate as an evolutionary unit. Racial population naturalists suggest that a similar argument can be made in the context of race. Thus, the rejection of racialism and the adoption of population thinking about race are theoretically linked in just the way that the rejection of biological essentialism and population level views of species are linked.

50. Andreasen, "A New Perspective," and "Race: Biological Reality or Social Construct?"; Kitcher, "Race, Ethnicity, Biology, Culture."

51. But note also that constructionist opponents of racial skepticism worry that the absence of a biological basis of race is also used to legitimate unfavorable social policies.

52. Frank Keil, *Concepts, Kinds, and Cognitive Development* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989); Hirschfeld, *Race in the Making*.

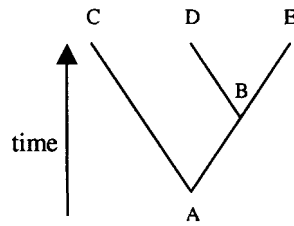


FIG. 1.—Phylogenetic tree

Population thinking means identifying relevant biological groups by features of entire populations rather than individuals. One way of emphasizing the profound shift of orientation signaled by such thinking is to note that it is conceptually possible that distinct, reproductively isolated populations (either at the species level or at the subspecies level) have no genotypic or phenotypic differences at all.<sup>53</sup> Because populations are defined relationally, intrinsic features of individual organisms are not central to such biological classification.

Andreasen defends the view that we can understand human populations as divisible into subspecies along *cladistic* lines. Cladism is a school of biological taxonomy that organizes biological populations into a phylogenetic “tree” indicating ancestor and descendent relations. (See fig. 1.) If accurately produced, a phylogenetic tree indicates genuine genealogical relationships among populations, providing an objective basis for taxonomic division.<sup>54</sup> Cladistic taxonomy grounds taxonomic categories by classifying *monophyletic* portions of the tree (portions including a population and all its descendent populations). Traditionally, phylogenetic trees are constructed with branching points (*A* and *B* in fig. 1) representing speciation events. There are a variety of accounts of just what a speciation event is, but typically they involve at least the division of a population into two daughter populations exhibiting reproductive isolation.<sup>55</sup>

Cladistic taxonomy traditionally identifies species with the monophyletic segments of such a phylogenetic tree (e.g., *AC*, *AB*, *BD*, and *BE* in fig. 1). Andreasen extends the traditional account of cladistic tax-

53. Andreasen (“Race: Biological Reality or Social Construct?” S664–S665) makes a similar point but to different effect.

54. Taxonomic divisions at the superspecies level are objective insofar as they represent monophyletic portions of the tree, but other questions remain open (e.g., how many and which monophyletic portions of the complete tree ought to be taxonomically identified). See Andreasen, “A New Perspective,” for further discussion.

55. See Kim Sterelny and Paul Griffiths, *Sex and Death: An Introduction to Philosophy of Biology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), chap. 9, for an overview of the ongoing debate over species concepts.

onomy to the subspecies level, arguing that a phylogenetic tree can be constructed tracing the genealogical relationships of human populations (again characterized as exhibiting reproductive isolation). On Andreassen's view, such populations were human races. But while Andreassen believes that such human races once existed, she allows that racial terms may fail to refer to populations in the contemporary United States since the modern world has brought "the intermixing of isolated populations and the gradual dissolution of racial distinctness," resulting in a situation in which races "are on their way out."<sup>56</sup> Andreassen's positive thesis is thus strictly a claim about the historical existence of human races. She believes that human races once existed, but she is agnostic about whether they do any longer.<sup>57</sup>

Philip Kitcher offers an account similar to Andreassen's. Like Andreassen, Kitcher understands races as a certain sort of reproductively isolated population lineage. However, Kitcher's account differs from Andreassen's in key ways. Andreassen argues that racial populations may exist as clades or monophyletic segments of a phylogenetic tree that reconstructs the evolutionary history of humanity. In contrast, Kitcher suggests that we can choose what he calls 'founder populations' "as we please, gerrymandering [them] as we fancy" as long as certain additional conditions are met to ensure that the population lineage we end up with is biologically significant.<sup>58</sup> So, while both Andreassen and Kitcher think 'race' talk could pick out reproductively isolated population lineages, Andreassen's lineages are of a special sort: they are monophyletic segments of the phylogenetic tree reconstructing the history of humanity.<sup>59</sup> Kitcher's proposal allows that races may be such clades, but they may also be what Ernst Mayr called "non-dimensional" populations that are reproductively isolated only at the present moment.<sup>60</sup> Because non-dimensional populations may disappear before playing an evolutionary role, they might never become clades. Andreassen's and Kitcher's proposals thus represent different requirements of the amount of time a population must be reproductively isolated to be relevant (see fig. 2).<sup>61</sup>

Perhaps because Andreassen's cladistic proposal is more highly constrained by evolutionary relevance than Kitcher's comparatively pragmatic groupings, Kitcher is far more optimistic that contemporary racial groups comprise biological populations. Kitcher proceeds by marshaling

56. Andreassen, "A New Perspective," 200.

57. Andreassen, "Race: Biological Reality or Social Construct?" S659 n. 4.

58. Kitcher, "Race, Ethnicity, Biology, Culture," 94.

59. The discussion draws on Andreassen's own account of the differences between the two views ("Race: Biological Reality or Social Construct?" S659 n. 4).

60. Kitcher, "Race, Ethnicity, Biology, Culture," 102.

61. Although, presumably, the reason to be interested in nondimensional racial populations is that they may give rise to longer-lasting evolutionarily important clades.

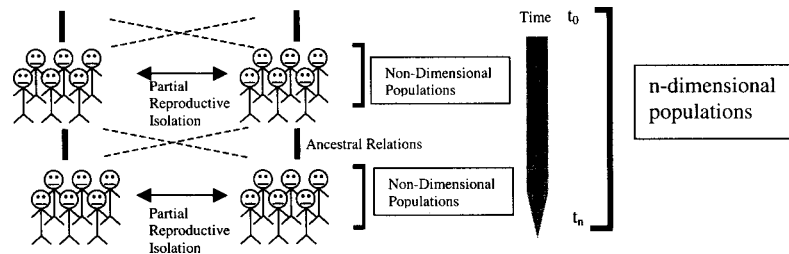


FIG. 2.—Populations over time

evidence on racial intermarriage suggesting that, in the contemporary United States, black-white intermarriage rates are quite low. As Kitcher notes, such evidence must be interpreted very carefully, for the data are quite limited, and they may not indicate genuine reproductive isolation.<sup>62</sup> Moreover, the limited data that Kitcher relies on may no longer be (or may come to no longer be) true of contemporary U.S. populations.<sup>63</sup> For these reasons, Kitcher offers the somewhat tentative conclusion that “divisions into races *might* have biological significance” in the contemporary United States.<sup>64</sup> An interesting feature of Kitcher’s account is that it shows how a purely arbitrary system of cultural classification might create populations of genuine biological significance. The mere fact that in contemporary America people employ racial divisions in deciding with whom to bear children could be enough to produce an important biological kind.<sup>65</sup>

#### A. Populations and Reproductive Isolation

How do Andreasen’s and Kitcher’s accounts stand up against the objections posed by racial skeptics? Let’s begin with Andreasen’s claim that racial terms accurately refer to human clades that once existed,

62. There are many complications here. These include determining whether marriage rates are a good indicator of reproductive rates between racial populations (particularly given the history of American chattel slavery), assessing whether there are “bridge” populations (Kitcher [“Race, Ethnicity, Biology, Culture,” 115–16 n. 18] notes, following a comment by Gregory Trianosky-Stilwett, that if white-Hispanic and black-Hispanic intermarriage rates are high, there may be no reproductive isolation), and considering how changes in racial designations in census reports affect such estimates.

63. More recent evidence from the U.S. Census Bureau’s Current Population Survey indicates still low but gradually increasing black-white marriage rates, while both the rate of marriage and its growth are higher for Hispanic to non-Hispanic and white to nonwhite (mostly Asian); Rodger Doyle, “The Progress of Love,” *Scientific American*, October 2003, 19.

64. Kitcher, “Race, Ethnicity, Biology, Culture,” 90.

65. Kitcher’s account thus presupposes the existence of the same sorts of practices of racial ascription and the causal effects of such practices typically emphasized in constructionist accounts (see “Race, Ethnicity, Biology, Culture,” 106).

but may no longer. Andreasen's claim depends on substantive readings of the tradition of cladism and the genetic evidence, neither of which I will assess here. Rather, I will restrict myself to assessing whether the concerns raised by Appiah and Zack should lead us to reject Andreasen's population naturalism. For Appiah, and for Zack in her recent *Philosophy of Science and Race*, the answer seems to be a clear "no." Both allow the possibility that biologically relevant human populations might exist (or have existed), but both are skeptical that any current, large populations in the United States are races.<sup>66</sup> Thus, they are in agreement with Andreasen about the possibility of historical, reproductively isolated human populations and express skepticism to her agnosticism about whether there currently are such populations.

Zack's earlier *Race and Mixed Race*, in contrast, suggests that "no racial population, past or present, has ever been completely isolated from other races in terms of breeding."<sup>67</sup> But why should complete isolation be the standard? As Kitcher points out, this standard is much too high for the purposes of biological taxonomy, for even many species would not count as reproductively isolated if it requires never interbreeding.<sup>68</sup> Kitcher's suggestion is, then, that Zack's earlier discussion is simply mistaken about the relevant standard of reproductive isolation.<sup>69</sup> But it is also possible that Zack is concerned about complete reproductive isolation because she believes the "one-drop rule" is a necessary feature of the race concept "black."<sup>70</sup> Such a rule infamously dictates that having one black ancestor is enough to make one black (i.e., that all the descendents of a black person are also black). If this rule is a necessary feature of contemporary racial taxonomy, then complete reproductive isolation would be relevant for assessing racial membership (since having no black ancestors would be necessary for being nonblack). However, it is clear that Andreasen and Kitcher are not concerned to vindicate ordinary race concepts, particularly if they entail the one-drop rule. So, if Zack's conceptual analysis was the source of her objection, then she is in a position to agree that more or less reproductively isolated populations may once have existed, while retaining her view that we ought not call them 'races'.

The more contentious view is Kitcher's claim that populations in the contemporary United States might count as races. Appiah, and more recently, Zack, are prepared to allow that the Amish or Irish Protestants

66. Appiah, "Race, Culture, Identity," 73; Zack, *Philosophy of Science and Race*, 76.

67. Zack, *Race and Mixed Race*, 15.

68. Kitcher, "Race, Ethnicity, Biology, Culture," 95. Andreasen notes, in a similar vein, that "low levels of interbreeding can be allowed; interbreeding is only a problem when it is extensive enough to cause reticulation" ("A New Perspective," 210).

69. Kitcher, "Race, Ethnicity, Biology, Culture," 95.

70. Zack, *Race and Mixed Race*, 10ff.

might count as races (due to their relative reproductive isolation), but they insist that “no large social group in America is a race.”<sup>71</sup> So does Kitcher simply disagree with Appiah and Zack about the extent of reproductive isolation? I suggest not. Instead, the argument seems to turn on disagreements about the degree of reproductive isolation required to fall under the concept “race,” with Kitcher holding that “clusters of populations are reproductively isolated from one another just in case, where populations in different clusters are in geographical contact, they interbreed only at low rates.”<sup>72</sup> It is this standard that Kitcher suggests may be met in the contemporary United States. Kitcher’s claim grows out of a more general argument that reproductive isolation (whether among species or subspecies groups) is not an all-or-nothing affair but admits of degrees.<sup>73</sup> Kitcher’s claim, like Andreasen’s, is thus a substantive argument within the context of discussions of subspecies population groups in the philosophy of biology, and assessing it fully would take us well beyond the present discussion. But the present point is that skeptics and population naturalists do not disagree over the empirical rates of intermarriage or interbreeding, only on whether the actual degree of reproductive isolation is sufficient to result in genuine races. Zack’s earlier skepticism may have been driven by her analysis of commonsense race concepts. And more recent arguments by both Appiah and Zack that contemporary races lack the required degree of reproductive isolation seem to be driven by the judgment that, however rates of intermarriage or interbreeding come out, they will be insufficient to vindicate the presuppositions of ordinary ‘race’ talk.<sup>74</sup>

If this reading is correct, the dispute between racial skeptics and population naturalists is best interpreted not as a disagreement over what rates of reproductive isolation are required for biological relevance or whether those rates have been achieved but as a dispute over whether whatever human populations there were or are should be labeled by ‘race’ talk. Andreasen argues for a similar conclusion regarding the

71. Appiah, “Race, Culture, Identity,” 73.

72. Kitcher, “Race, Ethnicity, Biology, Culture,” 95. See also n. 68 above.

73. Thus Kitcher argues: “Long before the extremes [of reproductive isolation] are reached, the differences between inbreeding and outbreeding rates may be sufficient to preserve the genetic differences that underlie the distinct phenotypes—or, at least, substantially to retard the erosion of those differences” (“Race, Ethnicity, Biology, Culture,” 97). See also his “Some Puzzles about Species,” in *What the Philosophy of Biology Is*, ed. M. Ruse (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1989), 183–208.

74. This reading is supported by Appiah’s “Uncompleted Argument” that begins: “Contemporary biologists are not agreed on the question of whether there are any human races, despite the widespread scientific consensus on the underlying genetics. For most purposes, however, we can reasonably treat this issue as terminological. What most people in most cultures ordinarily believe about the significance of ‘racial’ difference is quite remote, I think, from what the biologists are agreed on” (59).

relationship of her own proposal to racial skepticism. Andreasen diagnoses the skeptical conclusions of theorists like Appiah and Zack as resulting from their project of discrediting the ordinary or commonsense view of race. In contrast, Andreasen sees herself (and presumably Kitcher) as asking whether there is any biologically objective way to divide persons into races given that the essentialism suggested by the commonsense view is false.<sup>75</sup>

### *B. Populations and Reference*

Of course, it would seem that Andreasen's diagnosis works only if population naturalists can avoid skeptical arguments that race does not exist. This argument, we saw, involves both metaphysical and semantic premises, and here (as in the skepticism-constructionism debate) we find the disagreement is semantic rather than metaphysical. Population naturalists thus resist skepticism by offering alternative semantic assumptions.

On the descriptivist view of reference, resisting the skeptical view requires offering an alternative account of the elements in the description that referents of racial terms must satisfy. Kitcher does this, writing: "My strategy will be the inverse of one that is common in discussions of race. Rather than starting with our current conceptions of race, with all the baggage they carry, I want to ask how biologists employ the notion of race, and how we might regard our own species in similar fashion."<sup>76</sup> Thus, while Appiah and Zack begin with the ordinary conception of race (and the baggage of racialism it carries), Kitcher is concerned to analyze the concept of race as it is used (or might be used) in contemporary biology.<sup>77</sup> Like Mills and Taylor, Kitcher employs an alternative description that he believes may be satisfied by contemporary groups.

In contrast, Andreasen suggests that "the objectivity of a kind, biological or otherwise, is not called into question by the fact that ordinary people have mistaken beliefs about the nature of that kind" and reminds us that the causal-historical account of reference bears out this intuition.<sup>78</sup> Appiah, recall, thinks that populations cannot be the referent of a causal-historical use of 'race' talk, because there is both an extensional mismatch and an import mismatch between population groups and

75. Andreasen, "A New Perspective," 218.

76. Kitcher, "Race, Ethnicity, Biology, Culture," 92.

77. Kitcher's approach thus contrasts with Appiah and Zack in the way that Putnam's "scientific functionalism" (or "psychofunctionalism") contrasts with the commonsense or analytic functionalism of Lewis. See Hilary Putnam, "The Nature of Mental States," in *Readings in Philosophy of Psychology*, vol. 1, ed. Ned Block (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), 223–31; Lewis, "How to Define Theoretical Terms," and "Psychophysical and Theoretical Identifications"; Ned Block, "Introduction: What Is Functionalism?" in his *Readings*, 171–84.

78. Andreasen, "Race: Biological Reality or Social Construct?" S662.

racial groups. However, these mismatches are ones that Kitcher and Andreasen are aware of and are inclined to accept. That is, both Kitcher and Andreasen believe that population groups of the sorts they discuss might deviate in important ways from commonsense views, and moreover, neither believes such groups have the kind of explanatory import common sense attributes to them.<sup>79</sup> They simply disagree with skeptics about whether such population groups could properly be called 'races'.

#### V. EXPANDING THE ONTOLOGICAL CONSENSUS

The above authors all suggest or defend very different accounts of what race is, suggesting there is a vibrant and ongoing set of metaphysical disagreements about whether race exists, and if it does, what kind of thing it is. But this appearance is deceptive, for it is driven in large part by the semantic strategy that begins with different assumptions regarding the correct theory of reference for race terms and concepts. We can see this simply by reviewing these positions and the implicit or explicit assumptions about reference they can or do employ (see table 1).

When we look at the metaphysical facts, divorced from questions regarding the use of racial terms or concepts, we find a relatively broad range of theses that do and should command wide agreement among skeptics, constructionists, and naturalists. Such a restatement looks like an almost banal list of observations:

1. Racialism is false. There are no biobehavioral racial essences.
2. There are a variety of racial concepts in the United States that are applied to persons.
3. Ordinary people employ criteria including skin color, body morphology, ancestry, and identification to ascribe these concepts to persons.
4. The application of these racial concepts may causally affect persons in both superficial and profound ways.
5. Racial classification has had profoundly oppressive effects, at least in the past.<sup>80</sup>
6. Whether or not biological populations now exhibit a significant degree of reproductive isolation, the geographic distribution of populations suggests that they once did. Such distribution is partially responsible for the geographic distribution of superficial bodily features associated with race.

79. I suspect Appiah is well aware of the limitations of mismatch arguments, and it is for this reason that he stops short of concluding his discussion of referential theories by saying "there are no races" as he does elsewhere in the same work (e.g., "Race, Culture, Identity," 38).

80. This is not to imply that racial classification has not also had positive effects, e.g., by fostering a sense of pride or common identity.

TABLE 1  
FROM REFERENCE TO METAPHYSICS

| Metaphysical Position  | Options for a Theory of Reference   |
|--|---|
| Racial skepticism: races do not exist (e.g., Appiah and Zack).   | <p>Descriptivist: construe descriptions as entailing the false theory of racialism (Appiah, Zack).</p> <p>Causal historical: construe referents as constrained by mismatches (Appiah, Zack).</p>  |
| Constructionism: races are aggregates of individuals sharing superficial properties that serve as the criteria for a social practice of ascription (e.g., Mills), or they are groups of persons produced causally (e.g., Piper) or institutionally (e.g., Root) by such a social practice. | <p>Descriptivist: construe descriptions as free of racialism and choose a description satisfied by individuals that, e.g., possess certain superficial properties (Mills) or that have certain historical or institutional properties (Taylor).</p>   |
| Population naturalism: races (if any exist) are biological populations characterized by partial reproductive isolation (e.g., Andreassen and Kitcher).   | <p>Description: construe racial descriptions as they might figure in contemporary biological discussions of populations (Kitcher).</p> <p>Causal historical: construe racial terms as picking out populations, at least in the past (Andreassen).</p> |

7. Among the many things that the practice of racial classification affects, one is marriage rates (and reproduction rates) between some groups of classified persons. That is, marriage/reproductive rates between members of classified groups may be lower than marriage/reproductive rates within the same groups.

8. If the reproductive rates between groups are low enough (and there are no bridge populations), the groups will be distinct biological populations.

Further evidence that there is wide agreement on metaphysical questions but disagreement regarding the appropriateness of 'race' talk is revealed by the attempts of race theorists to provide an account of phenomena that do not (by their lights) count as race. For example, Appiah thinks races do not exist, but he offers an account of racial identification to account for the constructionist intuition that racial classification is causally important.<sup>81</sup> While constructionists and naturalists believe that races exist or may exist, theorists in each tradition are at pains to emphasize their agreement with racial skeptics that races

81. Appiah, "Race, Culture, Identity."

do not exist in the sense that racialists believe they do. And skeptics may allow that reproduction rates among groups of persons classified as different races are lower than within those groups but insist that such groups do not count as races.<sup>82</sup>

If this is correct, it is mistaken to view disputes among constructionists and naturalists as primarily metaphysical in character. Skeptics say race does not exist, employing the term 'race' to mean something that everyone agrees does not exist. Constructionists insist that race does exist, again employing the term 'race' to pick out phenomena that everyone agrees exist. And naturalists insist that races existed and might still exist, using the term 'race' to pick out biological populations that are substantially different from the kinds whose existence eliminativists deny.

It is a consequence of this view that for a variety of important questions of public policy and applied morality, the questions may be restated without important metaphysical disagreement within different idioms of 'race' talk. For example, skeptics who call for rectification of civil rights violations in twentieth-century America might claim that "rectification is owed to those persons who have been classified as 'black' in twentieth-century America," even though they may continue to insist there are no true members of a black race. In contrast, similar prorectification constructionists might simply claim that "rectification is owed to twentieth-century American black persons."

To say that there is no important metaphysical difference between alternate ways of speaking is not to say that there is no important difference at all. This is especially true of 'race' talk. While there are facts that can be equally well stated in a variety of vocabularies, the ways people think and talk about race matter, and these practices are susceptible to consideration and critique.

## VI. AGAINST THE SEMANTIC STRATEGY

Metaphysical debates over race have employed the semantic strategy to resolve disputes over the true character of race. But, in the absence of substantial metaphysical disagreement, racial theorists have achieved alternative conclusions by making different assumptions about the correct semantics for racial terms. Race theorists have employed theories of reference in at least two different ways. One way, the way I have been attributing to Appiah,<sup>83</sup> employs a theory or theories of reference as determinative of a correct answer to the question: to what (if anything) ought we use *t* to refer? But while this approach is quite common in

82. See, e.g., Glasgow, "On the New Biology," 471.

83. This way also figures in the practice, at least in part, of Glasgow, Kitcher, Mills, and Zack.

philosophy, it is not obligatory. Taylor, for example, does not make such a claim.<sup>84</sup> Rather, Taylor offers an account of reference that allows for 'race' talk to pick out a race construed as a socially constructed object. This permissive employment of theories of reference offers an interpretation of how a particular account of race coheres with the intuitions supporting a particular theory of reference, but it does not make the additional claim that other proposed referents of racial terms or concepts are disqualified on semantic grounds. If we want to employ a theory of reference to decide which account of race is correct (e.g., to decide whether one of the metaphysical accounts in table 1 is correct), we need a determinative reading of such a theory.

If pursuing the semantic strategy requires a determinative theory, then the task for its proponents is clear. They need only decide which theory of reference is correct and decide what auxiliary assumptions regarding the application of such a theory are needed to determine the correct referents of racial terms and concepts.<sup>85</sup> Alternatively, they could pursue Appiah's strategy and attempt to justify a conclusion in terms of every plausible theory. Let us consider each alternative.

The semantic strategy seems to offer an avenue by which to settle disputes between skeptics, naturalists, and constructionists once and for all. Nonetheless, pursuing racial phenomena from this direction is obfuscating and ineffective. It is obfuscating because, as we have seen, it makes a philosophical debate over the reference of racial terms and concepts appear as a genuine metaphysical disagreement about what is in the world.<sup>86</sup> It is ineffective because it is unlikely to be fruitful in resolving the question of how we ought to use 'race' talk.

The semantic strategy makes discussions over the correct account of race hostage to issues in the philosophy of language and metaphysics about which there is little agreement.<sup>87</sup> Nor is it clear that a resolution will ever be forthcoming. Accounts of reference are justified by reference to semantic intuitions that vary from person to person and from culture

84. Andreasen may also be employing a theory of reference in this way, as she stops short of endorsing a causal-historical theory while making it clear that she thinks that the correct theory of reference allows for mismatches between ordinary beliefs and the real referents of 'race' talk (which she takes to be populations); "A New Perspective," S662.

85. For example, if the descriptivist theory is the right approach, we must still make auxiliary assumptions about which beliefs (and whose beliefs) determine the description (e.g., Arnold's, DuBois's, beliefs of contemporary folk, scientists' beliefs, etc.). We must also make assumptions about how much of the description must be satisfied by a candidate for it to count as satisfying the description.

86. See also Mallon and Stich, "Odd Couple."

87. See, e.g., nn. 16 and 23 above for some defenders of descriptivist and causal-historical approaches, respectively.

to culture.<sup>88</sup> Stephen Stich has even argued that there cannot be a resolution of the dispute over a correct theory of reference until there is agreement over what would count as getting it right.<sup>89</sup> All these reasons suggest that approaching the metaphysics of race via finding a determinative theory of reference for racial terms or concepts is unlikely to be fruitful.

One might think that one could escape these problems by pursuing Appiah's strategy: simply argue that one's conclusions follow from all of the plausible candidate theories of reference. In order to do so, we need to be able to separate the plausible from the implausible candidates. But even if we can decide on the plausible candidates, there is no reason to believe that all the plausible candidates converge on a single answer regarding whether or how race exists. Indeed, our discussion seems to show that just the opposite is the case, for Andreassen, Appiah, Kitcher, Mills, Taylor, and Zack all arrive at different conclusions simply by suggesting different although plausible assumptions regarding the reference of racial terms. For example, Appiah, Kitcher, Mills, Taylor, and Zack all suggest different although reasonable descriptions to fix the referent of racial terms.

Finally, even supposing we overcame all these problems and arrived at a correct account of the reference of racial terms (or an account of the reference of such terms based on a converging set of accounts) yielding a definitive account of what (if anything) race is, it is not clear that the semantically correct account of 'race' talk ought to dictate our use. To see this, consider first that semantic arguments regarding the referents of 'race' talk need not dovetail with other sorts of argument. One might coherently hold, for example, that racial labels and concepts do not refer but that we should continue to use them anyway because the practical benefits are so great. Or alternatively, one might think that racial labels and concepts do refer but we ought not use them because we risk being misunderstood as legitimating oppression.

Once we realize the possibility of such a gap, then semantic considerations seem less important, for it is not clear that they are of sufficient importance to outweigh other normative arguments to alternative conclusions. If, for example, we decide that the use of 'race' talk is deeply oppressive, no argument to the effect that such talk refers to a biological population or a social construction would be of sufficient weight to merit the continuation of this practice. In contrast, if we decided that the use of 'race' talk is morally required, or carries enormous epistemic benefits, skeptical arguments that racial terms do not,

88. Edouard Machery, Ron Mallon, Shaun Nichols, and Stephen P. Stich, "Semantics, Cross-Cultural Style," *Cognition* 92 (2004): B1–B12.

89. Stich, "Deconstructing the Mind."

strictly speaking, refer to anything would be appropriately ignored in deciding how we use these terms. The point, well demonstrated by Taylor, is that in the face of a variety of compelling pragmatic or normative considerations, it is reasonable to simply ignore semantic considerations.<sup>90</sup>

If the only source of disagreement about 'race' talk were semantic, we could simply pack up and go home. In the last section, we saw that there is little genuine metaphysical disagreement. And semantic disagreements between various race theorists can be safely set aside in favor of a dialogue in which skeptics, constructionists, and naturalists discuss various natural and social phenomena in alternate but metaphysically equivalent theoretical idioms (or alternatively in some neutral vocabulary). However, it is clear that the case of race is not so simple. While there is (or should be) a wide basis of metaphysical agreement on the expanded ontological consensus, there is profound disagreement over the practical and moral import of 'race' talk. Resolving this disagreement requires a complex assessment of many factors, including, the epistemic value of 'race' talk in various domains, the benefits and costs of racial identification and of the social enforcement of such identification, the value of racialized identities and communities fostered by 'race' talk, the role of 'race' talk in promoting or undermining racism, the benefits or costs of 'race' talk in a process of rectification for past injustice, the cognitive or aesthetic value of 'race' talk, and the degree of entrenchment of 'race' talk in everyday discourse. The point is that it is on the basis of these and similar considerations that the issue of what to do with 'race' talk will be decided, not putative metaphysical or actual semantic disagreements. Once we recognize this, we create a situation in which, in Taylor's words, "very real and important ethical concerns can no longer hide in the shadow of metaphysical speculations. . . . We'll have to talk openly about the categories in public policy, because the option of implying answers to these questions" by reference to metaphysical or semantic considerations "will no longer be available."<sup>91</sup>

To say that debates about 'race' talk are normative, not metaphysical, risks being misunderstood. What is normative is not what is in the world, but how, when, and where we decide to talk about what is in the world. I have argued that the attempt to link these two questions via the semantic strategy has, in the context of race and 'race' talk, resulted in an illusion of metaphysical disagreement and a misplaced emphasis

90. Taylor, "Appiah's Uncompleted Argument," secs. 6–7.

91. *Ibid.*, 126. As noted in the text, Taylor's target is Appiah's skepticism-cum-eliminativism. The present discussion extends to constructionist and naturalist conservationists also employing the semantic strategy.

on metaphysical and semantic concerns. Both are best left behind. The alternative is to acknowledge the widespread metaphysical agreement and ask, with Sally Haslanger, what do we want our racial concepts, terms, and practices to do?<sup>92</sup>

92. Sally Haslanger, "Gender and Race: (What) Are They? (What) Do We Want Them to Be?" *Noûs* 34 (2000): 31–55.