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Race, Intersectionality, and Method: A Reply to Critics

It is a great honor to have such excellent commentary on my book, and I am happy to have the opportunity to discuss these issues with others who have done such important work on the topics. I will reply to the commentaries separately, beginning with the critique by Charles Mills and moving on to Karen Jones's.

I. Reply to Mills

A. Revisiting my project

Mills considers four views that pose challenges to my account of race as a hierarchical social category.

1) Kitcher and Andreasen (and others) argue that there is a biological reality to race. If, as I argue, it is not helpful to draw a sharp boundary between the social and the natural, should we embrace their framework and allow that race is both social *and* biological? Or is biologism's history too troublesome for that? Am I implicitly committed to a problematic naturalism about race myself, given that I embrace a broad naturalism?

So a remapping of this contrast would be something like the "natural" unmediated by human causality and the "natural" mediated by human causality. Does it mean, then, that we should accept Andreasen's and Kitcher's claims as a friendly amendment, a recognition of the causal and conceptual fuzziness of these categories? Or should we resist them in the light of biologism's history? In either case, what are the alterations that Haslanger would make in the impressively detailed apparatus she has constructed to theorize these issues? (Mills 12)

2) Glasgow argues for an eliminative approach to 'race,' but offers a substitute 'race*' to do some of the work that the social constructionist was aiming to do. Drawing both on thought experiments and empirical research, Glasgow claims that the concept of 'race' has a biological core, and as a result, eliminativism is the only option. Mills rightly calls upon me to provide "a principled rather than ad hoc criterion for demarcating the point at which we can no longer be said to be employing the same concept." (Mills 14-15) More pointedly even, how can I draw such a demarcation on metaphysical rather than political/ideological grounds?

Obviously, some auxiliary hypothesis... is necessary so that Haslanger can be claiming to be giving a principled rather than ad hoc criterion for demarcating the point at which we can no longer be said to be employing the same concept. Yes, it's very different in many respects, but its sameness inheres in... (Mills 14-15)

But even if this is true, citing it as a justification would mean that constructionists would be conceding that their metaphysics was being determined by their politics, not in the epistemically acceptable sense of a commitment to social justice motivating a search for the social truth, but in the epistemically unacceptable sense of ignoring the evidence against an ontological *parti pris*. (Mills 15)

3) Jennifer Saul (2007) has argued that building subordination/domination into the concept of gender is not supported by everyday discourse or our practices using the terminology of 'men' and 'women.' Moreover, there are important political purposes for which we would not want the terms to have such entailments.

But by the same token, the problem with the account is that if you build subordination and domination directly into the concepts, then you open yourself up to obvious counterexamples. In a critique of Haslanger, Jennifer Saul has raised a series of objections to Haslanger's formulation: they are incongruent with everyday discourse (people do not in fact use the terms that way, either as signaling privilege/subordination or in differentiating sex/gender color/race); they do not allow for the possibility of unsubordinated women; the relation between the different concepts being invoked (manifest, operative, target) is problematic; and others. (Mills 17)

4) If we consider the extensive historical work that has been done on race, how can we pretend to analyze the concept from our armchair? As Mills suggests, we can't settle the question of whether racial categories are hierarchical by "conceptual fiat." (Mills 19)

We need to be open to the possibility that race as a social category may have existed at certain times without racism and without racial social subordination; this cannot be settled by conceptual fiat. So our categories should not beg the question in favor of a particular interpretation's being true in advance of an

examination of the historical evidence (evidence albeit shaped to a certain extent—this is unavoidable—by the nature of our conceptualization). (Mills 19)

In effect, the challenges are:

- 1) Race is *both* biological *and* social (Neo-naturalism (Kitcher, Andreassen))
- 2) Race is *neither* biological *nor* social (Eliminativism (Glasgow))
- 3) Race/gender is *not hierarchical* (Saul)
- 4) Race/gender should be studied historically/empirically and *a priori stipulations cannot do justice to the phenomena*. (Mills)

There are, I believe, many different projects that might count as providing a theory of race, just as there are many different projects in providing theories of other phenomena. For example, we might compare:

What are we doing in theorizing race?

- a) Providing a theory of *our concept of race*.
- b) Providing a theory of race.
- c) Providing a theory of what the term ‘race’ means.

What are we doing in theorizing water?

- a) Providing a theory of *our concept of water*.
- b) Providing a theory of water.
- c) Providing a theory of what the term ‘water’ means

My efforts to provide accounts of race and gender are, and have always been, primarily of the (b) sort. I want to understand what race and gender are. However, I have obscured this in some of my published work by distinguishing different projects by reference to different sort of *concepts* we are investigating (manifest, operative, target, (Ch 2, Ch 13)) and different ways of investigating concepts (conceptual, descriptive, ameliorative (Ch 7, Ch 12)).¹ This is confusing. One source of this obscurity is that the term ‘concept’ is used in many ways and functions differently in different fields and sub-fields. Another source confusion is that I am an externalist about concepts and so I believe that in order to understand the content of a concept – what a given concept is a concept *of* – one must investigate the world, not the mind. For an externalist, (a), (b), and (c) all involve investigation into the (watery, racial) parts of the world, and answers to (a) and (c) will depend on answers to (b).

As I read the Neo-Naturalists (see (1)) and the Eliminativists (see (2)), we disagree not only about what race is, but also disagree about the best method for determining what race is. How do we study race/gender? We can distinguish two broad approaches:

Neo-Fregean strategy: figure out what we mean by ‘race’ by analyzing our concept and then develop a theory about what fits the concept. (Adjust the extension, as needed.)

Non-Fregean strategy: consider a variety of “reference fixing” clues for ‘race,’ and develop an empirical theory about what we are talking about, if anything. (Adjust the concept, as needed.)

I favor the second, non-Fregean, strategy. On my view the meaning of the term ‘race’ is what it picks out, perhaps a feature of persons, perhaps a set of individuals, perhaps a function from individuals to possible worlds. The meaning of ‘race’ is not a concept, nor is it determined by our concepts. Our concept of race represents race as a biological category because doing so appears to justify the entrenchment of our practices about race. But it doesn’t follow that race is what we think it is. And it is not a coincidence that race isn’t what we think it is.

How do we undertake a study of race if we can’t rely on our concept to pick out the subject matter of our inquiry? Well, we have multiple ways of connecting with the phenomenon, including background ideas that we’ve stored in our concept of race. We are able to pick out paradigms; we create practices that depend on delimiting races, etc. But the information contained in the concept is metasemantic, not semantic. In Kripke’s terminology, information can fix the referent without being part of the meaning. (See Ch. 16)

So, I agree with Mills that race/gender should be studied historically/empirically. A theory of race is not to be achieved by an *a priori* investigation into our concept of race. (I’ll return to the issue of stipulation he also raises.) But both strategies will have difficulty in cases where it is unclear either what we are picking out, or where the

¹ Chapter references are all to *Resisting Reality: Social Construction and Social Critique* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). Mills’ pagination is to the manuscript circulated prior to the APA session.

concept is less than fully clear or determinate. There will also be difficulty if/when our linguistic practices evolve.

B. Jazz model of meaning (Bigelow and Schroeter)

Meaning isn't fixed but is constantly evolving. We are engaged in a collaborative project to communicate about the world. As our understanding of the world develops and changes, we collectively adjust. At some points we track form, at others function, etc. (What is a toaster? Is it whatever we can use to toast bread? Or must it have bread-sized slots with heating elements on both sides?) What we hold fixed through any particular change is up for negotiation, or sometimes power (who holds the means of (linguistic) production).

That said, there are several comparisons that need to be explored, for we are in a period of discovery with respect to facts that pertain to race and gender, and these discoveries produce linguistic instability. Consider three options:

- 1) 'Race' is like 'atom,' i.e., the term 'atom' was once thought (by definition!) to pick out the smallest indivisible particle, but now we know that atoms have parts. (|| Neo-naturalism)
- 2) 'Race' is like 'witch,' i.e., we once thought there were witches with supernatural powers, but now we know there aren't any human beings with supernatural powers, so no witches. (|| Eliminativism)
- 3) 'Race' is like 'monarch,' i.e., we once thought that monarchs were granted divine right that was passed down through the lineage, but now we know that monarchs are individuals whose power derives from custom, broadly construed. (|| Social constructionism)

When we find that the world is not what we had thought and our linguistic tools don't quite work, what should we do? Should we give up or refine a tool that we had been using? When do our revisions result in a new tool?

In such cases, the pressing question is whether there is a division between things that is important for the purposes at hand. In the case of 'atom' and 'monarch,' the accepted extension of the term picked out a group of entities that remained significant given our interests in the domain (chemistry, government), even if they weren't exactly what we thought they were. In the case of 'witch,' the presumed extension did not remain a significant group once we learned the members of it weren't capable of supernatural powers. But things could have been different. It could have been that there was something else that witches had in common that made the group significant; it could have been that once the divine right of kings was rejected, monarchs lost power.

In my work on race, I maintain that the presumed extensions of racial terms 'Black,' 'Asian,' 'White,' etc. remain socially/politically/legally significant even though members of the groups are not unified by biological commonalities. So we have reason to be attentive to and demarcate the groups and to correct our previous understanding, just as we did with 'atom' and 'monarch.' In the case of 'atom,' we found something newly important in the physical world; in the case of 'monarch,' it was part of the social world.

In *Resisting Reality* Ch. 10, I suggest that linguistic negotiation can be quite local. Within the biology lab it may be legitimate to use the term 'race' as neo-naturalists propose. However, it is a separate question how we should use the term 'race' in public discourse. The reason for adopting a constructionist account of race, I argue, is not for the purposes of biological theorizing, but for the purposes of social justice. Moreover, as Mills suggests, the neo-naturalists conception is problematic if the goal is social justice, both because it will not track the groups as they have been racialized, and because of the racist history of biological essentialism. Because social justice is a broad public goal, the revised social meaning has a claim on being a dominant meaning in public discourse. This remains, however, a matter for negotiation.

I am happy to allow that the term 'race' can have several meanings, depending on context. But in public discourse, it is wrong to say that race is biological, or to say that races don't exist. Taking into account both how the world is and what in the world we have reason to track in public discourse, the best option is to take race to be a social category.

This leaves Saul's concern (3) unaddressed, however, for she argues that the social/political/legal context for understanding gender, at least, does not support an understanding of the significant groups (men/women) in terms of subordination/privilege. I agree that this is an open question and is an important issue for debate. I emphasize subordination/privilege because I believe that social justice will be best served if current injustice is made vivid in

reconceiving what we mean (which, as argued above, isn't changing the meaning). But I don't have the empirical research to support this. I'm happy if my work has raised this question, even if it hasn't answered it.

C. Definitions, Stipulations, and Generalizations

Because, on my view, meanings aren't "in the head," then there isn't a stable distinction between analytic truths and synthetic generalizations. But what, then, am I doing offering *definitions* of race and gender?

Our thinking and speaking should focus on phenomena that are significant within the context (context of inquiry, context of discourse). We have reason to track some kinds rather than others, and language provides us tools to pick out a kind of thing and hold it fixed for the purposes at hand. This is one purpose of stipulated definitions; they play a role in any theoretical project and are a key device in linguistic negotiation. I agree with Mills that:

We need to be open to the possibility that race as a social category may have existed at certain times without racism and without racial social subordination; this cannot be settled by conceptual fiat. So our categories should not beg the question in favor of a particular interpretation's being true in advance of an examination of the historical evidence... (Mills 19)

However, the adequacy of an interpretation depends on what we are aiming to do with it. It is an open question what we want the language of 'race' (or 'gender,' 'man,' 'woman') for, and in what context. So as Saul suggests, there will be contexts in which it is valuable to understand race (or man/woman) without subordination (parallel to the biology lab?). But in our negotiation over public discourse I am urging that the significant phenomena that project forward concern social groups in which hierarchy is central. This is what we have been tracking all along, though we didn't realize it.

Mills worries, however, that I am letting my politics unduly influence the descriptive projects of semantics and ontology. I'm not sure I understand the "unduly." There are many distinctions that can be drawn, many truths to articulate. Accurate description is not enough for my purposes, for I am not simply trying to describe reality, I am trying to highlight some aspects of it in order that we can more effectively change it. And selecting what distinctions to draw and what truths to articulate based on political considerations is, I believe, a legitimate part of that project.

II. Reply to Jones

A. Two concerns

Jones raises two excellent concerns I will take up here:

a) My account of intersectionality doesn't do justice to the case of Indigenous men, for even though they are not privileged along any dimension, they are still *men*, not just *male*. The fact that they are *men* is important in providing an account of the kind of oppression they face. We who care about social justice "must make specific reference to their maleness and to the ways in which they are constructed as *Indigenous men*... We want to be able to theorize how it is possible to turn advantage into disadvantage and understand the confluence of forces needed to pull this off." (Jones p?)

This is connected to something Mills says that I didn't yet address: "What about movement up and down the racial ladder? This is another area where no ready gender parallel comes to mind...how, within Haslanger's apparatus, should we conceptualize positive and negative changes of white and nonwhite racial status, given that their geographical origins will not have changed?" (Mills 19)

b) There is a tension between my account of oppression/subordination in the definitions of race/gender and in my account of oppression. In my accounts of race & man/woman, subordination is coarse-grained and affects members of the group as a whole; but on my account of oppression subordination is fine-grained and affects subgroups differently.

Question 1: Would it be possible to be privileged *qua man* but subordinated *qua Black man*? Isn't someone who is subordinated *qua Black man* thereby subordinated *qua man*? But how, on my account, can someone be subordinated *qua man* (rather than privileged)?

Question 2: Can we always decompose the mechanisms that subordinate or privilege individuals in intersectional positions? Is the subordination of a Black man *qua Black man* decomposable, even analytically, into a confluence of racial subordination and gender privilege?

B. Intersectionality

When Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) introduced the concept of intersectionality, her concern was to highlight the ways in which antidiscrimination law obscured the claims of women of color, especially Black women. She begins her essay:

One of the very few Black women's studies books is entitled *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave*. I have chosen this title as a point of departure in my efforts to develop a Black feminist criticism because it sets forth a problematic consequence of the tendency to treat race and gender as mutually exclusive categories of experience and analysis. (Crenshaw 1989, 139)

She goes on to speak of the importance of using multiple axes of analysis:

With Black women as the starting point, it becomes more apparent how dominant conceptions of discrimination condition us to think about subordination as disadvantage occurring along a single categorical axis. I want to suggest further that this single-axis framework erases Black women in the conceptualization, identification and remediation of race and sex discrimination by limiting inquiry to the experiences of otherwise-privileged members of the group. (Crenshaw 1989, 140)

Much of the subsequent discussion of intersectionality in the feminist literature has focused on the intersectionality of *experience*. Experience is intersectional when it is the result of being socially positioned in multiple categories at once. Because I am socially positioned simultaneously as White, able-bodied, affluent, and as a woman, my experience of being a woman is inflected by the ways that these other social positions affect me. There are many who have argued that the experience of being a woman (or being White, or affluent) cannot be separated from the experience of the other social positions, because experience is not “additive” in the way that would be required (e.g., Spelman 1988). So there is no such thing as *the* experience of being a woman (or *the* experience of being White), and no way of being *a woman* “in general,” because one is always a woman of a particular race, class, etc.

If “experience” is understood in phenomenal terms, i.e., how we perceive, feel, and understand our situation, then it is very plausible that experience cannot be disaggregated into separate elements that everyone in the relevant social group, e.g., women, Whites, the affluent, shares. Note, however, that Crenshaw is not simply concerned with the subjective experience of women of color, but also the tools of analysis we use to understand the circumstances they find themselves in. In emphasizing the intersectionality of structural oppression, Crenshaw does not argue that we should retreat from analysis, but that we should undertake a *multidimensional* analysis rather than a single-axis analysis.

Social structures intersect and overlap in ways that affect how they oppress/privilege those who are positioned within them. For example, sexism and racism are two oppressive/privileging structures that have implications for many aspects of one’s life, e.g., where one lives, who one lives with, what one does in one’s life (employment, education, leisure). One’s social circumstances are affected by the combinations of structures one lives in: a White man and a White woman will have different opportunities and will be subjected to different norms because gender structures interact with structures of Whiteness. Similarly, a White woman and a Latina will have different opportunities and face different norms because race structures interact with being gendered a woman.

In my analysis of race and gender, I rely on an analogy to capture intersectionality: the intersection of race and gender has an effect similar to overlapping different colored gels on a theater light. Jones points out that there are limitations to this analogy, and I agree. It works better for the intersectionality of experience/identity, and not so well for the intersection of structural oppressions. Is there a better account of how structures interact? Or even another metaphor?

Let us step back to consider some important background questions:

- How does social categorization work and, more relevant for our purposes here, how do social categories interact?

- How does power work and, more specifically, how do multiple axes of power interact to create structures of subordination?

I don't think we can answer these questions a priori. We will need empirical investigation into structures at work in a particular context. It is likely to work differently in different settings. In this I agree with Charles Tilly, who emphasizes that:

...social processes are path-dependent – that sequences and outcomes of causal mechanisms vary by space-time setting, that the order in which things happen affects what happens, that the small-scale or large-scale collective experience accumulates or congeals as culture... (Tilly 2002, 38)

In different settings, social categories (race, gender, etc.) are formed through different processes and have different conditions for stability, persistence, etc. Compare different nationalities, religions, classes, sexualities, etc.

[*Durable Inequality*] claims that explanation consists of identifying reliable causal mechanisms and processes of general scope within particular social phenomena. Causal mechanisms are events that alter relations among some set of elements. Processes are frequent (but not universal) combinations and sequences of causal mechanisms. Social mechanisms are sometimes cognitive, involving changes in perception, consciousness, or intention. They are sometimes relational, involving shifts in connections among social units. They are also sometimes environmental, involving alterations in the surroundings of social units. Explanation then consists of locating robust cognitive, relational, and environmental mechanisms within observed episodes. (Tilly 2000, 493)

Even though the processes will be historically and culturally specific, can we make a few general observations? Power comes in multiple (and incommensurable?) forms, and power is not simply additive. Nevertheless, suppose we simplify to construct a model for understanding how power might accumulate and transfer along categorical lines. (This over-simplification may distort rather than illuminate!)

Oppression occurs in structures that distribute social capital unjustly. Let 'social capital' be a placeholder for the various sorts of power society distributes: economic, status, respect, access to resources & relationships, etc. (Think of Young on the many faces of oppression (Young 1990) or Ortner on gender hegemony (Ortner 1996)). For the moment, let's suppose that we can represent power in terms of a common currency: like poker chips. People occupying different categories in a structure are given a different amount of chips, and it costs to move between roles. Some chips you get by virtue of being a man, or a woman, some by virtue of being of a particular race, etc. In the US, Blacks get fewer chips than Asians, for example. There are different aspects of power that aren't captured by this simplification (as mentioned above, different sorts of power are in some ways incommensurable), but the point here is to illuminate ways in which movement between social categories is differentially available depending on where you start.

Most roles are designated to be occupied by individuals with a particular combination of race/gender/class. In changing roles, you are charged different amounts depending on your social category and what role you are coming from. So women can occupy a man's role, e.g., a woman can become a CEO, but it is harder than it would be for a man: not only does she have fewer chips to start with, but she has to pay out more chips to get there; a Black woman entering into a White man's role is going to be even harder, given that she has so few chips to start with and will have to pay extra for being a woman and being Black. White men lose substantial chips when entering a White woman's role and even more when they enter a nonwhite woman's role.

Movement up and down the race/gender ladder happens in complicated ways. Consider a male member of an out-group. Presumably the roles approved for him in the dominant culture will be men's roles. But these roles also cost a lot of chips to enter, especially from an out-group position. These are chips that he doesn't have. He is male and lacks power. Is he a man?

C. Indigenous males: Are they powerless men?

In the case of Indigenous men there are several issues:

- Do we really need to say they are *men* and not just *male* in order to do justice to the case? Could we say that Indigenous males are prevented from being men? (Not just that they are emasculated, for they may

have never had power. Note that in Ch. 6 I argue that Black men are sometimes emasculated – they cease to be *men* – in certain circumstances under White Supremacy.) And this is the/a problem?

- Is it really true that they have no social privilege? Who cleans the toilets in their house? Who gets up at night when the child is throwing up and cleans up the mess? What are the rates of domestic violence? If men have access to legal privileges in the dominant culture, don't they get those? I need to know more about the example. (This would potentially provide some social capital in local context that then would be completely spent because access is only to privileged positions in the dominant culture.)

To do justice to the case we need more information. However, I don't see the problem with saying that Indigenous males are not men (they don't regularly satisfy the dominant social conditions for being a man), though they may function sometimes as men. In fact, I think there are some advantages to this account. Carolyn Steedman in her book on class *Landscape for a Good Woman* (1986) says:

The legal impropriety of my existence, and the sudden covert revelations of this impropriety permitted sightings of fractures within the system we inhabit, which is variously called patriarchy, or a sex-gender system, or the law. There are these two ways of understanding the law, the space between two meanings, and their meeting place. (Steedman 1986, 72)

Perhaps we have in the case of Indigenous males a gender that is neither man nor woman (cf. eunuch, berdache), a space between two meanings (man, woman). If they are denied the meanings that accompany being a man, and those that accompany being a woman, then this is revealing of how the gender system places racial and ethnic conditions on membership. And this strikes me as capturing important facts about how intersectionality works. So it would help me to see why exactly we *do* need to provide an account that accommodates wholly subordinated/powerless *men*. (Alternatively, perhaps I could say that, parallel to race, the categories of men/women occur when interpretations of sex situates individuals in a binary hierarchy, allowing that either men or women can be situated as dominant.)

Ultimately, however, we need a better account of social structures and tools for understanding how structures interact and how oppression and privilege is reinforced. *Resisting Reality* has not provided the account we need. I believe we should explore the tools provided psychology, sociology, and other social sciences for understanding social structures. And it is part of my ongoing project to interpret some of the research in these fields in philosophical terms so that it can be better integrated into current debates in epistemology, metaphysics and moral philosophy.

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