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Citation: Haslanger, Sally. "Exploring Race in Life, in Speech, and in Philosophy: Comments on Joshua Glasgow's A Theory of Race." *Symposia on Gender, Race and Philosophy*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (Fall 2009).

As Published: <http://web.mit.edu/sgrp/2009/no2/Haslanger1009.pdf>

Persistent URL: <http://hdl.handle.net/1721.1/97037>

Version: Final published version: final published article, as it appeared in a journal, conference proceedings, or other formally published context

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Symposia on Gender, Race and Philosophy

Volume 5, number 2. Fall 2009

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

Exploring *Race in Life, in Speech, and in Philosophy*

Comments on Josh Glasgow's *A Theory of Race*

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Josh Glasgow's book *A Theory of Race* (2009) presents an important argument for the claim that race is an illusion and, that racial claims are, strictly speaking, false. They are false because the concept of *race*, according to Glasgow, makes a non-negotiable commitment to races being biologically based kinds, or at least to races not being wholly social kinds. Although Glasgow considers empirical evidence for this commitment (Ch 4), the data is inconclusive; instead he relies on a traditional method of thought experiment to argue that wholly social analyses fail to capture our intuitions (§6.2). Glasgow supports a reconstructionist approach which would have us adopt a family of concepts related to *race*, viz., *race**

concepts. *Race*s* are very much like races, except that it is not part of the concept of *race** that *race*s* are biological kinds. (I take it that in ordinary circumstances *post-reconstruction* the terms 'race' and 'race*' are to be pronounced the same and spelled the same, but as we pre-reconstructionists consider the reconstructionist proposal, we use the '*' to keep our meanings differentiated (139-40).)

There is much in Glasgow's discussion that deserves close attention for he engages recent work in philosophy of language, philosophy of science, and ethics at a high level. His arguments deserve careful consideration and discussion. I would like to use these short comments, however, to consider the broad project and methodology of the book and to reflect on different ways of engaging philosophically with the problem of race.

i. Questions and Conversations

Questions such as "What is race?" or "What are races?" arise at particular moments as parts of particular conversations. These conversations may take place "in your head" in moments of private reflection; they may occur between several people in debate, in an argument before the Supreme Court, in a biology lab; or they may occur as part of a broad public inquiry in the US, or in another country or culture. In order to adequately answer the question, it seems to me important to understand who is asking, why they are asking, what exactly they are asking about, and how the answer will matter. This is not just true of race, but of other questions philosophers ask, e.g., What is justice? What is knowledge? What is friendship? For example, one might understandably ask about friendship: Is my daughter my friend? Is my dog my friend? Is my God my friend? Could an object such as a book or a teddy bear be a friend? Is any friend of my friend a friend of mine? The question should arise: why do you want

to know? What is at stake right here, right now, in calling someone or something a friend?

Consider another question, “Who is in your family?” or “What is a family?” I think many of us would not be sure how to answer this question. Is an unmarried adult couple with no children a family? Does it matter if the couple is gay or lesbian? History matters. Context also matters: When I am in the doctor’s office and the doctor asks me if I know my (adopted) son’s family, I don’t say, “Well, duh!” I know she means to be asking about his birthfamily. When my daughter and her birth sister are together and someone asks of the sister, “Is she in your family too?” the question is clearly about whether we adopted them both. In adoption and GLBT literature (and bumper stickers) it is common to see the line: “Love makes a family.” The law doesn’t always see it that way, and the law matters. But neither blood, nor love, nor the law, fully determine the boundaries of family.

What should we make of this? Should we say that the term ‘family’ is ambiguous? ‘Family_b’ means biological family; ‘family_s’ means social family; ‘family_l’ means legal family? Should we say that the term ‘family’ expresses a cluster concept so that *a is part of b’s family* just in case *a* and *b* are sufficiently related by love, law, or kinship structures, etc? Should we say that ‘family’ is polysemic with several intertwined threads of meaning, possibly developing over time? Should we say that ‘family’ is an essentially contested concept as it is so embedded in the different social meanings of kinship? Should we say that ‘family’ is univocal and functions (roughly) as a contrast word that situates others as more or less close along some dimension indicated by context? There are many options of this kind to consider. But a further plausible option is that there is no fact of the matter about which of these options captures “what ‘family’ means” because meaning is not captured by descriptive conditions of this sort at all (I’ll return to this last suggestion).

It is hard to know what is the best approach to understanding family. But it would not seem helpful to insist that a particular set of intuitions that arise in philosophical inquiry are going to settle the issue in a way that matters to people who are actually wondering about the boundaries of family. There are two different reasons why. First, if there is a question about who is in my family, or what makes it the case that someone is in my family, this is not plausibly going to arise from my confusion about what the term ‘family’ means or what the concept of *family* entails. I already know how to use the term meaningfully, and have an adequate grasp of the concept, but, at least in the case at hand, that knowledge doesn’t settle the issue. The problem is that, if I am sincerely asking the question, what ‘family’ means gives out just when I need it. Either it doesn’t entail anything for the case I’m wondering about, or what I judge it to entail seems wrong.¹ Both are likely possibilities in circumstances of social change.² It is not plausible to claim that the meaning of ‘family’ is so determinate that it anticipates and settles all eventualities, or that its meaning is so written in stone that it cannot accommodate new (or newly discovered) circumstances.

Second, use of the term ‘family’ is part of a set of practices that have normative import. This import need not be entailed by the concept, but may be pragmatically implicated by an utterance involving the word. To put it in slightly different terms, to designate someone as a member (or not) of my family is to perform a speech act that brings with it normative consequences defined by the social context. These consequences cannot be explored simply by considering the literal meaning of the term ‘family’ and the aptness of the speech act is not simply a matter of deciding whether the term ‘family’ descriptively applies. Suppose someone tells me that their intuitions about what makes a family entail that I am not a mother, that I’m only a mother*.³ A natural response would be to consider the nature of this speech act: is

it a purely descriptive act? What standing would be needed to perform the act? Why am I being told this? What is being implicated? It is true that I am not the biological mother of my children, but what am I supposed to conclude from this? How does that fact matter in the circumstances? In all respects that make a difference to my social and moral obligations to my children, I am their mother, so the observation would seem to have a much more suspect point, e.g., to stigmatize me or my family in some way. And it would be reasonable for me to reject it. It would seem, then, that not only is the intuition that ‘mother’ means ‘biological mother’ not important to how I live or ought to live, but the statement of this intuition is reasonably rejected by a competent user of the term.

How, you might ask, does this apply to Glasgow’s argument? How are my reflections on family relevant for thinking about race? The two concepts are similar in some ways: both seem to have a biological and a social component, and both carry significant social and moral implications. Moreover, I think it likely that statements such as “mothers are biologically related to their children” would garner at least as much support from the “folk” as claims about the biological basis for race; and political philosophers frequently rely on intuitions about the family that ignore the existence of adoptive and other non-traditional families. But it would be seriously problematic, I believe, to rely on these facts to conclude that the concept of *family* is non-negotiably committed to having a biological basis and that non-biological families are only families*.

I’m not arguing, however, that we should understand races as families. (Cf. Stubblefield 2005.) My concern is more methodological. Three issues carry over from family to race: (i) What is the context in which we are asking about race? (ii) What reason do we have for thinking that there is a “core meaning”⁴ of race committed to there being a biological basis

for racial groups, especially under conditions of social and scientific change? And (iii) how, if at all, do intuitions about meaning matter? I have offered the example of family in part because it shows that if we embed questions about language and concepts in social context, especially complex and evolving social contexts, we must be attentive to the limits of semantic-seeming intuitions, whether philosophical or “folk,” as a basis for our inquiry.

ii. Questioning Race

Questions about race occur, as mentioned above, in many different contexts. The term ‘race’ has a history in biology, anthropology, sociology and law, and a history in ordinary public speech. When philosophers begin to think about race they have a number of options. We can help out the biologists and legal theorists by clarifying or explicating their notions. We can engage with a history of philosophers’ use of the term ‘race’. I’m sure there are a variety of other worthwhile projects along these lines. But one that is especially important for critical race theorists is to begin with the everyday challenges of racial injustice.

I watch my children being disadvantaged by interpretations of their skin color and other markings of race; I see the ways that this disadvantage accumulates and spreads. I experience the impact of this on my neighborhood. I witness the ways in which these interpretations are supported by the media and are embedded in social and political structures. When I begin to theorize, these are the phenomena—the divisions of privilege and disadvantage along racial lines—I want to understand. My questions arise in a context where the reality of race weighs on me and the challenge is to achieve some analytical and critical distance.

This is also my experience in the classroom. Racial differences are assumed, experienced, and enacted. They affect where students sit, how they engage with each other

and the material, how they understand themselves. My goal is to raise questions that enable them to critically engage their understanding of themselves as raced: what does it mean to be Black or Latina, American Indian or South Asian? What does it mean personally, historically, socially? We are all competent users of the term ‘race,’ but that doesn’t tell us what race is or what it means to belong to a race. I’m convinced that just as philosophers’ intuitions about the concept of family won’t settle my questions about who is in my family, philosophers’ intuitions about racial possibilities won’t answer our questions about what it is to be raced.

If our starting point as we inquire into *what race is*, is the social experience of race and the social implications of race, it is not a serious option to claim that race isn’t real. It is like someone saying to me that I am not a mother but only a mother* because according to their intuitions, mothers are those who give birth (or at least carry a child to a certain stage of pregnancy?). Given where I begin my inquiries into race and family, and the questions I am asking, these sorts of abstract intuitions do not engage the issues. Nor does empirical investigation into the “ordinary person’s” abstract intuitions about race. I don’t trust the “ordinary” person’s ideas about race because I believe that the very social processes that create the divisions of privilege and advantage also obscure their workings. Investigation of unreflective ideas about race is potentially interesting because it can reveal how obscurantist ideology works (and anti-realists from Appiah to Glasgow offer important insights into this ideology), but it is rarely a source of insight into the reality of racial hierarchy as it is lived.

So, considering Glasgow’s discussion, I’m worried about the questions he wants his account to answer. I don’t really understand – or to be more candid, maybe the problem is that I find alienating – the context that supposedly gives rise to his questions and motivates his line of thought. His questions

seem to be a mix of political, psychological, biological, and philosophical, but without a clear object.

This may seem an unfair complaint because in his admirably clear way, Glasgow graphically highlights the questions and principles that guide his project. For example, he states that his agenda is motivated by what he calls the “normative question”:

The Normative Question: Should we eliminate or conserve racial discourse and thought, as well as practices that rely on racial categories (2)?

So let’s take this to be a question posed in conversation. If Glasgow were to ask me this question, I would have a fairly simple answer: Of course we should work to eliminate social practices that constitute or perpetuate racial injustice and we should engage in racial thought and discourse to the extent required to do this. Should we continue to use racial terms and concepts after racial injustice has been eliminated? We’ll have to see how our social practices evolve and whether it makes sense to extend our current vocabularies to the new social groups that emerge.

Why is this answer inadequate?

iii. The “Semantic Strategy”

Glasgow would reject this answer, it seems, because he adopts the semantic strategy Ron Mallon (2004) criticizes:

Thus the broad orientation of the race debate is that the normative is held to depend on the ontological, which in turn is held to depend on the conceptual. Mallon calls this dialectical move, of defending a normative position partly on the basis of ontological and at bottom semantic (and I would add, folk-theoretical) theses, “the semantic strategy” (12).

The worry, it seems, is that if race is not real, then we cannot reasonably conserve racial thought and talk because that would be tantamount to endorsing false thought and talk. This worry becomes a serious problem because, on Glasgow's view, racial thought and talk is "non-negotiably committed" to a biological basis for race that we now know does not obtain.

I myself find the idea of non-negotiable commitment unhelpful, and would not grant that for (almost) any concept there is some proposition that is strongly non-negotiable (25). But the more important issue, I believe, is identifying the object of inquiry. Glasgow seems to hold that what matters for shared concepts, shared meaning, and ultimately joint inquiry is a set of fixed and non-negotiable assumptions. If, however, what we are talking about and inquiring into is something in the world, an entity, a structure, a kind or property, we may share meaning and overlap in our inquiries, even if we have profoundly different understandings of what we are investigating and how. It is perfectly possible, for example, for those who think water is a fundamental element and essentially liquid to be talking and thinking about the same stuff as those who think it is a compound of hydrogen and oxygen and possibly solid or vaporous. (And even more radical divergence in assumptions is possible.)

As I indicated in the previous section, the critical race theorist is confronted with racial divisions, and these divisions are the subject matter of our (CRT) inquiry. These divisions are described in racial terms, they are justified using racial ideology, they are experienced as dictating racial identities. To suggest that they aren't *really* racial divisions because there is no biological basis for the groupings sounds as bizarre as saying that my family is not a *real* family because we aren't related by blood. The object of our inquiry is not something

we access by determining what satisfies "non-negotiable" conditions some associate with the term 'race'. The object of our inquiry is the racial divisions in the world and what causes them.⁵

This may not be a criticism of Glasgow, if we allow that there are multiple legitimate projects concerning race, with multiple objects. One might suggest, for example, that Glasgow's argument supports the idea that there are at least two worthwhile inquiries about "race" (understood neutrally), one about *race* (the purported biological kind) the other about *race** (the purported social kind). As he suggests in considering the compatibility of the normative and conceptual projects, there need be no conflict (19). Critical race theory (CRT) could be construed as having *race** as the object of its inquiry, and philosophical race theory (PRT), including the bulk of Glasgow's book, as inquiring into *race*. However, this is not a plausible interpretation of Glasgow's comments about *race**, for he does not think that *races** currently exist and it is our job to bring them into existence, through (at least partly) a conceptual revolution,

...reconstructionism is a *normative* program for designing a coherent conceptual architecture that will bring about the reality of *races** and *racial** identities (145).

It is puzzling to me, then, what Glasgow takes our current racial divisions to be. They aren't *races* and they aren't *races**. Surely they exist and have social significance; for CRT, *they* are the proper subject of our inquiry. But they don't even appear on Glasgow's landscape. So however interesting and smart his discussion is, a critical race theorist may be forgiven for thinking it is mostly beside the point.

iv. Racial Meanings

Recall that Glasgow adopts the semantic strategy that requires us to answer the normative question about racial thought and talk by determining first whether race is real; this in turn requires us to elucidate the concept of race, drawing on either empirical research or philosophical intuition. If we don't adopt this strategy, how do we proceed? I have asserted that there are racial divisions amongst us, and these divisions are what critical race theory aims to investigate. (This is, of course, compatible with different projects investigating different phenomena, e.g., the use of 'race' in biology, law, or philosophy.) Glasgow maintains, however, that the semantic strategy is apt for determining whether races, in the "ordinary sense" exist. Is this true and is it in conflict with CRT? Do those engaged in CRT, as I've described it, forfeit a claim to be capturing the ordinary sense of 'race' or the ordinary concept of race? There are two possibilities. On one hand, some working on CRT may be content to claim that they are not invested in capturing the ordinary concept of 'race' because this meaning is sufficiently corrupt that it only matters as part of an ideological debunking. Glasgow's arguments may be useful as part of this debunking project (though demonstrating how the ordinary concept of race functions to sustain unjust racial divisions would be an important part of this project not included in Glasgow's discussion). On the other hand, a proponent of CRT might reject a priori reflection - whether on the part of philosophers or the "folk" - as the right method for determining the content of our concepts or ordinary meaning of our terms. It would then be incumbent on this approach to lay out a different strategy for unpacking our ordinary concept.

This task is tantamount to formulating a substitute for the traditional project of conceptual analysis, thus it is not something I can accomplish here. Glasgow's discussions of semantic externalism, especially in §§2.2, 3.2-3, 6.2-3, are very

judicious and helpful, and he clearly recognizes the value of different approaches to meaning. Let me sketch the externalist approach to meaning I favor and suggest briefly how it is relevant to the debate between Glasgow and CRT as I've described it. (See also Haslanger forthcoming.)

Thoroughgoing externalists hold the Millian or Russellian view that terms have a single meaning, viz., their referents, and a term does not get its referent by virtue of yet a further semantic item such as a Fregean sense. According to externalists of this sort, the meaning of a term is determined by a variety of complex pragmatic and causal factors. Typically we will have descriptions in mind that pick out the same referent as the term in question, or so we believe, but these descriptions are not part of the term's meaning, nor do they provide a "folk theory" that determines or even constrains, in the context of utterance, what we refer to. Such externalists about meaning also believe that this account has implications for the theory of concepts and hold that (at least most of) our concepts have wide content (Lau and Deutsch 2008); just as what makes something a footprint is that it is caused (in the right way) by a foot, so what makes something a belief about water is that it is caused (in the right way) by water.

Roughly, it is incumbent on any account of meaning to explain how our thought and language are related to particular parts of the world. On externalist views, the weight of this explanation is placed on the world and its impact on us; having latched onto the world we find multiple ways to describe it. Sometimes our descriptions are accurate and sometimes not. On the traditional descriptivist model, in contrast, the explanation gives priority to the nature of thought. We have a thought and it turns out that there are things in the world that satisfy or match it. We communicate, according to the externalist, by talking about the same things;

according to the descriptivist, by expressing the same thoughts.

On this account, we share meanings, not by having the same “folk theory” of the subject matter, but by both being part of a “historically extended representational tradition,” within which we are each trying to make sense of that tradition as we engage with the world it purports to represent. (Schroeter and Schroeter 2009; Bigelow and Schroeter 2009) Being part of such a tradition is consistent with substantial disagreement on any particular claim; what matters is that we are engaged collaboratively with others in a shared project of representing what or how things are in some corner of the world. So, for example, we can still mean the same thing by ‘water’ and communicate about water even if we disagree about what composes water, whether the ocean is filled with water, and whether water is good to drink, as long as we are each working to apply the term ‘water’ in light of our best interpretation of a shared linguistic tradition.

As I see it, the “historically extended representational tradition” concerning race is an attempt to make sense of and explain striking phenotypical differences between humans, differences that are typically associated with differences in geographical origins. Because geography has divided cultures and cultures affect individual psychology, there have been ongoing questions about the relationship between appearance, geography, culture, and individual character. Human difference has resulted in human division because these differences – interpreted in quite different ways – have been taken to be socially meaningful. When we speak of race we are participating in a tradition of attempts to make sense of the apparent physical-geographical-cultural differences that divide us. At times these divisions have been thought grounded in God’s will, at other times in genetics, or in social practices. Differences in these explanatory strategies do not prevent us, however, from talking about the same thing; and

false beliefs about what we are talking about, e.g., that the divisions are grounded in biology, do not prevent us from referring to the divisions as they actually exist.

In closing, I’d like to bring us back to the consideration I raised in discussing families that words can do more than describe the world, they can be used to include and exclude, and to problematize existing groupings. As we consider our “historically extended representational tradition,” we will sometimes need to make judgment calls about how to extend the tradition to new cases. Just as our talk of families will need to make judgment calls about what counts as a family beyond, and in opposition to, what the representational tradition has encountered before, so likewise we will need to do the same as we reorganize ourselves around, and in spite of, appearance and culture. In doing so, our speech is not simply descriptive, but performative. When I tell the airline attendant that I am my daughter’s birth sister’s aunt, I am constituting family relations. When I corn row my daughter’s hair with extensions, I am refusing to be White. The representational tradition is a dynamic process that includes what we do now. This gives us opportunities for destabilizing entrenched beliefs and divisions and choices about how and whether we carry forward our linguistic and conceptual resources.⁶

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¹ The second option itself can be explained in several ways. Having the concept of family and being a competent user of the term may be compatible with ignorance or confusion about hard cases; or it may be that the meaning of family is not static but evolves in response to new circumstances and contexts of use. I will explore the latter option later in these comments. See also (Haslanger forthcoming).

² Technological and scientific change are also relevant: is the gestational mother of a child—one who is neither the genetic nor life mother of the child—part of his or her family? In considering terms that are less socially loaded than ‘family’ scientific change may be an even more important issue than social change.

³ Adoptive parents are familiar with the experience of being told that they are not their child’s *real* mother. And I know of a family in which the adoptive parents refuse to call the biological mother of their children the “birthmother” because on their view “any woman who would give up her children does not deserve to be called a ‘mother’.” Both examples illustrate the point.

⁴ Glasgow claims that his view is not committed to descriptivism in the philosophy of language, i.e., the view that the referent of a term is determined by a set of descriptions or “folk theory” associated with the term (25). His view seems to be that for (almost) any concept C there is a set of non-negotiable beliefs that someone who has the concept C must hold and these beliefs constrain what the concept applies to. However, on his view, concepts are importantly connected to meaning: we gain access to the meaning of a term such as ‘race’ by exploring our concept of race and the associated non-negotiable “folk theoretical” beliefs. So it would seem that he holds at least a weak form of descriptivism. Although it may not be that the descriptive content of a concept that serves as the meaning of a term is *sufficient* to determine the referent, the term expresses the concept and the non-negotiable elements of the concept constrain what can count as the referent. In what follows, I’ll speak of the “core meaning” to refer to what Glasgow thinks is that non-negotiable part of the concept that constrains the referent of the term.

⁵ Racial divisions, it should be noted, predated genetics and modern biology (Stocking 1994). Biological theories were offered to explain racial divisions (and replaced metaphysical and religious theories). Those theories have turned out to be false, but that doesn’t mean that the racial divisions aren’t real and in need of explanation.

⁶ Thanks to Robert Gooding-Williams and Stephen Yablo for helpful comments on earlier drafts.