The Metaphysics of Race

(with Allan Hazlett)

Learning Points

- ■ Introduces the distinction between natural entities and those that are socially constructed
- ■ Considers the ontological status of racial categories as a case study in social ontology
- ■ Evaluates three views about the metaphysics of race.

RACE: A TOPIC IN SOCIAL ONTOLOGY

Suppose we are satisfied that merely fictional entities – like Pegasus – do not exist and that the entities described by natural science – like horses – do. Now consider marriages. To which category do they belong? On the one hand, it seems like a mistake to say that marriages don't exist, in the manner of Pegasus. Marriage is a real phenomenon, not a mere fiction like Pegasus. But, on the other hand, it seems like a mistake to say that marriages exist, in the manner of horses. Marriages do not exist independently of our social practices, institutions, and conventions – as John Searle puts it, marriages seem to exist only because we believe them to exist.[1] So what sort of entities are marriages then?

Academics from various disciplines speak of "social construction" when they encounter entities or phenomena that, on the one hand, cannot be dismissed as merely fictional, but that, on the other, are not part of the objective, mind-independent world. Along with marriage, things that are said to be socially constructed include gender, knowledge, science, nature, and race. Such entities or phenomena are part of a social reality that exists, in some to-be-articulated sense, in virtue of our social practices, institutions, and conventions. This talk of social construction and social reality raises many fascinating metaphysical questions. Are there any socially constructed entities? If so, which entities are socially constructed? Is everything socially constructed? What is the relationship between socially constructed entities and other entities? What is the relationship between "social reality" and reality?

In this chapter we'll introduce these issues by looking at a specific example of something that is often claimed to be a social construction: race. One reason for this focus is the fact that a large and heterogeneous set of things have been claimed to be socially constructed. It may not be possible to say anything sensible about social construction in general, without first considering a specific (putative) case. So in what follows we turn to the idea that race is a social construction, and to the metaphysical alternatives to this idea.

EXERCISE 10.1

Natural and Socially Constructed Entities

List five examples each of entities (or types of entities) that are socially constructed and those that are not socially constructed.

NATURAL AND SOCIAL KINDS

In his essay on "The Analytical Language of John Wilkins," Jorge Luis Borges asks us to imagine a certain encyclopedia, in which

> animals are divided into (a) those that belong to the emperor; (b) embalmed ones; (c) those that are trained; (d) suckling pigs; (e) mermaids; (f) fabulous ones; (g) stray dogs; (h) those that are included in this classification; (i) those that tremble as if they were mad; (j) innumerable ones; (k) those drawn with a very fine camel-hair brush; (l) etcetera; (m) those that have just broken the flower vase; (n) those that at a distance resemble flies.

This passage has fascinated philosophers interested in the idea of social construction. We can start to see why by comparing the classification of animals in Borges's encyclopedia with the classification of animals in contemporary biology, where animals are classified by phylum, by class, by order, by family, and by species. Someone using the categories of Borges's encyclopedia and someone deploying the categories of contemporary biology would come up with a different division of the same individual animals. The person using the categories of contemporary biology would come up with Figure 10.1.

While the person using the categories of Borges's encyclopedia would come up with Figure 10.2.

The reason all this is interesting is that there seems, at least at first glance, to be a metaphysical difference between our two systems of
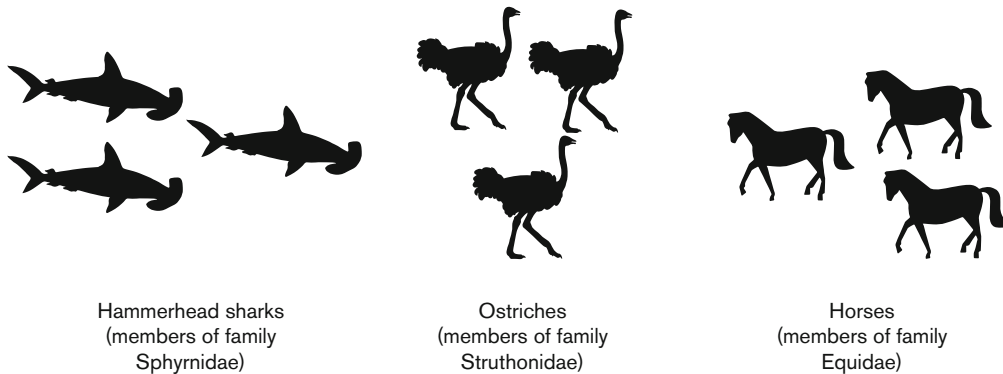
Hammerhead sharks
(members of family
Sphyrnidae)

Ostriches
(members of family
Struthonidae)

Horses
(members of family
Equidae)

Figure 10.1 Biological System of Classification

Animals that belong to
the emperor

Animals that have
just broken the
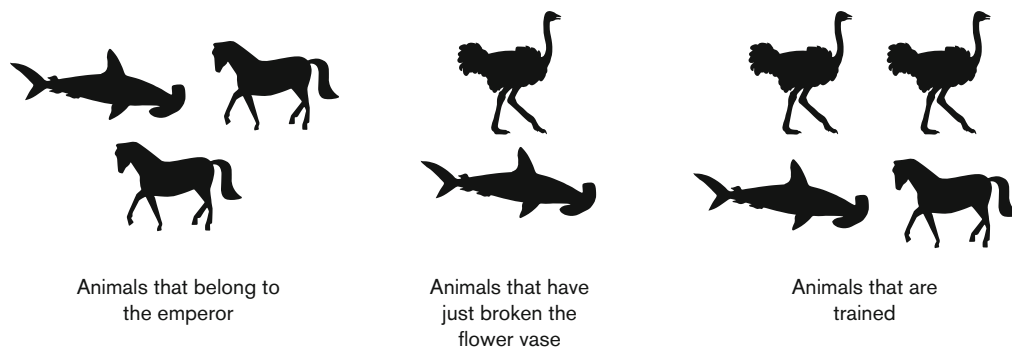flower vase

Animals that are
trained

Figure 10.2 Borgesian System of Classification

classification. This difference isn't easy to articulate precisely. One way of putting it traces back to Plato's *Phaedrus*: the biological classification system seems to "carve nature at the joints," while the Borgesian system doesn't. That is to say, one classification carves entities up according to objective distinctions in the world, while the other does not. (Or, at least, the distinctions tracked by the former system seem more objective than the distinctions tracked by the latter system.) Contrast the periodic table of the elements – a system of chemical classification positing a hundred chemical categories (hydrogen, carbon, gold, barium, etc.) – with some random, arbitrary grouping of objects: all the things in your bedroom count as one chemical element, all the things in your kitchen count as another, and so on. Chemists at least think that what they are doing with the periodic table is carving things up according to objective distinctions that exist in the world prior to our taking an interest in them, whereas the alternative system of chemical classification just described would be doing no such thing.[2]

Another way of putting the present point is that the biological system groups animals into **natural kinds**, while the Borgesian system doesn't. As Quine argues in his essay "Natural Kinds," this notion is very closely related

Natural kind: a group of objects in which each member of the group shares some objective, mind-independent similarity.

to the notion of similarity. The biological classification system has grouped together animals that are similar to one another, while the Borgesian classification system has grouped together animals that are not similar to one another.

But not so fast! Although the animals that belong to the emperor aren't similar to one another with respect to their morphology – i.e., their form or structure – they are similar to one another with respect to their owner. And while the hammerhead sharks are similar to one another with respect to their morphology, they aren't similar to one another when it comes to ownership – or, indeed, when it comes to any number of properties they might have: their location, or their favorite kind of fish to eat, and so on. What makes classifying animals by morphology more "natural" than classifying them by ownership?

We might appeal here to the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic properties. Recall, this is the distinction between properties that a thing has in itself, just because of how it is, as opposed to properties that a thing has in virtue of its relationships with other things. The property of being square is intrinsic because whether something has this property depends only on how that thing is in itself, whereas the property being ten miles from Lagos is extrinsic, because whether something has this property depends on its relationship to Lagos. It seems that the morphological properties of animals – properties like the color and size of their bodies – are intrinsic, while properties like being owned by the emperor are extrinsic. So perhaps we can articulate the metaphysical difference between our two systems of classification, one "natural" and the other not "natural," by saying that the biological system has grouped together animals that are intrinsically similar to one another, while the Borgesian classification system has grouped together animals that are not intrinsically similar to one another, even if they are extrinsically similar.

However, this move is complicated by the fact that in contemporary biology, organisms – animals at least – aren't classified by morphology. The reason the hammerhead sharks go together isn't their common form and internal structure. Rather, individual animals are members of a biological species in virtue of their relationship to other members of that species. The reason the hammerhead sharks go together is that they have the same ancestors and can breed with one another. So if our contemporary biological system is "natural," as opposed to the Borgesian system, it's not because the former but not the latter groups together animals that are intrinsically similar.

One response you might have to all of this is to reject the idea that there is a metaphysical difference between the biological system and the Borgesian system. But for many people, the intuition remains that the former tracks objective distinctions while the latter doesn't, or at least distinctions that are more objective than those tracked by the latter. So let's attempt to articulate what is distinctive about biological and other natural classifications, as opposed to the classification system implied by Borges's encyclopedia.

One way to get a grip on what is distinctive about natural kinds is to contrast them with what we'll call **social kinds**. The criteria for membership

Social kind: a group of objects in which each member of the group shares some similarity based in existing social practices, institutions, or conventions.

in a social kind make reference to social practices, institutions, and conventions, like culture and language. To say that some group constitutes a social, rather than a natural, kind is to say that their similarity depends on social practices, institutions, and conventions. The members of said group are similar only given the contingent fact that social practices, institutions, and conventions are the way that they happen to be. The members of natural kinds, by contrast, you might think, are not like that: the hammerhead sharks would be similar, regardless of the existence of social practices, institutions, and conventions.

It seems like biological species and the chemical elements of the periodic table are natural kinds, whereas groups like the bourgeoisie and professors seem to be social kinds. People who are wives, or people who are husbands, people who are single, seem to constitute social kinds (perhaps providing the sense in which marriage is a social construction). Finally, to borrow an example from Sally Haslanger, people who are cool seem to constitute a social kind:

> [T]he distinction . . . between people who are cool and people who are uncool . . . is not capturing intrinsic differences between people; rather it is a distinction marking certain social relations − i.e. it distinguishes status or in-group . . . The distinction does not capture a difference in the individuals so-called except insofar as they are related to me (based on my likes and dislikes), and its use in this context is determined not by the intrinsic or objective coolness of the individuals but by the social task of establishing a cohort.
>
> (Haslanger 1995, pp. 99–100)

Since the classification system that divides people into the cool and the uncool depends on our social practices, the categories of cool people and uncool people are social kinds. We might then take a category or property to be a **social construction** when its members constitute a social kind.

One reason why it is important to determine whether a particular group constitutes a natural or a social kind has to do with necessity and contingency.[3] Social kinds depend for their existence on social practices, institutions, and conventions. But, crucially, any given set of social practices, institutions, and conventions could have been different. Social kinds, unlike natural kinds, are neither inevitable nor unchangeable. This has profound consequences for our understanding of these groups. From a historical perspective, the existence of a particular social kind (or set of social kinds) is not the only possible course history could have taken, and from a political perspective, the existence of a particular social kind (or set of social kinds) is negotiable, something that could in principle be changed. In both these senses, when it comes to socially constructed groups, things could have been otherwise.

Social construction: a classification whose members constitute a social kind.

THREE VIEWS ABOUT RACES

With this conception of social construction in hand, let us consider the claim that race is a social construction. We shall understand this claim as saying that racial classification is a social construction, that racial categories are socially constructed, and that particular races or racial groups – white, black, American Indian, Samoan, and so on[4] – are social kinds. We can bracket the question of whether individual "racialized" people – that is to say, people who are classified as members of a race (more on which below) – are socially constructed, in some sense, as well as the question of whether the very idea of race is socially constructed. And we will remain neutral on the question of universals discussed in Chapter 2. When we ask whether racial categories are socially constructed, we may be asking if there are universals corresponding to our categories that depend on social relationships. Or, if we prefer nominalism, we may ask whether there is a more or less natural class that corresponds to these categories.

The claim that races are social kinds is endorsed by many contemporary academics. But it has been sparsely defended in the history of philosophy, and goes against many people's common sense.[5] The historical and contemporary non-academic consensus has held the view that races are natural kinds. The most influential version of this consensus is that races are biological categories.

What makes something a biological category? Biological species evolve when there is geographic isolation that leads to exclusive mating, eventually resulting in a group of individuals who cannot produce viable offspring with any individuals outside that group. But this process of exclusive mating can create genetic variation that falls short of the inability to produce viable offspring with others. Think, for example, of the different breeds of dogs. Although all members of all breeds are members of the same species, *Canis lupus*, and thus are able to produce viable offspring with one another, the members of each breed are morphologically, genetically, and historically similar to one another, as opposed to members of other breeds. The species *Canis lupus* includes wolves, but also the subspecies for domestic dogs, *Canis lupus familiaris*. This includes greyhounds, golden retrievers, dachshunds, and the rest. Although the members of different breeds of dogs can interbreed, we recognize them nonetheless as members of distinct biological categories because of their morphological, genetic, and historical similarities. So species are one kind of biological category, but we also recognize more fine-grained biological categories. (One might wonder how fine-grained biological categories can be.)

We'll articulate the view that race is a biological category as follows:

Biological realism about race: Races are natural kinds; in particular, racial categories are biological categories, akin to (but perhaps not quite the same as) subspecies or breeds.

For the biological realist, races are akin to species, subspecies, or breeds. In this sense, races amount to real, objective categories in nature.

To what are races akin, for the social constructivist, that is, the theorist who says that race is a social construction? The example of cool and uncool people is instructive here. The social constructivist can argue that racial classification is essentially hierarchical, that is, essentially racist. Just as it is part of what it means to call someone "uncool" that you disapprove of that person, social constructivists argue that racist connotations are built into the meaning of terms for non-white races. The system of racial classification is designed to enforce a social hierarchy, with white people at the top. It has been argued that the idea of race and thus the division into the categories of, for example, white and non-white, emerged in the seventeenth and eighteenth century European academic world alongside the development of African slavery in Europe's New World colonies. Just as attributions of coolness are used to mark an in-group cohort, as against an out-group, racial attributions are used, so the argument goes, to identify white people as the norm and non-white people as the "other."

Haslanger articulates a social constructivism about race, according to which "races are those groups demarcated by the geographical associations accompanying perceived body type, when those associations take on evaluative significance concerning how members of the group should be viewed and treated" (2000, p. 44). It is the second clause that is most important to distinguish social constructivism: for Haslanger, to be a member of a race is to be *racialized*, which is to be systematically subordinated or privileged, in virtue of being perceived as "appropriately occupying certain kinds of social position" (p. 44). This doesn't exclude the input of biological features into the classification. These social distinctions are at least partly attributed in virtue of one's having certain morphological features. However, racial classification, according to this view, is not merely a matter of biological classification. Social factors play an essential role.

The system of racial classification, for the social constructivist, can usefully be compared to the caste system in India. A person's caste, like her race, is inherited from her parents and cannot be changed. Traditionally, castes were organized in a hierarchy, so that some occupied a higher social status than others meaning only they could practice certain trades or interact in certain circles. For example, Brahmins were priests; Dalits were a lower caste. To the outsider, caste distinctions may not mark objective (e.g., biological) differences between people, and this is because caste is merely a social construction. For someone immersed in a society structured by a caste system, caste might appear to be something other than a mere "social reality." But, this appearance is misleading. The social constructivist argues that the case of race is analogous. Racial distinctions seem to mark biological differences between people, but in fact racial differences are merely part of our social reality. So we should contrast biological realism about race with:

> *Social constructivism about race*: Races are social kinds, more akin to castes or to the cool people.

According to the social constructivist, race isn't biologically real, and so it doesn't correspond to an objective categorization in nature. It only exists as part of social reality.

Before turning to the arguments for and against these views, we need to consider a third option. In some sense, biological realists and social constructivists agree about the reality of race. Both parties agree that (for example) some people are white and that some people are black; what they disagree about is the nature of racial categories: do they pick out natural kinds or social kinds? You might want to reject this common assumption about the reality of races.

As the social constructivist can agree, we sometimes get things wrong when it comes to the categories we use: we can mistake a category that picks out a social kind for a category that picks out a natural kind. But we also sometimes employ empty categories, categories that pick out no real kind at all. Consider the category of witches. During the early modern period, around 50,000 people were executed in Europe and North America on the grounds that they were witches. As with attributions of uncoolness or caste status, accusations of witchcraft may have been used in some cases to enforce social hierarchies or to mark an out-group. However, although we may not be inclined to say that there are no uncool people or that there are no Dalits, we are inclined to say that there are not, and never have been, witches. The eliminativist makes the same claim about racial categories that we are inclined to make about the category of witches. There are not, and never have been, witches, although there have been people who were called 'witches.' The eliminativist says that there are not, and never have been, black people and white people, although there have been, and still are, people who are called 'black' and 'white.' So we can add a third view to our list of options:

> *Eliminativism about race*: There are no races. Racial attributions are false. The case of race is analogous to that of witch-hood. There are no witches and witch accusations are false. Race is neither biologically real nor socially real.

Social constructivists and eliminativists agree that races are not natural kinds. They disagree about the reality of races, more on which in the final section.

EXERCISE 10.2

Social Constructivism vs. Eliminativism

Why does it sound correct to many to say that there are no witches and yet wrong to say that there are no cool people? If neither category is natural, then in what sense could one category be "real" and yet the other is not? What could this attribution of reality come to?

THE ARGUMENT FROM GENETICS

It can seem like biological realism about race is obviously true. Can't we just *see* that people are racially different? Voltaire wrote that only a blind person could doubt that there are different races. This section and the following two sections consider three arguments against biological realism about race, which will at least undermine the idea that biological realism is obviously true. We will not take a stand on which of the three positions outlined above is correct; our aim is merely to give a sense of what speaks for and against those positions.

We first need to be clearer about what the biological realist is committed to when she maintains that racial categories are biological categories. If races are natural kinds, racial categories are not random and arbitrary groupings of people. Biological realism seems to be committed to what Kwame Anthony Appiah calls **racialism**, which is:

> the view . . . that there are heritable characteristics, possessed by members of our species, which allow us to divide them into a small set of races, in such a way that all the members of these races share certain traits and tendencies with each other that they do not share with members of any other race.
>
> (Appiah 1992, p. 13)

Importantly, racialism is not merely the view that people can be classified according to their morphological differences. Everyone – even social constructivists and eliminativists – agrees that people can be classified according to their morphological differences. (Although all will add the caveat that the existence of people of mixed race, people who "pass" as a race seemingly not their own, and people who identify and are identified as members of a particular race but who don't have the morphological features taken to be definitive of that race make racial classification based on morphology problematic.[6]) But racial oppression could hardly exist if there were not some way for racists to identify their targets!

One can accept morphological differences between people while rejecting biological realism about race. Recall the classification of people as cool and uncool. This is a paradigm example of a social classification. Yet there are morphological features that also distinguish the cool from the uncool: the cool people wear their hair a certain way, wear the right kind of clothes, and so on – they can be picked out by their appearance, and the distinction between the cool and the uncool is in many cases obvious. But cool people do not make up a natural kind, because membership in this category is determined by something more than these morphological features. The critic of biological realism says the same about races, but she does not deny that people are morphologically different in various ways that might be roughly mapped by our racial categories.

Consider some arbitrary morphological category, for example, one that picks out people who are redheaded and freckled. As Appiah argues, this isn't a biological category, and the reason is that the morphological criteria

Racialism: the view that there are heritable characteristics possessed by members of our species which permit a division into a small set of races.

for membership in this category aren't correlated with any biologically important features of a person. Racialism sees racial differences as tracking something more than mere morphological differences: the morphological criteria for race membership are indicative of an underlying suite of bio-logical features – a set of "traits and tendencies" which includes more than just morphological features. These involve genetic features that cannot be uncovered by simple observation, for example the presence or absence of certain genes.

In fact, Appiah argues, given what biologists know about genetics, racial categories do not have one key property of natural kind categories:

> Apart from the visible morphological characteristics of skin, hair, and bone, by which we are inclined to assign people to . . . racial categories . . . there are few genetic characteristics to be found in the population of England that are not found in similar populations in Zaire or China . . . [G]iven only a person's race, it is hard to say what his or her biological characteristics (apart from those that all human beings share) will be, except in respect of the "grosser" features of color, hair, and bone . . .
> (Appiah 1992, pp. 35–36)

Racial categories do track certain morphological differences. "But that," Appiah argues, "is not a biological fact but a logical one," since these criteria are merely morphological (p. 36). Being a member of the redheaded-and-freckled group is correlated with the morphological criteria for membership in that group, but that is not a natural kind, one that corresponds to a significant biological difference. But if "real" races are just like the group of people are who redheaded and freckled in all relevant respects, then these aren't natural kinds either. In other words:

The Argument from Genetics

1. If racial categories were biological categories, there would be genetic differences between races, beyond those related to mor-phology.
2. There aren't genetic differences between races, except for those related to morphology.

Therefore,

3. Racial categories aren't biological categories.

How might the biological realist resist this argument? One possibility would be to challenge the second premise. Consider the success of race-based medicine. To take a very simple case, black people are more likely to get sickle-cell disease. The reason is that carrying the gene that can lead to sickle-cell disease also makes one less likely to catch malaria, such that people whose ancestors evolved in areas where malaria is relatively com-mon are more likely to carry the gene that can lead to sickle-cell disease.

Black people are more likely to have ancestors who evolved in such areas, because malaria is most common in sub-Saharan Africa. Here is a relevant genetic difference, not one relating merely to morphology. This seems a good reason to reject the second premise from the argument from genetics.

Alternatively, the biological realist might challenge the first premise of the argument from genetics. Robin Andreasen, for example, argues that races are "ancestor-descendent sequences of breeding populations, or groups of such sequences, that share a common origin."[7] On her view, races are subspecies of *Homo sapiens*, given a "cladistic approach to subspecies." (1998, p. 200). **Cladistics** is the dominant approach to classification in contemporary biology, which carves up categories based on the shared evolutionary histories and (resultant) common genetic profiles of individuals. A cladistic system of classification classifies organisms in terms of their evolutionary history and genetic profile. Rather than a system of racial classification based on morphology and genetics (which is what Appiah targets), Andreasen proposes a system that groups individuals based on their shared history (and genetic profile). We will return to her proposal below.

Cladistics: an approach to classification in contemporary biology, which carves up categories based on the shared evolutionary histories and (resultant) common genetic profiles of individuals.

EXERCISE 10.3

The Argument from Genetics

Evaluate the argument from genetics. Is this argument sound or unsound?

THE ARGUMENT FROM RELATIVITY

If there are any natural kinds, they are absolute. If chemical elements are natural kinds, then there is one absolutely correct periodic table, not a plurality of equally correct periodic tables, one that is correct for me, another that is correct for you, and so on, or one that is correct for my culture, or that is correct for your culture, and so on. Only one periodic table can be correct. However, systems of racial classification do not seem to be like this: it seems that there are a plurality of equally correct systems.

We can see the problem by trying to list the races. For the seventeenth century writer François Bernier, one of the first people to write about race, there were four: a race comprising Europeans, North Africans, Indians, and Americans; an African race; an Asian race; and "the Lapps." In 1765 Voltaire proposed seven races: "the whites, the negroes, the Albinoes, the Hottentots, and Laplanders, the Chinese, [and] the Americans," while Kant's 1777 list had four races (but not Bernier's four): white (including Arabs, Turks, and Persians), "Negro," "Hun," and "Hindu." W.E.B. DuBois (in 1897)

had eight: "the Slavs of eastern Europe, the Teutons of middle Europe, the English of Great Britain and North America, the Romance nations of Southern and Western Europe, the Negroes of Africa and America, the Semitic people of Western Asia and Northern Africa, the Hindoos of Central Asia and the Mongolians of Eastern Asia."[8] Different people are apt to give different answers to this question. Consider the system implied by the 2010 United States census, as shown in Figure 10.3.

When the census is conducted in other countries, the list of races is different. For example, in 2011, South Africa offered four options: Black African, Colored (i.e., "mixed race"), Indian or Asian, and White. In 2000, Brazil offered five: White (branca), Black (preta), Yellow (amarela), Brown (parda), and Aboriginal (indigena). Some censuses speak of ethnicity rather than race. Thus in 2001, Bulgaria's census offered three "ethnic groups" as choices: Bulgarian, Turkish, and Gypsy, while England's offered the options: White, Mixed, Asian or Asian British, Black or Black British, Chinese, or "any other ethnic group." The 2010 U.S. census had a separate question as to whether a person is "of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin," which is standardly understood as a question about ethnicity rather than race. (The distinction between ethnicity and race is a murky one.)

Could any of these different systems of racial classification be the correct one, in the way that the periodic table of the elements is the correct system of chemical classification? You might think that the answer to this question is "No." If that is right, racial classifications are not absolute – there is no one correct way to divide people up in terms of race. In addition, even if we were to agree on a common list of categories, there are differences

Figure 10.3 2010 U.S. Census

> **EXERCISE 10.4**
>
> # Races
>
> Which way of drawing up a list of racial categories seems correct to you?

when it comes to the membership of the different races. Bernier included Indians and Americans (i.e., American Indians) in the white race because he thought their darker skin was merely the result of the harsher sun in their native environments. In Britain, 'Asian' refers to Indians and Pakistanis, but in America it refers only to East Asians.

The upshot of all of this is that different people employ different systems of racial classification, and that there are differences between contemporary systems and historical systems as well as differences between contemporary systems used synchronically in different places. However – and this is the important bit – none of these systems seems any more correct than any of the others. On what grounds could we maintain that one of these systems has gotten it right, when it comes to describing "the races"? They all seem to be equally good (or bad) ways of classifying people. Unlike the periodic table, there's not one system that correctly carves up reality. But if races were natural kinds, then there would be such a system. In other words:

The Argument from Relativity

1. If races were natural kinds, there would be one correct system of racial classification.
2. There exist multiple, equally correct systems of racial classification.

Therefore,

3. Races aren't natural kinds.

Again, both premises of the argument may be challenged. In particular, a realist like Andreasen might challenge the second premise. Based on the work of geneticists studying human evolution, Andreasen proposes the cladistic system of racial classification as shown in Figure 10.4.

Figure 10.4 represents our best theory as to the historical evolution of human beings. Unlike the systems of classification described above, this one is based on our best science, so it has a claim to be correct among a plurality of competitors. Andreasen's insight is to treat these cladistic groups as races. There are two important features to note about Andreasen's system. First, it does not match up with the system of racial classification
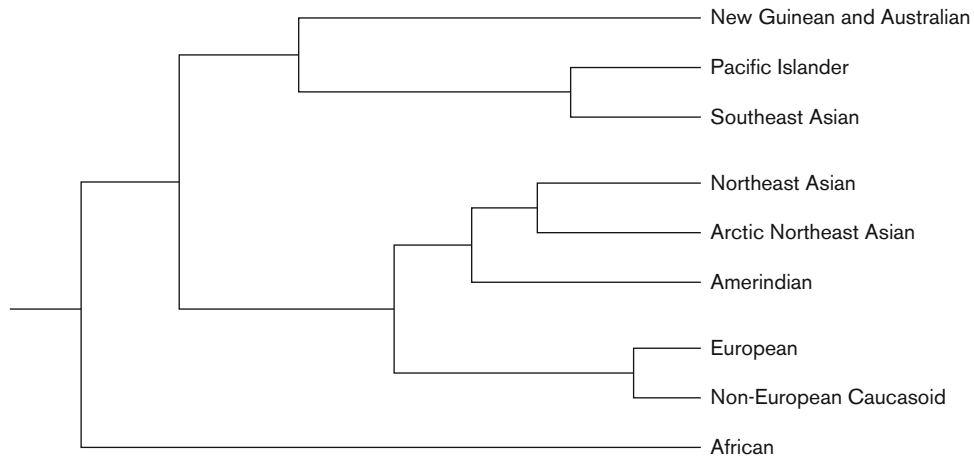
Figure 10.4 Cladistic System of Racial Classification

employed by most people. As Andreasen admits, "the folk category 'Asian' is not a cladistic race" (1998, p. 212). Second, if races are subspecies – or, indeed, if they are anything like the other categories of contemporary biology – they will be dynamic, that is, subject to change over time. Human beings have an ongoing history of mating in groups – i.e., most people are such that they are most likely to mate with some subset of the total human population – which has had various causes, including geography and culture. Races exist in virtue of this ongoing history. Were our practice of isolated group mating to end – as seems likely so long as global travel continues to be common – races would cease to exist. All individuals would end up with a shared common set of ancestors. Less dramatically, for the biological realist, what races there are might change: the races of today might not be the races of tomorrow. This conflicts with commonsense conceptions of race.

This is no problem, Andreasen argues, because "the existence of biological races does not depend on our folk taxonomy being right" (1998, p. 213). The critic of biological realism might challenge this assumption. Science often corrects common sense, rejecting commonsense classifications. The category "fish" was used for centuries, even millennia, to include cephalopods (whales), certain aquatic molluscs (octopus, squid), as well as (sometimes) mermaids. None of these are fish, according to contemporary biology. Science corrects common sense. But you might think that when scientific categories are *too* different from folk categories, what we have is not a correction of commonsense categories, but rather a rejection of commonsense categories.

We can see an example of this principle at work if we consider two systems of classification intended to explain and predict human behavior: the signs of the zodiac, posited by astrologers, and the five-factor model of personality, posited by psychologists. The former divides people into 12 groups (Pisces, Leo, Gemini, and so on), based on their date of birth, and

offers explanations and predictions of their behavior on the basis of their astrological sign. The latter classifies people according to five personality traits (openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, neuroticism), and offers explanations and predictions of their behavior on the basis of said classifications. The five-factor model has been extremely useful in predicting and explaining human behavior. Five-factor personality differences have been found to be correlated with a variety of mental health and genetic differences, among others. By contrast, the signs of the zodiac are utterly useless for predicting and explaining human behavior. Now here's the point: no one would say that the signs of the zodiac are real, but that astrologers had them wrong: they've got nothing to do with your date of birth, and instead of 12, there are five, and instead of each person having one sign, each person has some degree of each of the five, and so on. The five-factor model of psychology didn't *amend* astrology, showing us what the signs of the zodiac really are, in the way that contemporary biology amended our commonsense theory of fish, showing us what fish really are; the five-factor model supplants astrology.

But now we have to decide: does the division of human beings offered by contemporary genetics and evolutionary biology amend our folk theory of race, showing us which races there really are? Or does it supplant our folk theories of race, showing us that the concept of race is bunk? Critics of biological realism argue for the latter view.[9] Contemporary biology doesn't reveal that race is radically different than we took it to be; it reveals that, so far as biology goes, there is no such thing.

EXERCISE 10.5

The Folk Theory vs. Biological Theories of Race

Could contemporary genetics amend our folk theory of race showing us which races there really are? Or does it rather supplant our folk theories? How could one decide the answer to these questions? What does this say about the Argument from Relativity?

THE ARGUMENT FROM ANTI-RACISM

The historical and contemporary non-academic consensus has been that races are natural kinds. But this view has been held in conjunction with various other false and morally problematic views about race. The appeal of biological realism is sometimes thought to be undermined by appeal to the fact that the concept of race has an (ongoing) racist history.

Consider a version of racialism[10] – cultural racialism – according to which it is of the essence of the various races to engage in different cultural practices. Think of the stereotype of Latino people as especially passionate or emotional. For the cultural racialist, members of a race who engage in the characteristic practices of that race are paradigms of their kind, while members of that race who don't engage in those practices are exceptions to the rule. Many of the people who maintain biological realism about race are cultural racialists. But cultural racialism is false. Here again is Appiah: "differences between people in language, moral affections, aesthetic attitudes, [and] political ideology . . . are not to any significant degree biologically determined" (1992, p. 35). In addition, many of the people who maintained (or maintain) biological realism were (or are) *racists* – they saw (or see) some races as being better than others.[11] Historically, biological realism was often defended by white supremacists. It is difficult to separate the history of the concept of race – understood as a biological division of human beings – from the history of racism. The upshot is that biological realism is often associated with, and motivated by, various false views and morally problematic ideologies.

But can't biological realism be separated from these associations and motivations? Consider the contemporary slogan "Race is only skin deep." Couldn't someone coherently believe in real racial differences – perhaps morphological, as suggested by the slogan, perhaps historical and genetic – while rejecting cultural racialism and racism?

What seems to make the difference here is whether racial categories can be freed from any cultural racialist or racist presuppositions. Sometimes a presupposition is built into the meaning of a word. If you call someone a 'witch' you're implying that she made a deal with the devil. Given the historical and contemporary association of biological realism and cultural racialism and racism, you might think that something similar is true of our words for the races. Just as the term 'witch' cannot be freed from its presupposition about the devil, one might think that 'Latino' cannot be freed from its cultural racialist and racist presuppositions. We know this is true of racial slurs, but given the racist history of the concept of race, you might think that it is true of all racial language. Call this the argument from anti-racism.

The critic of biological realism could expand on this argument. Historical and contemporary commonsensical conceptions of race are rife with confusions. We discussed two such confusions above: (a) historical and contemporary common sense assumes that races are static, whereas all contemporary biological categories are dynamic, and (b) cases of commonsense racial categorizations that do not correspond to genuine biological categories, for example Americans typically treat "Asian" as a race, but there is no such biological category.

What emerges is a picture of our folk conception of race as riddled with errors and racist assumptions. But just as we must reject the existence of witches if we deny the assumptions that go along with the use of that category, it seems like we must reject at least the biological reality of race, if we reject our erroneous and morally problematic folk conception of

race. Even if those accused of witchcraft in the seventeenth century really did have something in common, and even if that has something to do with their being accused of witchcraft, we would not say that this had vindicated the reality of witches. The folk theory of witches is just too riddled with error and morally problematic assumptions for us to ever accept the reality of witches. The critic of biological realism says the same about our folk theory of race.

EXERCISE 10.6

The Argument from Anti-racism

How might one state the Argument from Anti-racism in numbered premise form? How might the biological realist respond to the argument from anti-racism?

One point that might be contested is the idea that the biological reality of race is threatened by the fact that our words for the races have racist implications. The biological realist might grant this idea, but argue that these terms nevertheless pick out natural kinds. Consider the slur 'retard,' paradigmatically used to denigrate the developmentally disabled. Suppose this group forms a natural kind. On this assumption, the fact that 'retard' is a slur – that it is used this way is the reason why there are now many campaigns to stop its use – does not challenge the claim that it picks out a natural kind. The fact that our racial language is rife with erroneous and morally problematic implications, you might argue, is orthogonal to the question of whether races are natural kinds.

A CAUSAL ARGUMENT AGAINST ELIMINATIVISM

If you are convinced by any of the arguments of the previous sections against biological realism, you are still faced with a choice: social constructivism or eliminativism? Social constructivism says that races are real, but not natural kinds; eliminativism denies the reality of racial categories altogether. When we reflect on the confusions and morally problematic ideologies that have evolved hand in hand with our concept of race, the eliminativist's picture begins to look appealing: we thought there were these natural kinds – races – but it turns out that there are no such things, just like there are no witches. The presuppositions of our concept of race, like the presuppositions of our concept of a witch, just turned out to be false.

This section considers an argument against eliminativism, and an eliminativist reply.

Alexander's dictum: the entities that exist are all and only those that possess causal powers.

Many metaphysicians have endorsed a principle known as **Alexander's dictum**, according to which the entities that exist are all and only those that possess causal powers.[12] For our purposes here, we need only consider the 'all' part of this principle. The claim that we should count something as existing if it has causal powers seems almost undeniable. If the correct causal explanation of some event or phenomenon cites x as a cause, then x must exist. Otherwise, how could it be a cause? This thought can be applied to races: if they have causal powers – if they enter into correct causal explanations – then we should admit their reality.

There are at least two ways in which one might think that races have causal powers. First, consider the ongoing history of racism and racial oppression, which is constituted by real events. For example, suppose Sarah, a bank manager, suffers from an unconscious racist bias against Samoans. Maria, her employee, descended from ancestors from Samoa, has applied for a promotion at the bank. Sarah rejects Maria's application. We might ask: Why was Maria's application rejected? In such a case, it seems perfectly possible that among the causes of the rejection was the fact that Maria is Samoan. This, together with Sarah's implicit bias against Samoan people resulted in Maria's application being rejected. But if the fact that Maria is Samoan *caused* her application to be rejected, then races have causal powers. And if races have causal powers, then we should count them as existing. And that means we should prefer social constructivism to eliminativism.

Second, an important and much-discussed feature of racial categories is that they often, perhaps even inevitably, become part of people's identities. When systems of racial classification are employed in a society, people in that society come to think of themselves as members of a particular race. In many cases, a person's race is a deep part of one's self-conception, of his or her understanding of who he or she is. Our races seem to make a difference to the way we view ourselves from our own first-person perspective. For some people, this difference is profound and meaningful. How can something so central to someone's identity be unreal? If the fact that you are Samoan is an essential component of your sense of self, could it really be true – as the eliminativist claims – that you are not actually Samoan? Just as race seems to enter into correct causal explanations of racial oppression (as in Maria's case), it seems to enter into correct causal explanations of people's identities. But eliminativists would have to reject such causal explanations.

The eliminativist about race could reply by embracing the conclusion that race cannot enter into correct causal explanations and offer alternative explanations of the relevant events and phenomena. When it comes to racial oppression, the eliminativist could argue that a correct causal explanation of the fact that Maria's application was rejected would cite the fact that Sarah *thought* Maria was Samoan – and that this is enough to explain what we were inclined to explain by appeal to Maria's actually being Samoan. Just as the behavior of those involved in witch-hunts can be

explained by appeal to their false beliefs about witches, the behavior of those involved in racial oppression can be explained by appeal to their false beliefs about race. When it comes to racial identities, the eliminativist could make a similar argument: someone's identity can be founded on a false self-conception. According to some historical accounts, one of the people accused of witchcraft at Salem actually believed that she had made a deal with the devil – i.e., that she was in fact a witch. And we can imagine some-one who not only believes such an accusation, but internalizes it, such that being a witch becomes part of her identity. The eliminativist could offer this as a plausible explanation of racial identity: the internalization of a false system of classification.

We can draw at least two important conclusions from this discussion of the metaphysics of race. First, the metaphysical question about the reality of race cannot be answered without careful consideration of our best contemporary science, including genetics and evolutionary biology, as well as anthropology and sociology. Second, answering these questions about race requires consideration of issues in the (applied) philosophy of lan-guage. Are racist implications part of the meaning of our racial vocabulary? Are race terms more like empty terms like 'witch' or more like meaningful terms like 'fish,' whose folk extension needs amending by science? We cannot inquire after questions about the metaphysics of race without inquiring after questions in the philosophy of language, linguistics, biology, and other disciplines. If the metaphysical debate about race is represen-tative of debates about social construction in general, then this conclusion generalizes: questions about social construction require input from disci-plines, including the natural sciences, the social sciences, the philosophy of language, and linguistics.

We have assumed that nothing is both a social and a natural kind, which grounds our conception of social construction. This conception yields a tripartite distinction between natural categories, socially constructed categories, and empty categories; this corresponds to our three articulated positions about race: biological realism, social constructivism, and elimina-tivism. The assumption that nothing is both a social and a natural kind could be challenged. You might point to the categories of the social sciences as both socially constructed and natural.

Alternatively, for some philosophers, all categories are socially con-structed, including (if not especially) those posited by scientists. We should tread carefully before accepting that view, however – and before accepting whatever conception of "social construction" leads to it. We should not, for example, say that everything is socially constructed because our language, which we use to speak about everything, is socially constructed. It would be rash to jettison the conception of social construction we have employed here in favor of one that dissolves the seemingly interesting distinction between natural kinds and social kinds, so long as that distinction can coherently be made out (as we attempted to do above). Making out such distinctions is one of the important tasks of the metaphysician.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Two essential sources on the philosophy of race are Robert Bernasconi and Tommy L. Lott's collection, *The Idea of Race* and Bernard Boxill's *Race and Racism*. For overviews of the question of the reality of race, see Joshua Glasgow, *A Theory of Race*, chapter 1, and Charles Mills, "But What Are You *Really*?: The Metaphysics of Race," in his *Blackness Visible: Essays on Philosophy and Race*. On natural kinds, see W.V.O. Quine, "Natural Kinds," pp. 114–138 and Nelson Goodman, *Fact, Fiction, and Forecast*.

On social construction in general, see Ian Hacking, *The Social Construction of What?*, Sally Haslanger, "Ontology and Social Construction," and Ron Mallon, "A Field Guide to Social Construction." For defenses of social constructivism about race, see Lucius T. Outlaw, *On Race and Philosophy,* Charles Mills, *Blackness Visible: Essays on Philosophy and Race*, Sally Haslanger, "Gender and Race: (What) Are They? (What) Do We Want Them To Be?"

For defenses of eliminativism about race, see Kwame Anthony Appiah, *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* and Naomi Zack, *Race and Mixed Race.* For a defense of biological realism about race, see Joshua Glasgow, *A Theory of Race*. On the medical and genetic science relevant to the metaphysical race debate, see M.J. Bamshad and S.E. Olson, "Does Race Exist?"

NOTES

1   In *The Social Construction of Reality*.
2   Recall the distinction between sparse and abundant theories of properties in Chapter 2.
3   See Hacking, *The Social Construction of What?* pp. 5–9, and Mallon, "A Field Guide to Social Construction," pp. 94–95.
4   These examples of races come from the question about race on the 2010 US Census. Contemporary American culture generally recognizes three, sometimes four, main races: white, black, Asian, and (sometimes) Latino. There are numerous different systems of racial classification. As we will see in the section on the argument from relativity, which distinct races one recognizes can make a difference to which metaphysical view is plausible. Biological realism is not plausible when applied to the categories Asian or Latino.
5   The closest anyone came to defending this claim, prior to the twentieth century, was David Hume, in his 1742 essay "Of National Characters," where he argued that "national characters" are the result of "moral" (i.e., cultural) as opposed to "physical" (i.e., geographic) causes. But although Hume seems to have thought that the differences between Europeans were merely cultural, he did not extend this prescient view to other races.
6   Race membership seems to depend on things that would not make a difference to membership in a biological category. For example, the fact that Barack Obama is "black" and Tiger Woods is "multiracial" seems to have something to do with the fact that Obama identifies as "black" and Woods identifies as

"multiracial," and not to have anything to do with their racial background. Biological categories aren't subjective in that way.

7   "A New Perspective on the Race Debate," p. 200.

8   See references in R. Bernasconi and T.L. Lott eds., *The Idea of Race*.

9   See Joshua Glasgow, *A Theory of Race,* chapter 5. The anthropologist Ashley Montagu famously compared race to "phlogiston" – a non-existent substance posited by seventeenth century scientists to explain the process of combustion.

10 Recall that racialism is the view that human beings can be divided into a small set of races, such that members of each race share traits and tendencies with each other that they do not share with members of any other race.

11 By saying that racists "see" some races as being better than others, we do not mean to imply that racism is entirely, or even necessarily, a cognitive matter. In the sense that a person can be a racist, racism is a set of cognitive, affective, and practical dispositions. "Racism" is also an illuminating name for the ideologies, practices, and institutions that sustain racial oppression.

12 The principle is named after the British philosopher Samuel Alexander (1859–1938).