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TWO ROUTES TO RADICAL RACIAL PLURALISM

Quayshawn Spencer (2019) argues for radical racial pluralism, the position that there is a plurality of natures and realities for race in the United States. In this paper, I raise two difficulties for Spencer's argument. The first is targeted narrowly at his response to a potential objection to his argument, and the second is a more general difficulty to do with how the argument handles the social consequences of the authoritative categorization of people. Although the second difficulty is more serious than the first, neither is insurmountable. I then sketch an alternative argument for radical racial pluralism, one that would be likely to succeed in the event that Spencer's argument turned out to fail. Considering these two contrasting routes to radical racial pluralism highlights the fact that radical racial pluralism is a rather more modest metametaphysical position than it may have initially appeared to be. In virtue of this, I suggest that we should develop and assess a *more* radically pluralist metametaphysical account of race, which I term 'ultra-radical racial pluralism'.

I

In his paper 'A More Radical Solution to the Race Problem', Quayshawn Spencer argues for a metametaphysical thesis about race—that is to say, for a claim about the form that a correct metaphysical theory of race must take. This thesis is *radical racial pluralism*, defined by Spencer as 'the view that there's a plurality of natures and realities for race in the relevant linguistic context' (Spencer 2019, p. 27). In the case that concerns Spencer, the relevant linguistic context is US race talk (2019, p. 26).

Spencer's argument for radical racial pluralism is detailed, powerful, and firmly rooted in empirical research. The argument centres on the racial taxonomy developed by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), which is commonly used in many formal contexts in the US, including birth certificates, college applications, and mortgage applications. The OMB taxonomy includes five categories, labelled as follows: 'American Indian', 'Asian', 'Black', 'Pacific Islander', and 'White'. These categories are largely, though not

exclusively, described in terms of a person's biological ancestry; for example, the description of the category labelled 'White' is 'A person having origins in any of the original peoples of Europe, the Middle East, or North Africa' (OMB 1997, p. 58789, cited in Spencer 2019, p. 30). Spencer argues that the OMB's meaning of each of the category terms is one of the human continental populations, and that the OMB's meaning of 'race' is the set of human continental populations. Human continental populations are, roughly, genealogical groups defined by genomic properties linked to different areas of the world. The human continental populations are Native American, East Asian, African, Oceanian and Caucasian. Spencer combines this claim with the further claim that race terms have other meanings in other dominant speech contexts, thereby providing an argument for radical racial pluralism.

The OMB racial taxonomy is an example of a familiar phenomenon: those with authority construct systems of categorization that are intended to reflect differences between people, but the social consequences of authoritatively placing people into those systems of categorization far exceed whatever differences the system was supposed to be tracking (see, for example, Hacking 1990; Root 2000). For example, the fact that someone is categorized as 'Black' on a college application might mean that they are eligible for a scholarship for which someone else who is categorized as 'White' may not be eligible. Clearly, this difference in scholarship eligibility cannot be explained by differences in genetic ancestry. It is rather a product of the use of racial categories to classify people in a social setting. A recent account of the ontological implications of this kind of process on which I shall draw in this paper is Åsta's (2018) account of social properties, which focuses on the concept of a social status, understood in terms of constraints on, and enablements to, a person's behaviour.

In this paper, I raise two difficulties for Spencer's argument for radical racial pluralism. The first is targeted narrowly at his response to a potential objection to his argument, and the second is a more general difficulty to do with how the argument handles the social consequences of the authoritative categorization of people. Although the second difficulty is more serious than the first, neither, in my opinion, is insurmountable. I then sketch an alternative argument for radical racial pluralism, one that would be likely to succeed in the event that Spencer's argument turned out to fail. Considering

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II

Spencer’s paper is a contribution to what is often termed ‘the race debate’, but which he, far more accurately, terms ‘the US race debate’.¹ As Spencer describes this debate, it concerns ‘the nature and reality of race according to the dominant ways that “race” and other race terms (such as “White”) are used to classify people in contemporary, ordinary American English’ (Spencer 2019, p. 26). Positions in the US race debate consist of a claim about the nature of race and a claim about the reality of race, for the dominant ways in which race terms are used by ordinary speakers in the US. For example, anti-realists about race hold that the meaning of race terms, as used in contemporary, ordinary American English, is such that they refer to biological entities (the first claim), and that no such entities exist (the second claim).² Positions in the US race debate are metaphysical positions, whereas radical racial pluralism, as a *metametaphysical* position, tells us that any correct metaphysical account of race in the US context must take the form of a conjunction in which each of the conjuncts specifies the nature and reality of race for a different context of US race talk (Spencer 2019, p. 27).

The task of establishing the correct metametaphysical view of race is an important one. If we hold an incorrect metametaphysical view, we are liable to respond inappropriately to various metaphysical views. For example, if we hold (implicitly or explicitly) a metametaphysical view to the effect that race terms must always refer to the same entities, we might reject a certain metaphysical account of race on the basis that there are some instances in which race terms are used where it seems implausible to think that those terms refer to the

¹ Spencer’s previous contributions on this topic include Spencer (2014, 2015, 2016, 2018).

² Following Spencer, I use ‘entities’ as an umbrella term that includes properties, kinds and particulars (such as sets).

entities posited by the theory. However, if radical racial pluralism is true, then this metaphysical account may simply be a part of the conjunction which constitutes the correct metaphysical account of race, such that rejecting it altogether would be misguided.

Spencer sets out his argument for radical racial pluralism as follows:

- (2.1) Radical racial pluralism is true for US race talk if the correct US race theory is radically pluralist.
- (2.2) The correct US race theory is radically pluralist if more than one distinct meaning of ‘race’ is used in US race talk.
- (2.3) One meaning of ‘race’ used in US race talk is the OMB’s meaning of ‘race’.
- (2.4) The OMB’s meaning of ‘race’ is the set of human continental populations, and the OMB’s meanings for ‘American Indian’, ‘Asian’, ‘Black’, ‘Pacific Islander’ and ‘White’ are Native American, East Asian, African, Oceanian and Caucasian, respectively.
- (2.5) The OMB’s meaning of ‘race’ is not the only meaning of ‘race’ used in US race talk.
- (2.6) So radical racial pluralism is true for US race talk. (Spencer 2019, p. 28)

Spencer takes (2.4) to be by far the most contentious premiss, and he devotes the greater part of his paper to defending it (pp. 33–43). His claim is that the OMB taxonomy fixes the referents for the race category terms as the five human continental populations, and also fixes the referent for ‘race’ as the set of these five populations. His case for this claim rests on the correspondence between the five races in the OMB taxonomy and the five human continental populations, the fact that continental population membership strongly predicts OMB self-reporting, and the apparent intention of the OMB demographers, in drawing up the racial taxonomy, to refer to something like human continental populations.

Spencer also makes a brief case for (2.3) and (2.5). His case for (2.3) is that when people declare their race in formal contexts such as birth certificates, college applications and mortgage applications, they typically use the OMB classifications. His case for (2.5) is that there are instances of race talk that are part of the dominant or

mainstream context in the US where ‘race’ clearly does not mean the set of human continental populations. For example, political opinion polls typically use the term ‘Hispanic’ to describe a category that is clearly presented as a *racial* category. Yet the individuals who are usually understood to be Hispanic do not form a distinctive human continental population. In the contexts of opinion polls, then, the term ‘race’ cannot mean the set of human continental populations.

III

After presenting his argument and defending each premiss, Spencer considers an objection to (2.3) and (2.4) taken together. The objection runs as follows: given that most people are unfamiliar with the idea of human continental populations, is it plausible to think that they can be talking about them when they use race terms? Perhaps the OMB’s meaning of ‘race’ really is the set of human continental populations, but when ordinary individuals use ‘race’ in contexts such as college applications, which are governed by the OMB scheme, they are not really using the same meaning as the OMB. Or, on the other hand, perhaps ordinary individuals in these contexts really are using the same meaning of ‘race’ as the OMB, but that meaning is not the set of human continental populations. The thought here is that despite the OMB’s intentions and the correspondence between the OMB’s categories and the human continental populations, the meanings of race terms as used by both ordinary people *and* OMB demographers may not be set by the OMB but by something else, such as collective social practices. On either of these possibilities, the conjunction of (2.3) and (2.4) is false (Spencer 2019, pp. 39–42).

In response to this objection, Spencer appeals to semantic deference:

However, it may still be puzzling how ‘race’ can sometimes mean the set of human continental populations in US race talk even though ordinary folk in the US don’t really understand what a human continental population is, and can’t even name all of the human continental populations. Well, this mystery is solved by positing that when ‘race’ means the set of human continental populations in US race talk, the meaning of ‘race’ is controlled by what Hilary Putnam (1973, p. 704) has called a ‘division of linguistic labour’. In particular, when ordinary folk are using ‘race’ to mean the set of human continental populations in US

race talk, the OMB has defined ‘race’—not ordinary folk—and, furthermore, ordinary folk are semantically deferring to the OMB. (Spencer 2019, pp. 40–41)

Semantic deference as described here by Spencer can be understood to occur in many cases. For example, suppose that a person does not understand the difference between lymphoma (cancer that starts in infection-fighting cells that are found in the lymphatic system, which includes bone marrow) and leukaemia (cancer that starts in blood-forming cells that are found in bone marrow). However, they may succeed in using the term ‘lymphoma’ to refer specifically to lymphoma, as distinct from leukaemia, because they use it in such a way that the meaning of the term as uttered by them is determined by how experts—in this case, scientists and medical doctors—have defined the phenomenon in question.

Spencer supports his case for semantic deference by examining some empirical evidence that he takes to indicate that ‘Americans are trying to self-report in the OMB’s racial scheme in a way that corresponds to their continental ancestry, just as the OMB wants’ (2019, p. 42). In particular, he points to cases in which a person’s race according to the OMB scheme conflicts with that person’s self-conception. For example, most Americans whose origins are in Middle-Eastern and North African countries do not consider themselves to be White. By and large, however, such individuals are Caucasian in terms of continental ancestry—and, sure enough, most do tend to say that they are White in contexts in which the OMB racial scheme is in play. Spencer asserts that ‘the simplest explanation for these flips in racial self-reporting is semantic deference to the OMB’ (2019, p. 42). I take it that Spencer’s strategy is to show that we must grant that semantic deference takes place in cases of flips in racial self-reporting, on pain of not being able to explain people’s responses; and that once we have granted this, semantic deference can also be used to explain, in general, how ordinary people can use race terms to refer to human continental populations without knowing what these are.

I agree that there does seem to be some form of deference going in the case of flips in racial self-reporting. However, it is not obvious that it is a form of deference that amounts to *semantic* deference. In other words, it is not clear that the kind of deference that is present is of a sort that makes it the case that the race terms that are uttered

take on the OMB's meaning for those terms. Let us consider the example of a specific individual who is faced with this sort of situation. Soledad O'Brien's 2012 documentary *Who Is Black In America?* features an interview with a young woman called Becca Khalil who is applying for college, hoping to study theatre. O'Brien and Becca discuss Becca's experience of filling in her college application form. Becca's parents were both born in Egypt, and Becca strongly considers herself to be both Black and African-American. She says that she wanted to check the 'African-American' box, but instead checked the 'White' box. When O'Brien asks her why she did this, she answers, 'So that I can avoid any troubles with getting in to college'. Expanding further, she says, 'You look at "Black or African-American" and you have this image in your head. And then when you meet me—especially because I have to audition for these schools—you meet me, and now they don't have any Black girls, you know?'

Throughout the documentary, Becca is very clear about the fact that she believes herself to be Black and African-American. There is no suggestion in what she says that she takes the college, or the OMB, to have any kind of expertise that she lacks. Rather, her choice of what answer to give on the college form appears to be guided by practical considerations about the outcomes she wants to effect and the ways in which her answer may make these harder. This draws our attention to the difference in power between Becca and the college: the college has the power, as Becca implies, to create 'troubles' in her application process if her appearance, when she presents herself for audition, does not match their expectations of what she should look like based on what she has said about her race. This all seems very different to someone who uses the term 'lymphoma' without knowing exactly what it is but being content to rely on the definitions put in place by experts.

How should we think of the kind of deference in which Becca engages? I want to suggest that we should see Becca as deferring first and foremost to the *authority* of the college. She recognizes that it is up to the college to say who counts as what race for their purposes, and that according to the criteria they have set out she counts as 'White'. This deference to authority is importantly different from the deference to expertise that takes place in the classic cases of semantic deference such as the lymphoma case, where the person intends to

use the term ‘lymphoma’ in a way that is consistent with the way that experts use it.

The question, then, is what implications deference to authority has for the reference of the terms used in the utterance. Given Becca’s understanding of the situation and her intentions, what does her utterance of ‘White’ mean? Does it mean the Caucasian human continental population, as the OMB would have it mean? Or does it mean something else? There is certainly room to say that deference to authority amounts to semantic deference, such that Becca’s utterance of ‘White’ means what the OMB want it to mean. However, there are also conceptions of semantic deference according to which it requires ‘a disposition to accept linguistic correction from a recognized expert’ on the use of the term (Rauti 2012, p. 325). On this sort of understanding, Becca does not seem to be engaging in semantic deference, because it does not seem as though she would accept correction from an expert. Being willing to tactically make claims one considers false in order to evade sanctions by the powerful is not the same as being willing to revise one’s linguistic practice in response to the pronouncements of an expert. It matters, therefore, what conception of semantic deference is being appealed to here.

It is important not to overstate the worry that I am raising here. My claim so far is simply that deference to authority is available as a respectable alternative to deference to expertise when it comes to explaining flips in racial self-reporting, and that it’s not clear that deference to authority amounts to semantic deference. The problem this creates for Spencer is by no means insurmountable. As his argument stands, Spencer relies on the supposed need to invoke semantic deference to explain flips in racial self-reporting, in order to show that the possibility of semantic deference should be accepted more generally for cases in which people use race terms in the context of the OMB taxonomy without knowing what human continental populations are. Even if, on further investigation, it turns out that deference to authority provides the best explanation of flips in racial self-reporting, and that deference to authority does not amount to semantic deference, it is open to Spencer to give an alternative argument for thinking that semantic deference is taking place when ordinary people use race terms in contexts governed by the OMB taxonomy.

However, thinking about authority in the context of the account of institutional race properties given in the previous section adds a further complication. This is that authoritative categorization of the sort we saw in the case of Becca and the college can be understood as creating new properties through the conferral of social status. These properties are rival candidates for the meaning of Becca's utterance of 'White'. In the next section, I explain this process using Ásta's (2018) account of social properties, and in the following section I explore the implications of recognizing these properties for Spencer's argument.

IV

In Ásta's recent book, *Categories We Live By* (2018), she offers an account of social ontology that takes as its primary focus social kind properties, such as the property of 'being a woman', the property of 'being gay', or the property of 'being disabled'. She argues that to instantiate such a property is to have a certain social status in a particular context. You get this status by other people adopting a certain attitude towards you: they *confer* the status on you, usually on the basis of believing you to have a certain feature. What it means to have that status is to be under certain social constraints and enablements: some things are easier in virtue of how people have categorized you, and some are harder. Importantly, the constraints and enablements that are constitutive of social status are the 'constraints on and enablements to a person's behaviour and action that are over and above the constraints and enablements that come with simply possessing that property' (Ásta 2018, p. 33). These constraints and enablements might be formal or informal. For example, you might be able to park in a special parking space without getting a parking ticket because you are disabled; you might have your opinion taken less seriously because you are a woman (more on this distinction between formal and informal constraints and enablements in a moment).

Ásta identifies five aspects that matter in a conferral:

Conferred property: what property is conferred . . .

Who: who the conferring subjects are . . .

What: what attitude, state, or action of the subjects matter . . .

When: under what conditions the conferral takes place . . .

Base property: what the subjects are attempting to track (consciously or not), if anything . . . (Ásta 2018, p. 8)³

This account is intended to capture the idea that social construction is a matter of social significance, as expressed, for instance, in the slogan ‘gender is the social meaning of sex’. The thought is that for a feature *F* to be socially constructed is for it to be the social significance of some other feature (or set of features), *B*, which serves as the basis for conferrals, that is, the property that subjects are attempting to track in making the conferrals (Ásta 2018, p. 44).

Ásta distinguishes between those conferrals that are more official and codified, and those that are more informal and tacit (2018, pp. 21–3). What she terms ‘institutional properties’ are conferred by those in positions of formal authority, in explicit ways, and in the context of an institutional structure. By contrast, ‘communal properties’ are conferred by those with informal social standing, in implicit ways, and don’t require an institutional context (although the conferral always takes place in a particular context).⁴ An example of an institutional property is ‘being the president’ (in a particular state); an example of a communal property is ‘being cool’ (in a particular school).

Ásta argues that there are both institutional and communal race properties in the US at present (2018, p. 94). Institutional race properties are created wherever formal institutions, such as governmental and non-governmental agencies, schools, colleges and so on, authoritatively categorize people by ‘race’ and use these categories in ways that make a difference to people’s lives. For example, a person’s institutional racial categorization may determine whether they are eligible for a certain kind of scholarship, or it may influence (together with the categorizations of others) the allocation of resources, such as public transport and road maintenance, that the local government makes to their neighbourhood. The institutional kinds are largely governed by the OMB definitions. By contrast, communal race properties are created whenever people are informally categorized by ‘race’ in a way that affects what they are able to do. For example, if

³ In my opinion, the idea of unconsciously attempting to track something needs more unpacking than it receives in Ásta’s treatment of base properties, though I am not able to undertake this work here. Thanks to Liam Kofi Bright for pressing me to clarify this point.

⁴ I think it is most plausible to think of the institutional–communal distinction as a matter of degree, with plenty of borderline cases, rather than a perfectly clear-cut distinction.

a person is perceived by his friends as White, and this leads them to censure him for wearing dreadlocks, this would be an example of a communal race property.

It is worth noting that conferrals of social status need not be conscious, explicit or overt in either communal or institutional cases. The OMB, a college, or any other institution may take their practices of categorization to be merely describing a pre-existing feature of the world, but when the categorization is used as a basis for differential social treatment, however slight, this creates conferred social status properties.

Here is the schema Ásta gives for institutional race properties:

Property: being of the institutional race *R*, for example, Black or African American, White or Caucasian, Asian, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, American Indian or Native Alaskan

Who: legal and political authorities, drawing on self-identification in official documents

What: the recording of a race identification in official files and documents

When: in each context where the official document plays a role in decision making

Base property: supposed actual geographic ancestry, but the evidence for it is self-identification. (Ásta 2018, p. 99)

Because these properties are institutional properties, they are conferred through the authority of the institution in question. For example, if the institution is a college, the authority of the college (to determine its policies and decide who it admits, and so on) underpins the conferral.

The way that Ásta specifies the base property in this schema is somewhat confusing. She refers to ‘supposed actual geographic ancestry’; however, it’s not clear why she needs to include the caveat ‘supposed’, since the idea of a base property has already been defined as ‘what the subjects are *attempting* to track’ (Ásta 2018, p. 8, emphasis mine). Presumably, institutions are attempting to track *actual geographic ancestry*, not *supposed actual geographic ancestry* (indeed, it’s not obvious what *attempting* to track *supposed* ancestry would involve).

Ásta’s specification of the base property also includes the further claim that self-identification is treated as evidence of the base property. It’s not clear to me why this further claim about evidence is

included in the base property. Again, the base property is what the subjects are attempting to *track*, which in this case is geographic ancestry. It would be more consistent with Ásta's explanation of conferral schemas and her use of them in other cases to simply give as the base property 'geographic ancestry'. If this makes the conferral schema seem incomplete, then that might indicate that the template for conferral schemas should be expanded to include a sixth component that captures properties that the subjects treat as indicative of whether or not the base property is instantiated. Call this component the 'indicator property' (or properties).⁵ The indicator property for institutional race in the US would be self-identification, at least in most cases, although institutions can and do draw on other properties to challenge or overrule self-identification, such as someone's appearance.

Some readers may think that this suggestion gets things the wrong way round, and that the base property should in fact be, simply, 'self-identification'. After all, in many cases, people declare their race and that declaration is entered into the institutional system without any evidence of their ancestry being consulted. Doesn't this mean that what is being tracked—the base property—is really self-identification? Ásta argues, compellingly in my view, that this is not correct, because self-identification is not really being treated as decisive (2018, pp. 95–8). As she sees it, the institution uses its authority to set up racial categories based on ancestry, and decides to treat the self-identification of individuals as evidence of having the relevant ancestry. The individual's self-identification is not the real base property, but is merely treated as an indicator of the base property, which is the individual's actual geographic ancestry. If the institution chose to do so, they could introduce a requirement to supply additional evidence of geographic ancestry along with, or in place of, self-identification. They could also challenge someone's racial self-identification on the basis of their appearance, which is what Becca fears will happen if she says on her college application that she is Black or African-American.

I think that Spencer's analysis of the relationship between the OMB's racial categories and the human continental populations offers a way to improve further on the schema for institutional race

⁵ In cases where the subjects are able to access the base property directly, the base property and the indicator property will be the same.

that Ásta gives. In Spencer's argument for (2.4), which is the claim that the OMB's meaning of 'race' is the set of human continental populations, he makes a very strong case for thinking that the OMB intended their racial terms to designate entities that have the features that human continental populations have, such as possible use in health research. To put this into the language of conferralism, the claim is that in setting up the racial taxonomy, the OMB was attempting to track human continental populations. Since I find Spencer's arguments on this point compelling, I am inclined to think that the base property for institutional race (in contexts where the OMB taxonomy is in play) can be specified as membership of one or more human continental populations. I take this to be a more precise way of spelling out the general idea of 'geographic ancestry' to which Ásta appeals.

Here, then, is the revised conferral schema that I am proposing for institutional race properties in contexts governed by the OMB taxonomy, incorporating both my own revisions and Spencer's insight about human continental populations:

Property: being of the institutional race *R*, for example, Black or African American, White or Caucasian, Asian, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, American Indian or Native Alaskan

Who: legal and political authorities

What: the recording of a race identification in official files and documents

When: in each context where the official document plays a role in decision making

Base property: membership in one or more of the human continental populations, these being African, Caucasian, East Asian, Oceanian, and Native American.

Indicator property: usually a person's own self-identification.

It is important to understand the exact difference between the institutional property and the base property. The institutional property is a conferred social status that consists of constraints and enablements. In other words, to be White in the context of a particular institution is to have been categorized as White by the relevant authorities and to be able or not able to do certain things as a result of this authoritative categorization. For example, suppose that Alice is categorized as White by a college to which she is applying, and as a result of this categorization she is not eligible to apply for certain

scholarships. The fact of Alice's *being White* consists in the fact of her having been so categorized and the resulting constraints on and enablements to her behaviour. Alice is categorized this way because she is understood to instantiate another property, *being Caucasian*. The fact of Alice's *being Caucasian* (that is, being a member of the Caucasian human continental population) consists in her having a high proportion of alleles in her genome that originate from previous members of that population at the last time at which it was completely distinct from other populations.

These properties have different persistence conditions. There have been institutional race properties only for as long as there have been institutional practices of dividing people into racial categories, whereas human continental populations predate these practices and could outlast them. The properties can also come apart in particular cases. Suppose that Ben is of predominantly Aboriginal Australian descent, which means that he is a member of the Oceanian continental population. Due to his experiences of being perceived and treated as a Black person in the US, he considers himself to be Black and ticks the 'Black' box on the college application form. Furthermore, because his appearance matches what the college expects a Black person to look like, this identification is not challenged, and the college treats him as a Black person. Ben is not a member of the African continental population but he nevertheless instantiates the institutional property of *being Black* in the context of the college.

V

We have seen how, when institutions authoritatively place people into categories, this creates conferred social properties that are different from the properties the categorization was intended to track. This means that there are entities in the vicinity of the OMB taxonomy that Spencer does not consider, namely, the conferred institutional properties created when the OMB taxonomy is actually used by institutions such as colleges, together with other entities concerning these properties, such as the set of institutional race properties and any types or kinds formed by individuals who instantiate these properties. To return to the case of Becca Khalil, these entities offer an alternative candidate for the meaning of her utterance of 'White':

perhaps when Becca defers to the authority of the college and says that she is White, the meaning of her utterance of ‘White’ is the conferred institutional property that the college creates through its authoritative categorizations. If Spencer wants to argue that (due to semantic deference) Becca’s utterance of ‘White’ shares the OMB’s meaning, he must rule out this alternative possibility.

What’s more, this point generalizes beyond the specific cases of ‘flips’ in racial self-reporting (such as the case of Becca) that were our focus in §III. Spencer needs to give us reason for thinking that *in general*, when people use race terms in contexts governed by the OMB taxonomy, those terms share the OMB’s meanings rather than having meanings that concern the conferred institutional properties that are created when the OMB taxonomy is used to authoritatively categorize people. As we have seen, institutional race properties are separate from human continental populations, even though human populations are the base properties that the relevant conferrals are intended to track. Although Spencer makes a strong case for (2.4), his case for (2.3) is simply that people use the categories from the OMB taxonomy, with their associated descriptions, in many formal contexts, such as birth certificates, college applications, and mortgage applications (Spencer 2019, p. 33). However, this fact does not, by itself, demonstrate that utterances of race terms in these contexts refer to entities that concern human continental populations rather than to entities that concern the institutional properties created through conferrals which attempt to track human continental populations.

In other words, the considerations Spencer raises give us no reason to endorse (2.3) in preference to (2.3*):

(2.3*) One meaning of ‘race’ used in US race talk is the set of institutional properties conferred in accordance with OMB conferral schema.

Because Spencer has not shown that (2.3), as distinct from (2.3*), is true, it has not been established that the OMB’s meaning of race is used in US race talk.⁶ And since this has not been established, showing that the OMB’s meaning of ‘race’ is not the only meaning of ‘race’ used in US race talk—Spencer’s premiss (2.5)—does not show

⁶ (2.3) and (2.3*) are not contradictory; both could be true together.

that there is more than one meaning of ‘race’ used in US race talk, and therefore does not show that radical racial pluralism is true.

Why might we be tempted to prefer (2.3*) to (2.3)? One reason is simply that the institutional properties seem to have a great deal of explanatory power in at least many of the contexts that are governed by the OMB taxonomy (see *Ásta* 2018, p. 93). What explains the likely response to Becca at an audition for the college is not her membership in a human continental population as such, but rather the social status conferred on her by the college on the basis of their beliefs about her ancestry. To the extent that explanatory power is relevant to meaning, this points towards race terms in these contexts having meanings that concern institutional properties. Moreover, if we were inclined to think that Becca is deferring to the authority of the college rather than to its expertise, this would seem to link her utterance more closely with institutional properties—the product of the college’s authoritative conferrals—than with human continental populations—the topic of the college’s putative expertise.

In order to decide whether to prefer (2.3) or (2.3*), we need to know two things. First, we need to know more about what is actually going on when people use race terms in contexts governed by the OMB taxonomy—what they are thinking, what causal roles are played by different entities, and so on. This alone, however, will not settle the issue. We also need to select a specific theory of meaning that tells us how various factors—people’s mental states, causal relations, explanatory value, the pronouncements of experts, and so on—combine to determine the meaning of utterances. I shall not attempt to settle either of these issues here. Instead, in the next section, I will try to show that even if (2.3*) turns out to be true and (2.3) turns out to be false, all is not lost for the proponent of radical racial pluralism.

VI

Here is an argument for radical racial pluralism that relies on (2.3*) rather than (2.3):

- (2.1) Radical racial pluralism is true for US race talk if the correct US race theory is radically pluralist.

- (2.2) The correct US race theory is radically pluralist if more than one, distinct meaning of ‘race’ is used in US race talk.
- (2.3*) One meaning of ‘race’ used in US race talk is the set of institutional properties conferred in accordance with OMB conferral schema.
- (2.5*) The meaning of ‘race’ given in (2.3*) is not the only meaning of ‘race’ used in US race talk.
- (2.6) So, radical racial pluralism is true for US race talk.

Besides (2.3*), the only altered premiss in this argument is (2.5*). There are at least two ways to defend this premiss.

The first way is to show that there are meanings of ‘race’ used in US race talk that do not concern conferred social properties at all. One possibility is race talk that is closely focused on identity. As Ásta herself acknowledges, identity properties are distinct from conferred social properties (2018, ch. 6). To the extent that race talk sometimes has more to do with a person’s sense of their own identity than with the social status that has been conferred upon them (whether on the basis of identity or on the basis of some other property), this possibility holds some promise.

A second, more complicated way to defend (2.5*) is to grant that all meanings of ‘race’ in US race talk concern conferred social properties, and to argue that these meanings are nevertheless distinct. Let me unpack this a bit. There are very many different conferred social properties in the US. We’ve encountered one type of institutional property, which is conferred in accordance with the OMB taxonomy. I am inclined to think that even here we will have a different property on our hands for each different institution that uses the taxonomy, because the social status that is conferred (that is, the constraints and enablements on people’s behaviour) will be different in different institutions. Being Black in the context of a college might mean you are eligible for a certain scholarship. Being Black in the context of a local government might mean that your area is less likely to receive the funding that is needed to maintain public services to a decent standard. And so on. Of course, once we turn to consider communal properties, it is even clearer that there are very many conferred social properties in the picture: the basis on which people are informally categorized with regard to race, and the

resulting informal constraints and enablements placed on their behaviour, will vary very greatly in different contexts.

It's clear, then, that race terms have different *referents* in different contexts within the US. But someone might contend that there is a single reference-fixing description for 'race', and a single reference-fixing description for each racial category term, that fixes different references in different contexts, where all of the referents are entities that concern conferred social properties (some institutional, some communal). A stumbling block for this view is the variance in conferral schemas—the base properties differ, the social statuses differ, the parties doing the conferring differ, and so on. It's not obvious that there is a single reference-fixing description that would fix the appropriate reference in all circumstances. Moreover, contexts are not perfectly distinct from one another. They overlap in all sorts of messy ways, and there may be multiple institutional and communal race properties in a given context. The reference-fixing description would have to accommodate this. Again, it's far from clear that there is a single reference-fixing description that will do the job. It might therefore be possible to defend (2.5*) even if we cannot find any meanings of 'race' used in US race talk that do not concern conferred social properties at all.

Both of the avenues for defending (2.5*) need much more exploration than I am able to undertake here. I hope, however, to have shown that there are reasonable prospects for defending (2.5*), and therefore that the argument given in this section presents another possible route to radical racial pluralism, one that could be viable even if a successful defence of (2.3) turned out to be impossible.

VII

The conclusion of the previous section highlights something rather surprising about radical racial pluralism, which is that this position is not quite as radical as it may at first have seemed. Recall Spencer's definition: 'the view that there's a plurality of natures and realities for race in the relevant linguistic context' (2019, p. 27). This does not require that race terms refer to significantly different *sorts* of entities—for example, that they sometimes refer to biological entities and sometimes to social entities. Suppose it turned out that race

terms in dominant contexts in the US have more than one meaning, and that all of these meanings concern conferred social properties and refer to real entities. If this were the case, then, technically, radical racial pluralism would be true. But this does not seem all that radically pluralist.

We might want, then, to consider an even more radical thesis: that there's a plurality of natures and realities for race in the relevant linguistic context, and this plurality contains significant variation in the *kind* of entities to which race terms refer (biological, social-structural, social-cultural) and/or in the reality of these entities (real, not real).⁷ We might call this 'ultra-radical racial pluralism'. For example, if it turned out that race talk sometimes referred to entities concerning human continental populations and sometimes referred to entities concerning conferred social properties, then ultra-radical racial pluralism would be the correct metametaphysical theory of race. It strikes me that ultra-radical racial pluralism is interestingly different from radical racial pluralism, and merits consideration as a separate metametaphysical position. If this is right, then regardless of the route we take to arrive at radical racial pluralism, we may find that it is merely a staging post on the way to a still more radical metametaphysical account of race.⁸

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⁷ Although a more precise definition of ultra-radical racial pluralism is undoubtedly called for, unfortunately this is a task for another occasion.

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