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Anthony F. Peressini

Marquette University, [anthony.peressini@marquette.edu](mailto:anthony.peressini@marquette.edu)

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# Against The Philosophical Project Of “Biologizing” Race

Anthony F. Peressini

Department of Philosophy, Marquette University, Milwaukee, Wisconsin

## Abstract

This paper critiques philosophical efforts to biologize race as *racial projects* (Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States*). The paper argues that the deeply social phenomenon of race defies the analytic schema employed by biologizing philosophers. The very (social) act of theorizing race is already in an involuted relationship with its target concept: analyzing race must be seen as a *racial project*, in that it simultaneously helps to manage how race is represented in society and helps organize society’s resources along particular racial lines. Such biologizing projects are rife with moral and political dimensions and have a depoliticizing effect that has the potential to camouflage, defuse, or explain away the social-structural reproduction of white power/privilege. The paper begins by considering two recent philosophic-scientific biologizations of race, showing how they conform to the analytic schema, reviewing received critical points, and offering several novel ones.

## Keywords

biological race, social race, racism, population genetics, scientific ontology, philosophical methodology, racial projects, race, structural racism, metaphilosophy

## 1 INTRODUCTION: BIOLOGIZING RACE

The contemporary philosophical debate concerning the ontological status of race is rich and complex. There is even serious debate about the nature of the debate itself (Hochman **2017**). Apparent (but not stable) fault lines fall along whether (1) race is biologically real, (2) real in a more general sense, (3) only socially real, and (4) socially real in a biological way. And of course being “real” has its own complications: is the key being mind independent, or being explanatorily indispensable, or having real effects, or being socially real (which might entail having real effects but not having mind-independent existence)?

There does seem to be wide agreement that the racial concepts present in contemporary U.S. society cannot be grounded in natural science in the old way of *racial naturalism* (Mallon **2004**) or *racialism*, which understand race as a real, interest-independent biological category in which its members share “physical, moral, intellectual, and cultural characteristics” (Appiah **1996**, 54), and/or as a metaphysical kind with accompanying essential properties, and in either case with an accompanying hierarchy (moral, intellectual, aesthetic, and so on) among its divisions. A recent strand of philosophical work has resurrected racial naturalism by developing a *thin* conception of race, grounded in scientific results (typically genetic clustering studies) and lacking moral metaphysical implications; such a position has been called “new racial naturalism” (Hochman **2013a** and **2014**). Such thin, science-based analyses typically take the “folk” or “intuitive” sense of race as it functions in contemporary U.S. society as the starting point for a *philosophic-scientific* project to “biologize” race.<sup>1</sup>

What I intend by *philosophic-scientific analysis* is a special case of the cornerstone of analytic philosophy: conceptual analysis. That is, a rendering of one of our concepts into the more perspicuous concepts that compose it. A philosophic-scientific account of a concept is an attempt to work out an analysis of a concept that makes use of empirical science’s insights to ground, legitimate, and explicate the target concept in terms of clearer concepts grounded in empirical results. Such analyses can be schematized into three major components:

- i. *Corral* the pre-theoretic target concept, usually by delineating it through our shared pre-theoretic “intuitions,”
- ii. *render* the target concept into scientifically grounded concepts, and
- iii. *justify* the proposed rendering of (ii), utilizing the details of (i) to serve a normative function, that is, the rendering is argued to be the *correct* one based on the corralled target concept.

Accordingly, “biologizing” race means offering a philosophic-scientific analysis where the target is our concept of race and the analysis is grounded in biological science.

The heart of my critique of biologizations of race along the lines of this schema does not focus on the often-discussed adequacy of the scientific rendering (step ii); instead my focus is the schema as a whole. I question its viability as a philosophical project and its advisability as a “human project.” I argue

that the analytic schema underlying the effort to biologize race in this way is not up to the task: that the deeply social phenomenon of race will necessarily defy the analytic schema, and further, that the schema's death grip on philosophical theorizing is partially responsible for impasses regarding race within philosophy—and perhaps also for the relative lack of traction of philosophical work outside philosophy.

Even if one tries to sidestep the deeply social dimensions of race dynamics and racial discourse by stipulating and corraling a socially truncated sense (for example, “national” or “logical core” or “ordinary”), the very (social) act of theorizing about race is already and always in a complex and involuted relationship with the deeply social phenomenon (race) that is its target and that it embodies. Thus, the very act of analyzing race must be seen as a *racial project* (Omi and Winant **2015**) in the sense of helping to manage how race is represented and understood in society and simultaneously organizing its resources and powers along particular racial lines. Consequently, such biologizing projects are imbued from the start with normative (moral and political) dimensions. In particular, biologizing efforts can have a dangerous depoliticizing effect in attempting to scientifically ground human racial difference: so long as races are real kinds rooted in biology, they are legitimate scientific categories and have the potential to (in themselves) ground biological differences that can be used to camouflage, defuse, or explain away the social-structural reproduction of white power and privilege.

In what follows, in order to develop these two lines of criticism, I begin by considering two recent (population-genetics-based) philosophic-scientific biologizations of race; I show how they conform to the analytic schema, rehearse several received critical points, and offer several novel ones. Section **2** is devoted to an attempt to biologize offered by Michael Hardimon (**2003**; **2012**; and **2017**), the Minimalist Concept of Race. Section **3** takes up another recent case for the biological reality of race from Quayshawn Spencer (**2014**). Finally, in section **4**, I develop the general critique of biologizations of race as described above.

## 2 MINIMALIST CONCEPT OF RACE

The concept of race does not correspond to any concept more widely used in nonhuman biology (Templeton **1998**). An examination of scientific literature reveals that employing the term “race” in nonhuman settings is rare and generally ambiguous, most often intended as “subspecies” or a subgroup characterized by a genetic adaptation to the environment known as an *ecotype* (Pigliucci and Kaplan **2003**). In fact the *Dictionary of Genetics* (King, Stansfield, and Mulligan **2006**, 368–69, 430) offers the same definition for “race” as it does for “subspecies” (definition 2). It also states, “The number of racial groups that one wishes to recognize within a species is usually arbitrary but suitable for the purposes under investigation” (369), suggesting that race is a concept whose content and extension are determined only relative to the pragmatics of investigation and do not necessarily correspond to a mind-independent reality, that is, what philosophers would classify as “not real.” This is why Pigliucci and Kaplan (**2003**, 1169) move to the notion of ecotype in order to find something objective enough to ground the reality of “race.”

If “race” does not correspond to a *general* biological concept, that is, one used for both human and nonhuman populations, then “race” might still correspond to a real biological division of interest only within humans. This is the direction taken by Hardimon's Minimalist Race Concept (MRC). The target

concept for Hardimon is the ordinary concept of race (OCR) involved in the use of the English word “race” and its cognates. In *Rethinking Race* he states that this is the “bare concept that people use when they refer to ‘races’” (2017, 63). Hardimon acknowledges that when people use “race” there may be various things included or excluded (for example, racist content, geographic origin), but that this is because people may employ different *conceptions* of race, and that there is in fact a unifying “logical core” concept behind all of the conceptions of race, and his MRC is precisely this: “It is the concept people use in forming conceptions of race” (29). MRC is not a revision or reconstruction of the OCR “but mirrors [a] covered and hidden but existing definition of ‘race’” (64). In fact, OCR is actually taken to be identical to MRC (29, 172), which Hardimon analyzes as:

(MCR) A race is a group of human beings,  
(C1) that, as a group, is distinguished from other groups of human beings by *patterns of visible physical features*,  
(C2) whose members are linked by a *common ancestry* peculiar to members of the group, and  
(C3) that originates from a *distinctive geographic location* (31, italics in the original).

ORC/MRC embodies an effort to corral the target ordinary conceptions of race. But ORC/MRC is also already biologized: MRC is itself (a) biological in the *basic sense*, and even (b) biologically *respectable*, though (c) not biological in the *scientific sense* (sec. 2.12.1).<sup>2</sup> The final step, then, is to identify ORC/MRC with the *scientifically* biological population race concept (PRC), which Hardimon characterizes as:

(PRC) A race is a subdivision of *Homo sapiens*—a group of populations that exhibits a distinctive pattern of genetically transmitted phenotypic characters and that corresponds to the group’s geographical ancestry and belongs to a biological line of decent initiated by a geographically separated and reproductively isolated founding population (99).

Hardimon is officially agnostic about whether PRC races actually exist, which he takes to be an open empirical thesis (120), but he argues that that evidence to date suggests that they do (chap. 6). He further asserts that PRC “is ‘continuous’ (in an intuitive sense) with the minimalist concept of race” (114), and so “if populationist races exist, they are minimalist races” (120) and hence are a scientific rendering (biologization) of the OCR.

A few clarifications are in order. First, I have at this point glossed over parts of Hardimon’s case in which he argues that MRC races actually exist (chap. 3) and are biologically real (chap. 4). Hardimon spends chapter 3 defending the claim that the MRC refers to something in the world (minimalist races), that is, that groups satisfying the conditions defining MRC exist. The chapter is the shortest in the book (nine pages), and as Hardimon himself seems to concede, is almost “too easy” (73); the upshot of it is that there is a (real) phenomenon in the world of differences in patterns of visible physical features of human beings that correspond to differences in geographical ancestry, and that the groups characterized by these (real) differences are minimalist races. I will not delve further into this chapter here: I focus on MRC as part of the Corraling step in the schema and on PRC as the Rendering step, but one could see both steps as present in the articulation of MRC. Nothing in my main critique below (section 4) turns on which of these ways one goes. Hardimon’s chapter 4 is an extended argument

contending that these minimalist races are not merely real (exist) but are *biologically* real—I take this up at length below.

Also, Hardimon is a pluralist about race concepts (after a fashion), recognizing other important race concepts, such as racialist race (RRC), which is the “pernicious traditional, essentialist, and hierarchical race concept,” and socialrace, which is a nonracialist, critical, emancipatory concept of social groups that are taken to be racialist races (2–3). These last two concepts might well be understood as theoretical concepts, whose definitions are simply stipulated and whose introduction and use is then justified by their ability to capture aspects of racial discourse. The same cannot be said of Hardimon’s MRC: it is consistently privileged as being *the* account of *the* ordinary concept. And Hardimon is at pains to argue that while the RRC and socialrace are necessary to understand racial discourse, they are decisively distinct from the ordinary (folk) conception of race (chaps. 1 and 7), unlike ORC/MRC, which is its proper rendering because it is its logical core. In keeping with the analytic schema, putative features of the ordinary conception(s) are repeatedly enlisted to help establish ORC/MRC as the correct analysis of it.<sup>3</sup>

For my purposes here, I focus on the details of the case for MRC as *the* ordinary race concept/conception. Careful and compelling cases have been made against the standard realist position regarding both *bio-genomic* (cluster) races and more *traditional* biological races (Hochman 2013a and 2013b; Kaplan and Winther 2013 and 2014; Winther and Kaplan 2013), which correspond closely to Hardimon’s PRC and MRC, respectively. In particular, these lines of criticism argue that

1. depending on the *grain-of-resolution*, results from clustering studies will give different answers as to what (and how many) races there are, resulting in either arbitrariness or absurdly large numbers of clusters out of keeping with relevant clusters in other species (see Kitcher 2007, 304–6; Hochman 2013a, 345; Kaplan and Winther 2013, 411), and
2. human *variation is generally clinal* (gradual) rather than discrete, and so clustering results are artifacts of researcher choice rather than indications of biologically meaningful divisions (see Hochman 2013a, 346–47; Winther 2017, 312; Kaplan and Winther 2013, 411; Kaplan and Winther 2014, 1047).

Certain features of Hardimon’s (2017) case, however, do seem designed to avoid these now standard lines against racial naturalism.

By attempting to make a case for a *biological* (not scientific) MRC *without* fully committing himself to the *reality* of its scientific analog, PRC, Hardimon avoids, or at least deflects, these criticisms to some extent. For example, while Hardimon does enlist the results of clustering studies (Rosenberg et al. 2002; Rosenberg et al. 2005) to *supplement* his case that *minimal race* is biologically real because these results show that differences in *minimal races* reside at the level of the gene (2017, sec. 4.4), he goes on to offer two additional arguments for its biological reality. The other components of his case include that they have explanatory value in biology (sec. 4.2) and that they are of intrinsic interest (secs. 3.5 and 4.3). As Hardimon writes, “The case I have made for the biological reality of minimalist

race does not rest on any one of these considerations taken by itself but rather on their totality” (94). I take up the explanatory value argument and intrinsic interest cases next.

Regarding the biological significance of *minimalist race*, Hardimon cites the example of skin color, which he argues is biologically significant because it is ecologically and medically significant, and since minimalist race is defined in terms of skin color, it is biologically significant.<sup>4</sup> Again, Hardimon stresses that he is not attempting to make the case that minimalist race is a “profound” or even a “not superficial” biological kind (82); nonetheless he is arguing for “kind-ness.” He uses the example of skin color as an adaptation that minimalist race is needed to help explain, and that this “explanatory relevance” supports the kind-ness of minimalist race (81). I will put aside the not insignificant objection that it is doubtful that skin color is an adaptation (see p. 81, note 28, for Hardimon’s response, which mentions but does not cite new work on the origins of skin color). The problem remains that explaining an interesting biological difference scientifically does not require reifying the groups exhibiting the difference into biologically real groups. For example, differences in height or body mass index (BMI) between groups of people can be explained scientifically without introducing real biological subdivisions of humans by height or BMI. Even if we supposed that different ranges of height were directly heritable and traceable to distinctive geographic points of origin, there would be no *scientific* need to *reify* the population groups around this trait in order to explain it scientifically. An explanation involving migration, distinct selection pressures, and a change in the gene frequency of some gene(s) influencing height would be perfectly adequate. These populations would be different ecotypes that share a common ancestry. There would be no further need to valorize this ordinary kind of difference and its explanation by recognizing the population divisions induced by this difference as an additional real, biological entity.<sup>5</sup>

Hardimon devotes a section of *Rethinking Race* to the “intrinsic interest of *minimalist race*” (sec. 4.3), where he writes that “minimalist race is interesting from the point of view of human beings,” though perhaps not to an “alien biologist” or to explain “human variety in general” (83). It is important here not to misconstrue MRC. It might be tempting to think of minimalist races as ecotypes—populations exhibiting phenotypic differences that are ecologically adapted to a particular environment—but they are distinct. The phenotypic differences of minimalist race need not be adaptations.<sup>6</sup> Hardimon rejects the Pigliucci and Kaplan (2003) understanding of race as ecotype because ecoraces do not generally correspond to “folk races.” He writes, “The question their essay addresses is not the general question (which concerns race as ordinarily understood) concerning the existence of biological races but instead the rather different question whether it is possible to find a ‘race concept’—that is, some notion or other that can be *called* a ‘race concept’—that can be applied to human beings” (116, italics in the original). Ecotypes are disqualified because they fail to correspond closely enough to the ORC, even though Hardimon’s MRC embraces even more glaring deviations from ORC, for example allowing for races within races (sec. 2.7), rejecting a definite number of races (53, n. 65), and not allowing that “Latinos (*sic*)” count as a race (38–39). While this may not technically be inconsistent, it renders MRC so conveniently flexible that it threatens to rob it of content.

But an even more important difference between minimalist race and ecotypes is Hardimon’s requirement that the MRC involve *visible* phenotypical features. Hardimon argues that minimalist race is “*intrinsically* interesting—from a biological point of view” (82, italics in the original). He offers the

(putative) fact that scientists take the aurora borealis to be interesting for its own sake as another example of something “intrinsically interesting” (82). In particular, he argues that minimalist race is intrinsically interesting because it “represents a *distinctive salient systematic dimension* of human biological diversity” (83, italics in the original). And it is *salient* because “human differences of color and shape are striking” (83). Hardimon recognizes that it is quite likely that this salience is due to historical social (racist) factors, conceding that “human differences of color and shape corresponding to minimalist races are as striking as they are is due largely to the fact that they correspond roughly to differences in social position” (83, n. 35). He goes on to (simply) assert that it “seems implausible” to think that the strikingness of these particular differences is “wholly due to socialization” (83, n. 35).<sup>7</sup> Given the absence of an argument supporting this claim, and given what we know about how powerfully our fears and expectations can color the actual phenomenological content of our experience (Vasey et al. **2012**; Witt and Sugovic **2013**) and about how deeply social perceptions of racial features can be (Obasogie **2010**; Krosch and Amodio **2014**), Hardimon’s salience claim would seem to be the implausible one.

A crucial question at this point is: Why the insistence on *visibility* in ORC/MCR? The official explanation is that it is necessary because the target of analysis, ordinary conception(s), is characterized by such visible physical features. But, as Hardimon concedes (13), the ORC is also arguably (and for related reasons) characterized by racialist content. Further attention to the corraling/rendering step is in order.

As I indicated above (section 1), Hardimon (29) employs a finesse that allows him to reconcile the (purported) fact that the ordinary person’s understanding of race is racialist, while the ORC/MRC is not: he employs the distinction between a *concept* (an abstract “most basic possible” characterization of the target) and a *conception* (a particular way of articulating the concept). Hardimon states that the methodology used to arrive at the overarching concept is a “dialectic” that seeks to find a “fit between intuitive specifications of the contents of the ordinary concept (claims about what races are) and archetypical examples of candidate races” and is “[g]uided by the regulative principle of avoiding the attribution of conceptual confusion and empirical error” (30).

Even setting aside general concerns about this methodology and assumptions behind it, questions remain.<sup>8</sup> The reader is left hanging as to the precise rules of the “dialectic” involved in determining *the* concept uniting the folk conceptions. The idea is that in performing this analysis we can discount characterizations of the particular racial categories that are “false or fail to fit empirically correct descriptions” of our clear racial examples. And hence, since science generally rejects there being essentialist and racialist aspects to these population groups, the resulting conceptual core will be nonracialist and consistent with the most recent results of science. But why should we think that the concept behind ordinary conceptions must omit the racialist/racist elements of folk conceptions and yet retain the idea that races are distinguished from each other by “patterns of visible physical features” (31)? One might suppose that it is built into the methodology, which involves purging aspects of folk conceptions that fail to square with what is known empirically to be false.<sup>9</sup> But as Hardimon recognizes, this only weeds out “essentialist” racialist components, not “neoracialist” conceptions that might “assert statistical correlations between race and intelligence and attempt to ground those



correlations in genetics” (26). Even more problematic than failing to rule out viable contemporary forms of racialism is *ruling in* traditionally racist *visible physical* features.

The particular visible features that Hardimon associates with the minimalist races that he argues actually exist—skin color, hair texture, facial shape and features—are indeed the particular ones that have figured so heavily in the racist history tracing back to chattel slavery in the United States.<sup>10</sup> And undoubtedly they are part of folk conceptions, but why preserve the abstracted, generic category *visible physical features* in a “rationally sanitized” ORC/MRC? Or more pointedly, granting as Hardimon does that ordinary conceptions of race contain both racist elements *and* visible physical characteristic elements, why purge the former but not the latter? And again, it is not enough to say that the racist elements are empirically false and hence ruled out, because neoracist conceptions (of which there is no shortage) are not known to be empirically false.

A related question comes up as to what kind of visible traits are *the relevant kind* for MRC. We are never given a clear account of what is sufficient for a visible trait that corresponds to differences in geographical ancestry to count as racial. It is simply asserted that “if anything is obvious about the concept race, it is that differences in patterns of visible physical characteristics such as skin color, eye shape, and hair type are necessary features of it” (Hardimon 2017, 41). Hardimon (41–42) does argue against the proponent of “Race without Color,” the scientist Jared Diamond, who denies visibility as a necessary feature of race, but Hardimon makes no further positive case for visibility. And his argument is that Diamond is simply constructing a concept by collecting “arbitrary” (non-visible) biological traits and labeling it “race,” but that this does not make it a genuine *race* concept. Ironically, it is hard not to see Hardimon’s own requirement that racial traits be *visible* as arbitrary in just this way.

Of course, Hardimon’s visibility requirement is *not* arbitrary: the need to readily (visually) assign differential value to individuals based on group membership is an essential part of the modern race concept’s racist historical genesis (see Smedley and Smedley 2012, 24, or any other critical history of race in the United States). Given this, it is hard *not* to see MRC as *racist* in this sense. Hardimon (2017, chap. 1) resists this of course, by employing an understanding of a racist concept of race as one that is explicitly essentialist and hierarchical. But as he recognizes (17, n. 7), there are other ways a concept can be racist, for example by being non-essentialist and hierarchical or, as I am urging here, by being some combination of historically, semantically, extensionally, or terminologically continuous with traditional racist divisions of humans, rather than explicitly invoking essentialist hierarchical criteria. This point is related to how complicated it is to dissociate slurs or other offensive words or expressions (or even sports team mascots) from their offensiveness—and especially how such revision cannot be accomplished by a simple, localized intention or act of redefinition, since it is a function of a larger social-historical context. I return to this in section 4.

There is more to say about the rendering step and its putative support from population genetics, but much of Hardimon’s rendering overlaps with Spencer’s (2014) and is taken up in the next section. It is important to note, however, one aspect of the rendering that will be contrasted to Spencer’s. Hardimon portrays PRC’s relationship with ORC/MRC as quite flexible. In particular, if the scientific details of the PRC turn out not to line up with the particular examples of race used to abstract away to the MRC—no problem. Hardimon’s proposal is not that MRC be rendered as a *particular* set of racial divisions but rather that *any* set will seem to do, or even multiple sets of divisions or even divisions

within divisions (2012, 268, and 2017, 52–55). So if it turns out that the science says there are eight subdivisions of humans that cluster genetically, geographically, and physically in the “racial way,” and there are three or four subdivisions of each of these, then this is still sufficiently “continuous” with MRC to count as a biologization of ORC. It is hard to understand how such a deviation from folk understandings (both in number and in being “nested”) is sufficiently continuous with ORC to rule it in, yet Hardimon criticizes competing accounts because they fail to properly classify cases like physically *indistinguishable* populations that come from different lineages (2012, 261, and 2017, 106–7, 110). Again, this “flexibility” seems excessively convenient and threatens to drain his concept of any useful content.

### 3 EXTENSIONAL CONCEPTION OF RACE

Quayshawn Spencer (2014) has offered a “radical” (his term) defense of race as biologically real. Instead of directly targeting folk concept(s) for analysis, he takes the target to be the “national” meaning of race in the United States as laid out by the U.S. Census Bureau terms. He argues that while census racial discourse *is* the national racial discourse, and that in both discourses “race” has the extension “{black, white, Asian, American Indian, and Pacific Islanders},” nonetheless “Americans do not agree on a logically consistent set of identifying conditions for defining census races” (1027). Spencer employs a methodological principle that states that if one has good reason to believe that a term has a robust extension but lacks consistent identifying conditions, then it is reasonable to take its meaning to be its extension, and thereby concludes that we should take the meaning of “race” to be its reference. Accordingly, “race” refers to the set of “population groups” {black, white, Asian, American Indian, Pacific Islander}. Hence “race” is not to be understood as a term denoting kind but as a proper name (understood as a rigid designator). Thus the central question becomes whether these population groups are merely arbitrary, “socially constructed” groups or a “biologically real set of population groups” (1029). Spencer argues that this set of population groups, which roughly correspond to Blumenbach’s notorious five races posited in the nineteenth century, can be shown to line up with a scientifically meaningful division based on human genetic clustering results. Thus “race” (understood in the sense of its national meaning) has a biological basis.<sup>11</sup>

Spencer’s case is novel in several respects; in particular and in contrast to Hardimon, he looks to empirical work to help *corral* the target concept, rather than relying exclusively on *a priori* reflection. The three major premises in Spencer’s case are:

1. the appropriate pre-theoretic target for philosophic-scientific analysis is the set of population groups designated by the U.S. Census Bureau terms,
2. human genetic clustering results support this set of population groups, and
3. a set of population groups supported by a scientific result like human genetic clustering render it biologically real.

I take up each of these in turn.

First, the suggestion that *the* meaning of “race” in U.S. racial discourse can be “read off” the census set is questionable. At best the census’s official categories could be seen as a touchstone or lingua franca for racial discourse, but even this is contentious; racial discourse is and has been a shadowy and shifting site of political struggle (Roediger 2008). Even as lingua franca it fails to mirror the actual

dynamic, multifaceted, and heterogeneous racial thinking in U.S. discourse, especially including dissenting discourse regarding its adequacy (Omi and Winant **2015**). Edward Telles argues at length for the census's inadequacy in capturing racial dynamics and distinctions and especially the self-identifications within the Latinx population in the United States. That the "national meaning" could engender so much confusion with racial self-identification and be the object of critical discourse suggests that there might well be a more fundamental national meaning. Spencer concedes that there are other uses of "race" in the United States, but that analyzing the "national meaning" in this sense is "the [most important?] task" (Telles **2018**, 1026). David Ludwig (**2015**, 255–58) has argued convincingly that Spencer's efforts to corral race are inadequate—that his argument requires support (which is not provided) that his favored meaning is actually the "widest used meaning in the nation" (257).

Second, the results of the study of human genetic variation, of which human genetic clustering is a part, are not so clearly in support of the "fundamental reality" of clusters, nor are the clusters that emerge so neatly supportive of the set of population groups designated by the U.S. Census Bureau terms. The lines of criticism of genetic clustering results as a legitimating basis for "race" sketched above in response to Hardimon are just as applicable to Spencer's case. In addition, Adam Hochman (**2014**) has compellingly critiqued much of Spencer's case directly, though without reference to Spencer's **2014** paper, which was presumably not yet available, so I will apply them directly and address a remaining issue or two.

Spencer's explanation, while understandably simplified and compressed, seems to conflate (or at least isn't clear about) two kinds of analysis that go into such clustering studies: principle component analysis (PCA), which is a long-standing technique in population genetics, and the more recent method, based on the Bayesian parametric model, employed in the widely used computer program structure, developed by Pritchard, Stephens, and Donnelly (**2000**).<sup>12</sup> I will focus on the most influential studies mentioned by Spencer and by Rosenberg and colleagues (**2002** and **2005**), which employ the structure program. The structure program is used to partition the sample into  $K$  clusters; this must be specified by the researcher—the program does not itself determine a partition number  $K$ .<sup>13</sup> Researchers typically run structure for different values of  $K = 2, 3, \dots$ . The structure program attempts to partition the sample into the  $K$  cohesive groups (for each value of  $K$ ) by an iterative procedure that simultaneously estimates the allele frequency correlation structures characterizing each of the  $K$  clusters and assigns an individual to one (or more) of the clusters. The procedure continues to refine these estimates/assignments using Bayesian methods to maximize *a posteriori* probability until stopping conditions based on Hardy-Weinberg equilibrium and loci linkage equilibrium assumptions are reached.

And indeed, in *some* of the studies cited, one does find that if one chooses the  $K = 5$  partition, then the resulting partitions from structure do correspond fairly well to the five Continental groups. But there is serious reason to doubt that the studies using structure are up to the task of grounding a biologically real understanding of clusters in general, much less the all-important  $K = 5$  set of clusters, and much, much less the Blumenbach populations. Attention to the studies cited by Spencer shows first of all that  $K = 5$  is not particularly interesting to any of them; they all go on to consider  $K = 6$  and show it too has important explanatory uses and in fact does a better job of handling known populations than the  $K = 5$  does. For example, McEvoy and colleagues write, "At  $K > 5$ , further

population distinction emerges in the Western Eurasian cluster, with gradual separation of European from Central and South Asian populations” (2010, 299). And Noah Rosenberg, the main cluster advocate cited by Spencer (and Hardimon), and his colleagues write: “We identified six main genetic clusters, five of which correspond to major geographic regions, and subclusters that often correspond to individual populations” (2002, 2381). They explain further that there is a population in Pakistan that clusters with none of the  $K = 5$  groups and splits off as a cluster itself at  $K = 6$  (2005, 668). I note too that the use of structure for the purposes of coming up with a number of partitions (for example, five) less than the number of (ethnolinguistic) groups in the study (between forty and three hundred), which is precisely Rosenberg’s use and that of all the studies cited by Spencer, has been called into question by Steven Kalinowski (2011), who points out that structure was not designed for such purposes and illustrates at length how it is prone to error when used that way.

There is also serious debate whether such clusters reflect *real* features of human genetic variation. Serre and Pääbo (2004) offer evidence that such clusters may be artifacts due to the sampling procedures researchers have adopted. They argue that human genetic variation consists not of clusters but of *clines*, that is, that the variation is a continuous function of geographic distance. Such clines can be shown to exist *within* clusters, and thus the discontinuities found by structure are as likely to be sampling artifacts, or at most just very modest (local) discontinuities in the cline.<sup>14</sup> Rosenberg et al. 2005 is largely a response to this critique and contains the concession that human genetic variation does indeed consist of clines, but that there are real clusters as well. Rosenberg and colleagues reconcile these observations by explaining that intra-cluster variation is continuous with geographic distance, but inter-cluster variation requires small discontinuous jumps. They point out, however, that such discontinuity can be accommodated into the linear regression (cline based on distance) by a binary variable adding the equivalent of 3,100 km of distance if one of the oceans, or the Himalayas, or the Sahara is crossed (2005, 668). Thus, one could model this situation with clines and a binary variable as a distance corrective for difficult-to-cross geographic features. This might be seen as undercutting Spencer’s case, as it allows that clines are more fundamental in explaining genetic variation because they are required to explain variation within clusters, and the variation discontinuities that constitute clusters can be embedded within a cline understanding.<sup>15</sup>

Spencer does offer a response to the objection that other studies (e.g., Friedlaender et al. 2008) have found significantly different clusters (including at  $K = 5$ ) from the Blumenbach five. Spencer suggests that this is because such studies have over-sampled certain populations (Africans and Pacific Islanders). The concern here is that in order for a genetic clustering study to support some specific set of racial groups, the clusters must be (among other things) nonarbitrary (Hochman 2013a, 347–48), but different studies (with different sample sizes and distributions) have in fact yielded different clusters, because the number and composition of the clusters found do indeed depend on the number and distribution of samples. Spencer’s response is that the studies that do not support his Blumenbach five set have *over-sampled* the data, loading the dice, as it were, against them. Spencer’s reasoning is that “African ethnic groups make up 65.1% of Tishkoff et al.’s sample, even though they make up 30.2% of [the] human ethnic group” (2014, 1034). As Hochman points out, by this reasoning the Rosenberg et al. 2002 study (favored by Spencer) “massively under-sampled sub-Saharan African genotypes . . . only 6 of their 52 populations were sub-Saharan African . . . [thus] at 11.5% of their sample, Rosenberg et al. (2002) under-represented sub-Saharan African genotypes to a much greater extent than Tishkoff et al.

over-represented them” (Hochman **2014**, 85). In fact, it is not even clear what a “representative, independent, and random sample of each and every human population” might be, “given the clinal, gradating relation of human variation” (Winther **2014**, 215). And more deeply troubling is the general “island model” sampling strategy involved in such cluster studies, which involves choosing preselected isolated or “extreme” populations on which to base the model, as it effectively and tautologically rules out *a priori* data that could potentially be falsifiers (Maglo **2011**, 371–72).

Finally, Spencer’s case that being biologically real is fundamentally different from being real in harder sciences (less stringent, so as to let in “constructs” like clusters and clines, with which he equates race) may well be correct; he utilizes the defensible notion that one should accept as real the theoretical entities that are needed for explanatory/epistemic purposes.<sup>16</sup> Spencer also rejects (not unreasonably) the idea that being “objectively real” requires being “not culturally constructed,” suggesting that such a criterion may work in chemistry and physics to determine what is real, but that it does not work in biology, because “cultural evolution is often a relevant factor in the origin and persistence of biological entities” (**2014**, 1036). He goes on to argue that the standard five Continental groups cannot be explained by mind-independent factors but instead require invoking mind-dependent social factors having to do with the psychological and cultural explanations of migration, mating patterns, and so on. And hence, that the population groups he equates with race are real.

While resisting a hard line between the biological and the social seems right, it is not clear that there isn’t a defensible distinction between *biological explanation* and *social scientific explanation*: biological explanations often make explanatory use of causal processes and characterizations in nonsocial/mental/cultural terms that are part of the supervenience base on which social, mental, or cultural phenomena supervene. That human genetic variation has the pattern it does can be (and is) explained by standard biological explanatory notions like migration, genetic drift, selection (natural and sexual), and founder effects, and by assumptions like “recent African origin.” None of these requires psychological or cultural explanatory postulates—they are just as readily applied to ants. Of course, if one wants to explain some of the *particular* migrations that transpired or some of the particular sexual selection that took place in human history, then one might well need to bring in psychological and social/cultural explanation. Certainly in the broader, *interdisciplinary*, human social context that is the source of our deep interest in race such disciplinary boundaries must blur and overlap, but to declare (on philosophical grounds) that working disciplinary methodological differences are mistaken would seem to go too far. For purposes of standard biological explanation, no such psychological or social/cultural explanations involving racial concepts seem to be required.

#### 4 PHILOSOPHIC-SCIENTIFIC RACIAL PROJECTS

The previous sections focused primarily on the details of the scientific renderings proposed as step (ii), *render*, in the schema. I now consider this approach more generally, both its viability as a philosophical project and its advisability as a “human project.” This will involve expanding our focus to steps (i), *corral*, and (iii), *justify*. The concerns I raise below come from two directions: (1) that the analytic schema underlying the effort to biologize race in this way is not up to the task, and (2) the social-historical nature of race concepts render any effort to analyze it a project imbued from the start with political-ethical dimensions; in particular, the political-ethical dimensions of such *efforts to*

*biologize* open them to further ethical critiques. To help set up my case, I first pin down the contours of the *question* of race in this context.

### Contours of the question

As should be clear from the previous sections, the corraling of the target concept (step i) of race in order to justify (step iii) the scientific rendering of step (ii) involves the notoriously “nuanced” process of philosophical reflection (perhaps incorporating some selectively chosen empirical results) characteristic of this vein of analytic philosophy. I argued above that each of Hardimon’s and Spencer’s respective delineated targets are not as readily seen as the “ordinary” or “national” sense of race as they claim. But more can be said about this general issue, namely, what kind of project is it to give an account of race in this way? Philosophical? Biological? Sociological? Something else? In his “Ordinary Concept of Race” paper, Hardimon offers an explicit statement:

[N]one of these [non-philosophy] disciplines are concerned with the ordinary concept of race *as such*. The examination of ordinary concepts as ordinary concepts is, however, one of the traditional tasks of philosophy. Researchers in other disciplines quite properly approach race as a concept within their own fields. Biologists take the concept to be biological. Social theorists take it to be social. Philosophy, on the other hand, provides the resources to explore the concept without prejudging its disciplinary status. . . . [T]he primary motivation for turning to philosophy is that we are fundamentally confused about the concept of race. (2003, 438–39)

I suspect (or perhaps only hope) that this arrogating, philos-centric view of philosophy is waning. Indeed, Hardimon’s thinking seems to have evolved on this—he writes in his more recent book: “The question, What is race? is not the property of any one discipline but is clearly of concern to biologists, social theorists, ordinary people, . . . and philosophers. The issues . . . are intrinsically interdisciplinary and heterogeneous. . . . The ultimate goal of the inquiry is to reach an answer that can be the object of interdisciplinary agreement, however difficult that might be to achieve” (2017, 2, n. 1). Indeed, if such an inquiry is to have any traction outside a subpopulation of philosophy, attention will have to be paid to the project’s beginning assumptions and methodologies—in particular, the understanding of the corraling step as a traditional *a priori* conceptual analysis.

Sally Haslanger (2010) and Edouard Machery (2017) have offered distinct but complementary critiques of traditional “conceptual analysis.” Haslanger argues compellingly that the problems that have been raised for the descriptivist (and neo-descriptivist) account of meaning—the account that undergirds analytic philosophy’s conceptual analysis—are such that “the project of conceptual analysis, even if supplemented by empirical methods, cannot be taken for granted” (2010, 184). She draws attention to an alternative account of meaning, the *rational improvisation account*, that is an externalist account; rather than tying meaning to a shared “folk theory” of the subject matter, it assumes language users are part of a historically extended communal representational tradition that is engaged in an ongoing project of “trying to make sense of that tradition as we engage the world it purports to represent” (179). Substantive analysis then focuses on theories of the phenomena to which the term refers, not the concept behind the term. Accordingly, understanding “race” involves engaging “the historical collective practice and worldly facts” (181), and accordingly is an inquiry with a decidedly empirical component.

Machery (2017, chap. 7) makes the case that *traditional* conceptual analysis is mistaken and develops a “naturalized, psychologized” version; one that understands concepts (nontraditionally) (Machery 2009) as bodies of beliefs (or belief-like states).<sup>17</sup> Consequently, analyzing a concept amounts to either (a) describing the beliefs that constitute it (descriptive) or (b) proposing new concept-constitutive beliefs (prescriptive); but in either case it is grounded in empirical rather than *a priori* inquiry.<sup>18</sup>

Haslanger’s and Machery’s insights will be brought to bear in more detail below. At this point, I hope it is at least clear that the corraling step cannot be taken for granted as nothing more than a traditional analytic project. A more inclusive and neutral framing of the broader interdisciplinary project at hand would be “understanding our representational tradition in using the term ‘race’” (Haslanger 2010, 181). This neatly characterizes the inquiry in a way that makes sense of how such a theoretically diverse group—social constructivists, racialists, anti-realists, and other positions, including thinkers outside philosophy and the “person on the street”—can be meaningfully talking to one another, as we indeed are. And so, in the context here of biologizing “race,” the social, historical, and psychological features and dynamics surrounding racial terms, conceptions, concepts, and phenomena have to be seriously engaged from the start—perhaps to be put aside again, but still seriously addressed—as part of an articulation of whatever precisely it is that will be biologized.

### Corraling “race”

An immediate consequence of recognizing the historical-social nature of the phenomena to which “race” refers is that it becomes clear that substantial theoretical assumptions and effort are required even to set up, much less complete, the corraling step.

Even granting the contentious understanding of step (i) as delineating the über-concept uniting the folk conceptions (Hardimon 2017), such an inquiry might not be best accomplished by the conceptual-analysis approach characteristic of traditional analytic philosophy—even one constrained by not being “empirically false.” As many social theorists and critical race scholars have urged (Roediger 1991; Jacobson 1998; Omi and Winant 2015; Kendi 2016), given the complex and *complicit* relationship racial discourse has had with racist ideology, *the relationship* between a putative über-concept and folk/institutional conceptions would be best understood as reciprocal and dynamic, animated through time (and space) by political, scientific, religious, sociological, and historical forces. To begin to characterize how the conceptions of the “person on the street” converge to a (putative) über-concept would necessarily involve the theoretical frameworks of multiple disciplines. If correct, this undercuts such philosophic-scientific attempts to employ the analytic schema because there isn’t any simple, single, static *pre-theoretic* concept to be found: to engage in something like step (i), corraling, requires employing an extensive theoretical framework, and hence would require serious engagement with various disciplinary approaches and justification on an interdisciplinary level.<sup>19</sup>

And again, if Haslanger is right that for terms like “race,” rather than endeavoring to unearth the folk theory behind such terms, we should be striving for an account that “is best at doing justice both to the historical collective practice and the worldly facts” by engaging in a study of the “social dynamics of meaning” (2010, 181, 182), then such an inquiry would necessitate substantive engagement with other disciplinary approaches to race. Indeed, Haslanger’s enterprise might well be characterized as working out the features of the *theoretical* concept, race, required to best *explain* the various (individual and institutional) social practices surrounding race discourse. But even if one clings to the traditional

philosophical quest for the ordinary folk über-concept, there is still reason to see the first step as requiring engagement with our best interdisciplinary understandings of the phenomenon. For without some shared methodology for determining the relevant features of the target concept, any interdisciplinary aspirations would seem likely to collapse back into disciplinary parochialism.

One might object that biologizing philosophers are engaged in the analytic project of identifying the “logical core” conceptual elements of the concept of race, that is, they are merely dealing with internal consistency, including consistency with current empirical theory, and so need not engage other disciplines. There are, however, two problems with this response. The first is that this “logical core” is not strictly *logical* in the sense of simply being a maximally consistent subset but rather is a *theoretical* bundle that retains as salient certain traditional physical or institutional racial characteristics. Accordingly, there is an onus on its proponents to justify how it is theoretically consistent with or superior to other (especially extra-disciplinary) accounts as well. The second problem with the response is that it raises important questions about *concept names*. Racial terms themselves (for example, “the white race”), even if they name a concept, also have connotations, less formal associations, and pragmatic implicatures. So, to offer a “logical core” of a racial term, one that attempts to cleanse it of some traditional racist features, and then to insist (without engaging other relevant scholarship) that it is the ordinary/national concept would be philosophical arrogation yet again.

A more neutral way to describe the project is that a new concept is being proposed, **X**, and that once its contours and general properties have been articulated, a case must be made that it is entitled to the name “race.” Put this way, it is clearer that larger social-historical considerations come into play. For example, consider the political resistance to the use of Native American mascots, names, and images for athletic teams. Reassigning meaning in this context is not as simple as insisting that a team name (for example, “Illini”) should not be considered a racial slur because it isn’t intended that way. Nor is changing the meaning of “Warrior” from a Native American “warrior” to a generic warrior simply a matter of changing the racist mascot image of a Native American to a Greek warrior.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, such “reassignment” of meaning can happen, but it seems to require engagement with the social-historical processes involved; the reclaiming of “queer” as a term of solidarity is one such example (Somerville **2014**). And, of course, understood as such a project, the project of identifying the core conceptual elements of the concept of race again opens the door to prescriptive considerations à la Haslanger.

The biologizing philosophers tend to see the project to understand (and thereby corral) race in a way parallel to how concepts like weight and water and organism have been scientized, namely, by analyzing the meaning of the term in question and then arguing that some scientifically delivered theoretical worldly objects/facts constitute the referent of the term. But a potentially significant difference is that in these cases the social-historical practice that helps fix the referent can be assumed to be distinct from the referent. But in the case of race and, as argued above (section **4.1**, and see Haslanger **2010**, 182), the phenomena to which racial terms refer include aspects of the very social-historical phenomena that fix the referent. For example, the use of the race term “Black” in the United States refers to what it does via a web of histories and social structures of oppression and domination, of resistance and liberation, in such an involuted way that it is not possible to separate to what it refers



from how it refers. Accordingly, this web of histories and social structures may well be part of the *referent* of race concepts. The particular classes or particular physical properties associated with race discourse are salient not because of a social-historical relationship (a representational tradition) to a nonhistorical, nonsocial feature of the world, as with weight or water, but rather because of a social-historical relationship (a representational tradition) to the *particular historical and social conditions* that have rendered these divisions for us (here and now) salient or “intuitive.”

Biologizers of course resist such an approach to racial discourse.<sup>21</sup> But there is another case to be made for it—alongside Haslanger’s (2010) case. To wit, it is clear that the referents of race terms like “white” have shifted in ordinary/national discourse (for example, Jews or Italians becoming white).<sup>22</sup> And further (1) there is no case to be made that they have shifted because we have developed a deeper empirical understanding of what race corresponds to in the world (as we did with, for example, “weight” and “water”), and (2) there are compelling and comprehensive accounts based in other disciplines of how and why such race terms/concepts have shifted based on social-political historical dynamics. Therefore, even a minimal, provisional delineation of what race “means” (to what and how it refers) requires serious engagement with the social-political historical factors that are integral to racial discourse. Consequently, neither Hardimon’s logical core nor Spencer’s extensional framing can be the complete story. Argumentation along these lines seems to be compelling to at least some philosophers, but for other philosophers an impasse undoubtedly remains—based on a sense that important questions are being begged with regard to the corralling of the target concept.<sup>23</sup>

And this is where the real limitations of the analytic schema and its corralling step become obvious. The impasse is an artifact of the self-hobbling nature of the traditional analytic schema: much richer and more complex accounts of racial discourse (and thereby of racial concepts) are available outside traditional philosophy, and expanding resources for theorizing the target of inquiry expands our prospects for consensus and progress on the questions.

For example, Ruth Wilson Gilmore, a critical geographer, theorizes racism as “the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death, in distinct yet densely interconnected political geographies” (2006, 28). Accordingly, race would be understood to be a particular “state-sanctioned or extralegally produced” system of group-distributed “vulnerability to premature death” for purposes of exploitation. Gilmore’s approach, which is based on her work as a *critical geographer*, is inherently inclusive of other disciplines, and it neatly accords with the modern history of race as essentially tied to inequality, oppression, and exploitation. Alternatively, Nikhil Pal Singh, working in Black studies, argues that race is a social power “technology” that makes use of “historic repertoires and cultural, spatial and signifying systems that stigmatize and depreciate one form of humanity for the purposes of another’s health, development, safety, profit and pleasure” (2004, 223). Singh’s characterization reveals the intensional (signifying) character of “race” that is inextricably enmeshed with its production of group-differentiated vulnerability to exploitation. Finally, Jodi Melamed (2011, 11–12), working in American studies, theorizes *racialization* as a process of devaluation, logically prior to and perhaps with a better claim to being “real” than the fluid, ubiquitous, and ever-moving *particular categories* of race that one finds at various places and times—a process that functions to make structural inequality appear fair and natural by sorting human beings into “natural” and innocuous categories of difference. Such a process-based understanding makes

particular sense of race's inchoate boundaries and its ability to detach itself from phenotypes. These examples of trans-philosophical analyses offer real insight into the social contexts in which "race" functions and within which it and theories about it are always embedded.

The question of the social content of racial discourse and concepts leads to the second, more normative point about the advisability of biologizing race. If race concepts are in some sense inextricably tied to social relations and history—both distal and proximal—then their meanings would be "sensitive to" just such efforts to biologize them. That is, the meaning of race terms and concepts are in fact not independent of the very (social) act of analyzing them. Even if one rejects this social-historical component to the *meaning* of "race," racial discourse—including efforts to analyze and biologize it—is undeniably embedded in the social-historical nexus of the time and place in which it occurs. This involuted, self-implicating character of *the act of analyzing race* renders particularly vexing simplistic, nonsocial analyses. To see this, it is helpful to employ sociologists Michael Omi and Howard Winant's (2015) critical framework known as *racial projects*.

### Biologizing race as a racial project

The critical framework of racial projects understands racial concepts to be part of an ever-evolving reciprocal process between how race is represented in society's language, ideas, media, and institutions and how its resources are (racially) allocated:

A racial project is simultaneously an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial identities and meanings, and an effort to organize and distribute resources (economic, political, cultural) along particular racial lines. (Omi and Winant 2015, 125)

Racial projects are ubiquitous and pervade human life—at the level of the individual and the collective, in the scientific and the aesthetic, in the spiritual and the political. Thus the notion of a racial project includes within its scope the very project of biologizing of race that is under consideration here—though perhaps this recognition comes less readily to those inclined to believe that philosophy's analytic techniques have the ability to transcend their own social, temporal, and disciplinary location and thereby offer a more general or universal account of a concept than other disciplines can. Understanding philosophical efforts to analyze race *as* racial projects, that is, seeing them as just one of the various efforts to manage how race is represented and understood and how resources are organized and distributed, makes clear why such efforts need to be explicitly engaged with other disciplines; as but one of a multitude of overlapping, socially embedded (racial) projects, it has implications for and is conditioned by other such projects (past, present, and future) in ways that are neither obvious nor within the traditional purview of philosophical inquiry, and thus requires insight from critical race work in other disciplines.

So, what light can such an analysis shed in the context at hand? Hardimon (2017, 30, n. 12) explicitly asserts that "normative considerations" can be avoided in analyzing the ordinary concept of race as MRC, and in fact he cites Spencer (2014) as arguing that "race" might even be thought of as having no descriptive content at all. This is in keeping with Hardimon's claim that the MRC "does not lend itself to . . . legitimizing oppressive racial ideologies," and that "bringing it into our social discussions is . . . unlikely to [cause harm]" (64). I argued above that sanitizing a term or concept or conception of its

racist character is not as simple as removing its explicit racist content; the racial-projects critique illustrates another way normative considerations may persist in such endeavors.

One well-studied racist racial project is that of *colorblindness* (Omi and Winant **2015**; Bonilla-Silva **2013**; Burke **2016**; Doane **2017**), a project to maintain the racially unequal status quo that has racist historical roots and that, once racializing processes are established in a society, has the ability to reproduce itself and the racial hierarchy—it develops a “life of its own” (Bonilla-Silva **1997**).<sup>24</sup> The racial project of colorblindness is widely understood as the answer to the question of how, half a century after civil rights victories in the United States, “glaring racial inequalities abound documented in the details of achievement gaps, segregation indices, wealth disparities, and incarceration rates” (Mueller **2017**, 219–20). One of the sustaining notions in this project is that “individual or cultural differences best explain racial inequality rather than ongoing racism and its legacy from the past” (Burke **2016**, 103). Bonilla-Silva (**2006**) details four “frames” that allow whites (predominantly) to interpret information in order to sustain colorblindness: abstract liberalism, naturalization, cultural racism, and minimization of racism. It is clear enough how biologizing race can support explaining racial disparity by providing grounds for seeing race and racial difference as “normal” or “natural.” But the most important frame (according to Bonilla-Silva) is abstract liberalism—and biologizing supports this frame as well. As Bonilla-Silva puts it, “The frame of *abstract liberalism* involves using ideas associated with political liberalism (e.g., ‘equal opportunity,’ the idea that force should not be used to achieve social policy) and economic liberalism (e.g., choice, individualism) in an *abstract* manner to explain racial matters. By framing race-related issues in the language of liberalism, whites can appear ‘reasonable’ and even ‘moral,’ while opposing almost all practical approaches to deal with *de facto* racial inequality” (**2006**, 28).

Abstract liberalism is based on the belief in individualism and meritocracy with the conviction that no group should be singled out for “special treatment” and that “individual freedoms” must be protected above all (Stoll and Klein **2018**, 218). As the emphasis on “abstract” suggests, it gains its ideological traction from abstracting away from actual, particular, historical material social relations and settings and human experiences; it focuses instead on asocial, ahistorical, apolitical abstract individuals.

The philosophic-scientific attempts to biologize race, in adopting just such an asocial, ahistorical, and apolitical starting point, are of a kind with this racial project, and in fact can be seen as supporting it. By helping to collapse perspectives, concepts, questions, and focus concerning ahistorical and apolitical versions, they assist in setting up racism and racial discourse as an individual-level, psychological phenomenon instead of (also) being a social-political macro-level structural phenomenon.<sup>25</sup> Such attempts to biologize race come into focus as assisting in rendering structural racism—along with its ideology, institutional underpinnings, and white privilege/supremacy—invisible. Regardless of one’s goal with respect to race concepts—whether to reduce or revise, to eliminate or vindicate—if one is not in serious interdisciplinary conversation with others about how to theorize the social-historical discourse within which the race concepts are embedded, one runs the risk of participating in (perhaps) unintended racial projects in just this way.

Attempts to biologize race in the ways discussed here have the effect of depoliticizing the question by offering a scientific grounding of human racial difference and an “ever open” possibility to legitimate white supremacy in the “natural” world: so long as races are real kinds rooted in biology, they are

legitimate scientific categories and have the potential to (in themselves) ground biological differences that can be used to camouflage, defuse, or explain away the social-structural reproduction of white power and privilege.<sup>26</sup> Remarkably, Hardimon does at least recognize that nothing in his argument against the very specific racist conception of race touches “neoracist” conceptions that might “assert statistical correlations between race and intelligence and attempt to ground those correlations in genetics” (2017, 26). And he further acknowledges that his case for the biological reality of minimalist races renders impossible the “‘stake-through-the-heart’ maneuver of blocking scientific racism by flat-out denying the existence of biological races” (26). It is not clear (to me at least), then, that countenancing MRC is “unlikely to cause harm,” nor that it “does not lend itself to . . . legitimizing oppressive racial ideologies” (64). By legitimating race as a scientific category, one *does* open the door to seeing studies of racial differences like intelligence as legitimate. Or, at the very least, one fails to help shut it.<sup>27</sup>

More insidiously, given that the ability of colorblindness to covertly reproduce white supremacy via institutions is reinforced and perpetuated *at the individual level* in large part by processes of ignorance (Mills 1997; 2007; 2008; Moore 2014), and that “colorblindness is about culturally sustaining an ignorance useful for cloaking and reproducing the contemporary structural mechanics of a white supremacy that is now centuries old” (Mueller 2017, 234), the notion of a natural, biologically grounded *racial* difference among human beings draws attention and tension away from the social-structural features of society that materially reproduce white power and privilege, and thereby helps make white ignorance psychically possible.

Finally, results from scholars who study race in comprehensive multidisciplinary ways give the lie to the commonly advanced idea that efforts to biologize race are helpful in combating racism because they replace racist concepts with nonracist biologized versions.<sup>28</sup> In fact, such “scientific” evidence and rational argumentation is generally ineffective in refuting even psychological racism (Sussman 2014; Leslie 2017), much less the institutionally propagated structural racism, which persists independently of any racist beliefs (Bonilla-Silva 2013; Feagin 2006; 2014; Mills 2008; Mueller 2017).

To be perfectly clear, the target of my critique here is limited to the philosophical accounts of race typified by the biologizing examples I have critiqued above, coming from philosophical approaches very loosely described as analytic.<sup>29</sup> There are, of course, other approaches within philosophy (for example, existential, phenomenological, feminist, Marxist, Africana, Latinx) that have a much better record of engaging other disciplines. As these approaches make clear, philosophical work on race must acknowledge and engage in substantive ways relevant scholarship in related disciplines. To list just a few such disciplines and a sampling of representative works, consider critical race theory, ethnic studies, American studies, history, sociology, Black studies, Native American Studies, legal studies, and science studies.

## 5 CONCLUDING REMARK

Sally Haslanger (2014) makes the compelling case that essentialist and normative implicatures lurk in the background of generic claims like “women are more nurturing than men” and “boys don’t cry,” even if they are intended to describe statistical “facts.” A similar dynamic surrounds attempts to biologize race: even if it were possible to coin a sense of race that is not racist *and* to defend it as

biological in some sense, such a project would still reverberate with enduring racist ideas, institutions, and social structures, and would similarly result in essentialist and normative implicatures. Biologizing race, like weaponizing a virus, might seem to be one of those projects that a naive methodological individualism—one that ignores the social-historical conditions that structure human choice and meaning—can rationalize simply as “the pursuit of knowledge.” But biologizing race is in fact a moral and racial project through and through.

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## Notes

- 1 I am setting aside attempts to biologize *racial thinking* as opposed to race itself. See Jackson 2017 for a compelling case against it.
- 2 Hardimon develops specific conditions for each of (a), (b), and (c). The details of (a) and (b) are not needed for our purposes here; the focus will be on (c), since being biological in the sense legitimated by science is how "biologizing" is generally understood in the analytic schema.
- 3 Again, Hardimon's view is that MRC *simply is* ORC (2017, 29, 172), though at certain points he writes that it is the "logical core" of "the ordinary concept of race" as a concession to the dominance of the ordinary *conception*, which is a racist articulation of the ORC. The key point for our purposes here is that he does avail himself of a unique ordinary (folk) understanding as the target of analysis that culminates in his MRC.
- 4 Hardimon makes a more cautious supplemental claim in terms of skin color's "almost certain[]" status as an evolutionary adaptation (2017, 81). But see also his note 28 on page 81 for further cautions.
- 5 I note that a parallel criticism applies to Hardimon's (2017, sec. 2.12.1) earlier argument that MRC is a biological concept in the "basic" sense of purporting to refer to biological objects (59). Certainly,

aspects of his definition of MRC (for example, skin color) can reasonably be thought of as biological, but it requires yet another step (itself requiring justification) to suggest that MRC “purports to refer” to race as biological objects (59). See also Glasgow 2009, 81–82, and Maglo 2011 for a more detailed case against race as biological kind.

- 6 See Hardimon 2017, 115, n. 40. What is more, “ecoraces” need not have *visible* phenotypic difference, as minimalist races must; more on this below.
- 7 This cannot but call to mind Benjamin Franklin’s belief that he (and anyone else) could *see* the *racial* difference between the “pure white people” (that is, “the Saxons” and the “English”) and other Europeans, for example “Germans” (Franklin 1755, art. 24, p. 10).
- 8 One looming methodological issue concerns the assumption that there must be a *unique* “one over many” *über-concept* that underlies folk conceptions. Also, one must assume that we have a philosophical method of identifying precisely which aspects of folk conceptions are inessential in order to abstract away from them to the abstract *über-concept*. And the ever-elusive “intuitions” or “archetypical example” invoked by philosophers to ground such analyses have been called into question, and may well reflect little more than socialization, rather than something that has any claim to universality. See Weinberg et al. 2010 and Machery, Mallon, and Nichols 2013; for a critical assessment of the method of cases upon which many applications of the analytic schema depend see Machery 2017.
- 9 By effectively requiring that the ORC/MRC be empirically adequate, Hardimon sets himself up for further trouble: part of the purpose for the corraling characterization of the ordinary concept is to help assess whether it can be biologized, that is, whether it can be rendered in scientific terms (see 2017, 114, where he concedes that MRC is “already scientized”). But this result is built into the MRC arrived at via the process just described. Since the process involves squaring the concept with scientific theory, Hardimon has in the corraling phase “pre-paved” the way for a biologized rendering—and if this is not a classical example of question begging, it is close enough so that anyone not already in the grip of the biologizing project will still have reason to doubt the process.
- 10 See, for example, Smedley and Smedley 2012, 24, or any critical history of race in the United States. Hardimon demurs from characterizing the precise pattern visible features, stating that it “is a matter of some delicacy” and would “require the competence of a physical anthropologist” (2017, 36–37). It must be noted, however, that it might be hard to find such an anthropologist, since a recent paper in the *American Journal of Physical Anthropology* that studied anthropologists revealed that “there has been a ‘dramatic rejection’ of race concepts among professional anthropologists regardless of subfield” (Wagner et al. 2017, 325).
- 11 Spencer uses the word “folk” only three times in his paper (in the first sentence of the abstract, of the introduction, and of section 4), and each time as “folk racial classification.” Spencer is probably best read as assuming that “folk racial classification” lines up (in some sense) with the national meaning, so that his case for a biological basis of the particular set of population groups that are the (putative) national meaning/extension of “race” is in fact a case for the biological basis of “folk racial classification.” My critique, however, does not depend on *these* exegetical particulars; it is sufficient for our purposes here that Spencer employs some notion (national meaning) as *the proper* target for biologization.
- 12 Spencer distinguishes between “fuzzy” and “sharp” partitioning (2014, 1030), suggesting (it seems) that this distinction aligns with these two kinds of analysis, but both PCA and Bayesian methods have versions that can be used to assign each individual to a single cluster (sharp) or to multiple clusters (fuzzy); see Alhusain and Hafez 2018 for examples of fuzzy PCA-based approaches, and the original structure program has an option for either sharp or fuzzy clustering (Pritchard, Stephens, and Donnelly 2000).

- 13 Model selection methods exist (for example, Akaike information criterion, Bayesian information criterion) to compare the distinct models determined by each  $K$ , but these are not appropriate for “choosing the single ‘best’ value of  $K$ ” (Verity and Nichols 2016, 1834).
- 14 The results of a PCA are consistent with either a cluster or a cline, showing only that when discrete (principal) components are considered, discrete subgroups are formed.
- 15 See Hochman 2013a, 347, for a similar argument and Maglo, Mersha, and Martin 2016, 4–7, for an extensive argument that human genetic variation is clinal and that “continental clusters” may well be “computational artifacts.”
- 16 As an anonymous referee for this journal pointed out, beyond philosophy the term “construct” is not always used to indicate a metaphysically neutral position; see Slaney and Garcia 2015.
- 17 Machery (2017) characterizes the relevant belief-like states and terms them *beliefs* (without the “e”). This distinction is important to avoid front-loading too much problematic traditional “structure” into his account. Such detail, however, will be unnecessary here.
- 18 Haslanger’s and Machery’s positions *may* diverge from each other regarding whether *empirical* conceptual analysis makes sense in the context of race; see Machery 2017, 229–31. What divergence there is, however, may only be superficial, since Haslanger (2010, 180) recognizes a role for determining what the folk actually think about race, and Machery (2017, 216–17) recognizes a role for prescriptive (“Gramsci-style”) conceptual analysis akin to Haslanger’s (2000) ameliorative understanding. Regardless, they are in agreement on the issue of concern here: that traditional conceptual analysis is mistaken, at least in the context of race.
- 19 While this cuts rather obviously against Hardimon’s philosophical-reflection-based corraling efforts, it also raises problems for Spencer’s coralling. Spencer’s referential methodological assumption does allow for more substantive engagement as far as the coralling step goes, in that it allows him to include some empirical work on what people believe about race (2014, 1027) to argue against there being a “single, logically consistent set of identifying conditions” (1028) associated with “race.” However, his identifying the referent of “race” as the particular set of categories, that is, {black, white, Asian, American Indian, Pacific Islander}, given by the U.S. Census Bureau gives short shrift to work in sociology, social psychology, and critical race studies, and also to Haslanger’s challenge. And importantly also to Muslim, Arab, and Latinx folk who are officially and in everyday praxis challenging the census categories. Recall also Ludwig’s (2015) critique in section 3 above.
- 20 See Bruyneel 2016 and Coles 2016 for discussion of the social history and politics of such terms.
- 21 Hardimon sidelines such framings as concerning his socialrace concept, and Spencer would presumably characterize it as the “sociological” or “intellectual” meaning of race rather than the “national” meaning.
- 22 It has been shown that the race concept “white” in the contemporary United States has evolved in roughly the past hundred years to include people of Irish, Italian, and Jewish descent (Jacobson 1998; Roediger 2008), which it had not previously included.
- 23 Thanks to an anonymous referee for help with this point.
- 24 While there is complementary overlap, Bonilla-Silva (1997) distinguishes his structural framework from the racial projects lens of Omi and Winant (2015). But this need not concern us here.
- 25 See too Gannett 2010 for a helpful discussion of natural (biological) kinds and a defense of the point that certain naturalizing (biologizing) approaches lead to some sets of questions being “overlooked and systematically ignored” and can “actually foreclose the asking of certain questions” (375).
- 26 I note that Spencer (2014, 35–36) rejects a sharp distinction between the “natural” and the social in that he argues that some biological (natural) explanations involve social components. Nothing in my point here, however, turns on this being a sharp distinction.

27 The inevitable objection to the above will be that following “the truth” can’t itself be morally problematic. To this I make two brief replies. First, Helen Longino has convincingly argued in the context of the study of the biological basis of alleged gender difference and sex-related behavior that the models one adopts help determine the relevance and interpretation of the data, and that commitment to a particular model often must involve “values or contextual features” (1990, 188–89). In a parallel way, I suggest that whether one legitimates and adopts the project of analyzing race along the lines of the biologizing philosophers or alternatively along the lines of Sally Haslanger (or Ruth Wilson Gilmore or Jodi Melamed) must also involve “values and contextual features.” Finally, a case may also be made that “highly probabilifying racial generalizations” are not just problematic for moral reasons, but rather that they violate “distinctively epistemic norms” (Bolinger 2018), and so what may appear to be a moral question may actually be an epistemic one.

28 Hardimon seems to embrace such an idea; see 2017, 26, 64, 96, 129.

29 For example, Glasgow’s (2011) case against the claim that the folk conception of race can be biologized in this way is not this kind of racial project. Nonetheless, my general argument, if successful, cuts against Glasgow’s account as well, since it depends on the folk concept being of the right kind to ground a justification that the biological rendering is *not* a rendering of the target concept.