

# Basic Racial Realism, Social Constructionism, and the Ordinary Concept of Race

## Abstract

Joshua Glasgow and Jonathan M. Woodward (2015) have proposed a new account of the metaphysics of race, which they call ‘basic racial realism.’ According to the view, races are kinds whose members are united by sharing similarities, e.g., visible traits like skin color, that are not directly relevant to science. They argue that basic racial realism has certain dialectical advantages over the other parties to the debate over race, viz. racial antirealism, biological racial realism, and racial social constructionism. Despite its being an intriguing addition to the debate, I argue that basic racial realism is not as promising as Glasgow and Woodward suppose. I argue, first, that basic racial realism is not as consistent with the ordinary concept of race as Glasgow and Woodward make it out to be. Second, I argue that basic racial realism does not enjoy the dialectical advantages over social constructionism, in particular, that they suggest it does. Finally, I defend social constructionism about race against their charge that it is inconsistent with the ordinary concept of race.

## 1. Introduction

In their paper “Basic Racial Realism” (2015), Joshua Glasgow and Jonathan M. Woodward argue that the debate over the reality of race has neglected a position they believe deserves consideration.<sup>1</sup> The three familiar positions in the debate are racial antirealism, biological racial realism, and racial social constructionism. The position that they advocate is called ‘basic racial realism,’ according to which race is real (pace the antirealist), but neither a natural kind nor a social kind (pace the biological realist and the social constructionist,

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<sup>1</sup> Also see Glasgow (2019) for defense.

respectively). On this view race is a “basic kind,” i.e., a kind whose members are united merely by sharing a similarity, but a similarity that is not directly relevant to science (2015: 451). (Basic kinds as such, they claim, lack causal powers and so their essential properties sometimes fail to overlap with properties that are useful to science.) Basic kinds are not gerrymandered or arbitrary sets, then, but objective, mind-independent kinds that do not rise to the scientific importance of natural or social kinds. Races are basic kinds in that they are “groups of people who are distinguished from other groups by having certain visible features (like skin color) to a significantly disproportionate degree” (2015: 452).<sup>2</sup> Glasgow and Woodward argue that basic racial realism has certain dialectical advantages in the debate over the reality of race, especially with respect to its consistency with the ordinary concept of race.

Glasgow and Woodward should be commended for introducing basic racial realism to the debate over the reality of race. It offers a novel account of race that promises to track the ordinary concept of race without undermining the social and political significance of race. For all those benefits, however, basic racial realism faces certain troubles. I argue, first, that basic racial realism is not as consistent with the ordinary concept of race as Glasgow and Woodward make it out to be. Second, I argue that basic racial realism does not enjoy the dialectical advantages over social constructionism that they suggest it does. In the third section, I defend social constructionism about race against their charge that it violates the ordinary concept of race. I conclude with general reflections about the comparative surprises that basic racial realism and constructionism give us regarding race.

## **2. The Case for Basic Racial Realism**

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<sup>2</sup> Also see Glasgow (2009) and (2019: 117).

According to Glasgow and Woodward, familiar parties to the race debate share a commitment to ‘elitism’ about kinds. Such elitism has it that only kinds that are directly relevant to science, whether natural or social, are real. They find the elitist assumption implausible because basic kinds seem to qualify as real on a plausible conception of reality—objective and mind-independent similarity—without being the direct objects of scientific inquiry. Rejecting elitism undercuts the antirealist’s argument that race is not real insofar as it is neither a natural nor social kind. For basic kind realism maintains that kinds need not be natural or social to be real.

Biological racial realism takes races to be suitably isolated breeding populations. Glasgow and Woodward note that a well-known concern for such a view is that the groups counted as races depart substantially from the groups we ordinarily count as races. For example, the Amish count as a distinct race on some versions of biological racial realism, though not for ordinary users of the concept of race.<sup>3</sup> In this way, there is a ‘mismatch’ between our ordinary concept of race and the populations identified by the biological realist. Glasgow and Woodward argue that the source of this problem is the realist’s attempt to identify races with biological or natural kinds. The mismatch problem can be altogether avoided if races are simply basic kinds distinguished by the visible traits the ordinary concept of race picks out.<sup>4</sup>

Constructionists about race, on the other hand, hold that races are social kinds, i.e., kinds unified by social factors such as classificatory practices. Glasgow and Woodward claim that the

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<sup>3</sup> See Glasgow (2019: 128ff.; 2009: 94ff.) for this argument.

<sup>4</sup> Spencer’s (2014, 2017, 2019) version of biological racial realism does not fall prey to this version of the mismatch argument. However, in his (2019: 121) Glasgow argues that what Spencer thinks is central to race (genetically distinct human continental populations) come apart from what is actually central to race, namely certain visible traits.

ordinary concept of race tells against thinking of race as a social kind. There are possible cases in which, intuitively, races still exist, yet the social factors that determine race (by the lights of the social constructionist) are absent (2015: 456). For instance, if classifying people as ‘white’ or ‘black’ or ‘Asian’ is what determines the existence of those races, then in a situation where everyone is collectively struck with racial amnesia for an hour, races cease to exist. But intuitively, these races still exist even if their members are not classified as members of those races. Like biological racial realism, the constructionist view of race departs from our ordinary concept of race. To the extent that it identifies races with whatever kinds our ordinary concept of race picks out (so long as the mind-independent world can satisfy the demands our concept of race puts on it), basic racial realism’s concept of race will never depart from the ordinary concept of race.

Constructionism about race is, moreover, supposed to have an advantage over other views of race because it is especially suited for explaining the social and political significance of race. Glasgow and Woodward argue that basic racial realism does just as well as social constructionism on this score. Even though basic racial realism denies that race is social itself, the view can still “license talk about the social significance and impact of race, and about social identities that are built upon race” (2015: 457). Basic racial realism separates the social practices involving race from race itself. In this respect, constructionism has no theoretical or explanatory advantage over basic racial realism. Since the latter identifies races with basic kinds, it is not committed to the more extravagant racial ontology of social kinds that the former is. In light of the weaknesses of its competitors and the strengths of basic racial realism, Glasgow and Woodward conclude that basic racial realism ought to be considered not only a fourth competitor in the debate about race but also the most promising of the pack.

### **3. Trouble for Basic Racial Realism**

#### **3.1 Consistency with the Ordinary Concept of Race?**

The main advantage Glasgow and Woodward claim for basic racial realism is that it reflects the common-sense way of thinking about race.<sup>5</sup> According to basic racial realism, the referents of our race talk are whatever basic kinds in the world satisfy the “conceptually nonnegotiable” commitments of our race concept. “A commitment,” they write, “is conceptually nonnegotiable if abandoning it means abandoning the concept in question” (2015: 458; also see Glasgow 2009: 24ff.). On their definition, “races are groups of people who are distinguished from other groups by having certain visible features (like skin color) to a significantly disproportionate degree” (2015: 452, cf. Glasgow 2009: 34). It is nonnegotiable with respect to the ordinary concept of race that races are tied to these visible traits. Given that the world can satisfy what the application conditions of our race concept demands, there will be no mismatch between our concept of race and the world; the ontology of basic kinds seems tailored to capturing our ordinary concept of race.

However, there are several ways in which basic racial realism departs from (though may not yet violate) our ordinary concept of race. I will argue that despite the fact that Glasgow and Woodward acknowledge these features of their view, they don’t seem to appreciate the extent to which these features puts their view at odds with the ordinary concept of race, something which the view is tailor-made to capture. The first departure is that basic racial realism entails that there

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<sup>5</sup> They assume that consistency with the ordinary concept of race is a desirable feature of an account of race, because that concept, rather than some other closely related concept, is the target of the debate. See Glasgow (2009 and 2010) for further discussion.

are fewer races than ordinary people recognize. In a footnote, they say, “The basic racial realist may have to admit that certain groups that are sometimes treated as races—such as those identified with the label ‘Latino’ or ‘Arab’—are not really racial groups if they have no distinctive visible traits, even to some small degree” (2015: 453). They entertain three ways of dealing with this concern. First, they could admit that some ordinary classification practices are mistaken. Second, they could identify certain minimal visible differences between races and “adopt a mechanism whereby many individuals within a race can significantly depart from the barely distinctive visible traits of the group without sacrificing group membership” (2015: 453). Third, they could hold that races are mere sets, rather than basic kinds.

The first option would undermine Glasgow and Woodward’s claim that basic racial realism is tailor-made to capture the ordinary concept of race. The last option is not an option insofar as it amounts to abandoning basic racial realism. The second option is only viable if there are in fact some visible traits that are distinctive of each race, i.e., traits had by their members to a significantly disproportionate degree. Glasgow and Woodward do not tell us what such features by might be for the categories Latinx and Arab (or MENA—Middle Eastern and North African), so it is not clear that this strategy offers a response to the concern. Moreover, the second option is a promissory note: they will discover some mechanism for allowing persons to belong to races even when those persons do not have the visible traits that differentiate its members from members of other races. Whatever mechanism they identify, however, will group people together on the basis of something more than just visible traits, perhaps ancestry or origination from some

geographic location<sup>6</sup> or perhaps something cultural, linguistic, or social. The examples of racial categories like Latino and Arab/MENA strongly suggest that visible characteristics like skin color are not the sole criterion for membership in some races. But more importantly, the examples suggest that basic racial realism departs from the ordinary concept of race insofar as basic racial realism only recognizes races whose members are united by distinctive visible traits. Suppose ordinary folk do recognize Latinx and Arab/MENA as racial categories. There is some evidence for this: see Alcoff (2006), Haney López (2005), and Parvini and Simani (2019). Then the ordinary concept of race is not merely a concept of groups of people distinguished by visible traits had by its members to a disproportionate degree. This problem is by no means decisive against basic racial realism.<sup>7</sup> But it certainly deserves attention from the basic racial realist, especially since Glasgow has used the failure to include Latinx and Arab as racial categories as a criticism of biological realist views (2019: 122). This failure marks a departure from the ordinary concept of race: basic racial realism recognizes fewer races than ordinary folk do.

The second apparent departure from the ordinary concept of race is the multiplication of races beyond what is ordinarily recognized.<sup>8</sup> According to basic racial realism, for any concept

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<sup>6</sup> Hardimon (2003) identifies the ‘logical core’ of our concept of race as involving visible traits of members who are linked by common ancestry and who originate from a certain geographic location. For a similar view, see Gracia’s (2018: 10) ‘genetic common bundle’ view.

<sup>7</sup> One option for the basic racial realist is to allow races to be unified by factors other than just visible features. Glasgow and Woodward (and Glasgow 2009) seem reluctant to do this, presumably because they think that the ordinary concept of race is *merely* a concept of groups of people distinguished by visible traits had by its members to a disproportionate degree. But allowing other factors to unify groups into race would allow them to maintain that races are basic kinds (assuming that the other factors are not directly relevant to science) and potentially to avoid the problem that categories like Latinx pose to their analysis.

<sup>8</sup> Jeffers (2019: 187) also highlights this departure.

of race that ties membership in a race to certain visible characteristics, there will correspond to it a basic kind in the world. Races, Glasgow and Woodward acknowledge, are plentiful. There is a race category corresponding to the one-drop rule, to the reverse one-drop rule,<sup>9</sup> or any other of the innumerable concepts of race (tied to visible characteristics) we might think up. The implication of this is that all of us belong to many different races at the same time.<sup>10</sup> Barack Obama, on their view, has at least three races: black, according to the one-drop rule, white according to the reverse one-drop rule, and mixed race, according to a classification schema that allows for mixed races. They recognize that this may seem to run counter to the ordinary concept of race, but they argue that it remains consistent with that ordinary concept in ways that biological realism and constructionism do not. They write,

If you'll permit us one more anecdotal observation—and, of course, more robust data would be better—we've found that when people learn that there are different racial classification systems in different societies, they tend to accept it (and do not insist that their own is somehow more privileged). We think, then, that there is an implicit willingness to accept this surprise. If so, then this particular surprise is *consistent with whatever is conceptually nonnegotiable about race* (emphasis original 2015: 461).

Obviously, one worry here is that this evidence is merely anecdotal. Even setting that aside, the worry is that the acceptance of different racial classificatory systems by ordinary people does not

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<sup>9</sup> This is the racial classificatory scheme according to which one is white if one has at least one white ancestor.

<sup>10</sup> They qualify this, saying, “We each have, then, multiple properties, appropriately called ‘races’ that are indexed to different social classification schemas...we have multiple races, different ones of which become uniquely *relevant* at different locations” (2015: 460).



provide evidence that they accept the basic racial realist account of race, its implications, or that the acceptance is consistent with what is conceptually nonnegotiable about race. Glasgow and Woodward do not tell us what it is exactly that people accept when they learn of different racial classification systems. Perhaps the acceptance signals that ordinary people are willing to agree that race is social in nature after all (as the constructionist holds). Or perhaps it signals that people are willing to give up their ordinary concept of race. Or perhaps it signals that people think that one's race can change from location to location. Or perhaps it signals that people come to believe that race does not exist after all. Until we know what it is that people accept when they encounter different racial classificatory schemes, we do not know whether the implications of basic racial realism are consistent with the ordinary concept of race.

Basic racial realism, to reiterate, has two surprising results. First, insofar as it denies that Latinx and Arab/MENA are races and ordinary folk think they are, basic racial realism recognizes fewer races than ordinary folks do. Second, it entails that there are many more different races than ordinary folks think there are. One can abandon a concept by denying of it something that is conceptually nonnegotiable. But one can also abandon a concept by getting its extension radically wrong. We might rightly doubt that someone has our concept 'dog' if they believe that pit bulls and collies do not fall under the concept 'dog' and that there are many other breeds of dogs, none of which we ordinarily recognize. The concern is that basic racial realism likewise abandons the ordinary concept 'race' by under and over populating the extension of the concept 'race'. Perhaps these concerns can be dealt with, but until they are, they cast doubt on Glasgow and Woodward's main contention that basic racial realism is consistent with the ordinary concept of race.

### **3.2 Dialectical Advantages?**

Glasgow and Woodward argue that basic racial realism enjoys certain dialectical advantages over its competitors. One of those competitors, which I will focus on here, is constructionism about race. According to Glasgow and Woodward, basic racial realism (1) is more ontologically parsimonious than constructionism, (2) has as much explanatory power as constructionism, and (3) is consistent with the ordinary concept of race while constructionism is not. In the following section, I'll address each claim in turn.

### *Ontological Advantage?*

Glasgow and Woodward say, "Basic racial realism secures much of what we want from a good theory of race, without committing to the more onerous ontology of race put forth in constructionism and biological realism" (2015: 457). It may be that basic racial realism is not committed to the more onerous ontology *of race* put forth by constructionism or biological realism. However, the permissiveness of basic kind realism entails that basic racial realism is ontologically committed to the same kinds as constructionism and biological realism. Recall, a kind is basic if "its members are united merely by sharing a similarity, that is, if they have something in common that is nontrivial but also not directly relevant to science" (2015: 451). Any set of objects can rise to the rank of a kind if there is *any* nontrivial similarity among its members. Given this permissiveness, the basic kind realist should also recognize the reality of the natural and social kinds directly relevant to science. Basic kinds are distinguished from other kinds in that they are not directly relevant to science, but the reality of basic kinds is secured by the nontrivial similarity between their members. It would be ad hoc to deny the reality of kinds that are directly relevant to science and that have causal efficacy; it would involve a reverse

‘elitism,’ to use their terminology, to recognize basic kinds but not the elite kinds relevant to the sciences. So, the basic racial realist, qua basic kind realist, is committed, e.g., to the social kinds that constructionists identify as races. The difference, then, between the basic racial realist and the constructionist is not a difference in ontology, but a difference in whether certain kinds are good candidates for the title ‘races.’ Basic racial realists do not have an ontological advantage over constructionists (or biological realists). In fact, the opposite may be argued to be the case: constructionism secures much of what we want from a good theory of race (more on this momentarily), without committing to the more onerous ontology put forth by basic kind realism.

### *Explanatory Power?*

What we want from a good theory of race, according to Glasgow and Woodward, is to accommodate the fact that “our racial practices have made a profound impact on our lives and that we should attend to this impact” (2015: 456). They claim that basic racial realism helps “secure,” “legitimize,” and “license” “talk about the social significance and impact of race” (2015: 457). Glasgow and Woodward may be correct that their view does not disable or prevent us from understanding the social impact of race and racial identities. But basic racial realism does not thereby secure, legitimize, or license “racial discourse that enables justice and makes sense of racial identity, experience, and history” (2015: 457). Basic racial realism is silent on these matters (except to the extent that it can be used to criticize views on which race is thought to be a natural kind). The metaphysics of basic kinds does not prevent us from pursuing such discourse, but it also does not in itself encourage it. They write,

[Ba]sic racial realism takes away *nothing* about the lived, social reality of racial experience; it just classifies that reality as part of *practices involving race* rather than as part of *race itself*. On this front, the difference between constructionism and basic racial realism is a bookkeeping difference, not a substantial gap in theoretical resources” (2015: 457).

But to explain the practices involving race, basic racial realists must appeal to the kinds of social factors that constructionists hold to be constitutive of race. The bookkeeping difference entails a difference in explanatory resources: the constructionist has, *in her account of race itself*, the theoretical resources to explain the social significance and import of race, whereas the basic racial realist must go beyond her account of the nature of race to say anything about its significance and import.

Moreover, some constructionists won't see this difference as a matter of mere 'bookkeeping.' Haslanger (2012: 224), for example, thinks the point of asking 'what is race?' is not primarily to describe what ordinary users of 'race' have in mind; rather it is to identify what concept of race we ought to use given our legitimate theoretical and practical aims. For Haslanger, and Taylor (2013: 90) too, the goal of an account of race is to draw our attention to the complex dynamics between social situatedness and ancestry/morphology, with an aim towards defeating racism.<sup>11</sup> Their accounts of race, as such, illuminate the profound impact that racial practices have on our lives, and by design. It is, of course, open to Glasgow and Woodward to reject this approach to the metaphysics of race. Indeed, their main theoretical aim seems to be offering a metaphysics of race that matches the ordinary concept of race. But the worry is that that undercuts their claim that basic racial realism has equal theoretical resources as

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<sup>11</sup> To their ranks we should add Alcoff (1996), Boxill (2001), Mills (1998), Root (2000), and others.

constructionism with regard to explaining the social significance of race. Given that basic racial realism does not entail much about the social significance of race, basic racial realism lacks theoretical resources for the kinds of explanatory projects in which many constructionists are engaged. For instance, many constructionists see themselves as engaged in liberatory projects, social/ideological critique (e.g., color-consciousness vs. color-blindness), racial politics (think debates over teaching race and racial formation in schools), or attempts to understand the centrality of race in a society (see Omi and Winant 2015). The only way that basic racial realism's theoretical resources rival those of the constructionist's is if the former's explanatory project is different from the latter's.

### *Constructionism and the Ordinary Concept of Race*

In section 3.1, I argued that Glasgow and Woodward had not established that basic racial realism is consistent with the ordinary concept of race. In this section, I turn to their claim that constructionism about race is inconsistent with the ordinary concept of race. But before I do, it is worth noting that not all constructionists think that it is a desideratum of a successful account of race that it be consistent with the ordinary concept of race. As I noted above, some, like Taylor (2013: 109) and Haslanger (2012: 224), think of their task as identifying what concept of race we *should* adopt given our theoretical, social, and political aims. But even ignoring this approach, the constructionist can argue that her account of race does not fair as badly regarding the ordinary concept of race as Glasgow and Woodward think.

According to Glasgow and Woodward, there are two conceptually nonnegotiable commitments regarding the concept of race:

The first is that races *must*, as a conceptually nonnegotiable matter, be organized around certain visible traits in a way that maps onto our racial categories...Constructionists don't have a problem with that fact: they maintain that we do organize races around visible traits, but it is we that do this, and it is our very doing of this that *makes* race real. But the problem with this move is that, second, races must not, as a conceptually nonnegotiable matter, be determined by social facts (because, again, when we imagine removing those facts, racial facts appear unchanged). (2015: 458)

There is a plausible response available to the constructionist. They can argue that the first, but not the second commitment is conceptually nonnegotiable of the concept of race.

The constructionist respects the first commitment because she thinks races are groups of people organized around certain visible traits. And it seems that the constructionist would do well to agree with the basic racial realist that race is *essentially* tied to certain visible traits. For one, that allows the groups that constructionists call races to be coextensive (in the actual world) with the groups that ordinary folks call races. It also allows her to say that race would vanish if our bodies came to look like each other (for there would be nothing to organize our social practices around) (cf. Alcoff 2006, Glasgow 2010: 63; 2019: 121). However, the constructionist can say that certain visible traits are necessary and essential to race—qua conceptually nonnegotiable of race—without also thinking they are sufficient to determine or ground the existence of races as kinds. One way to do this is to hold that race is *partially* determined or grounded by the disproportionate distribution of certain visible traits and *partially* determined or grounded by social factors. What *makes* race real, then, need not be entirely social on such a

constructionist view; social factors help unify races into kinds, even if there are other requirements for the existence of races.

The constructionist could regard their view about what unifies groups of people into races as part of their *conception* of race, without thinking it is part of the ordinary *concept* of race.<sup>12</sup> (They can also regard the basic racial realist's view of race as a refinement of the concept of race, one that ties race to visible traits (as the concept requires), but that also involves a novel view about what unifies races, viz. similarities that are not directly scientifically relevant.) The concept/conception distinction is between the 'thin' core of a concept and various 'thick' theoretical refinements of the concept. Glasgow (2009: 28ff.) makes use of the distinction in arguing for a 'thin' core to the concept of race, viz. groups differentiated by visible traits had by their members to a significantly disproportionate degree. But what the constructionist denies is that the thin core is sufficient for race, i.e., that the thin core is also consistent with race being partially determined by social factors, as their conception of race has it.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. Hardimon (2003: 439). Constructionists like Haslanger (2012: 129ff.) and Taylor (2013: 90) hold that many users of the concept of race are mistaken about what unifies races into kinds. But they do not think that the constructionist view of race abandons the ordinary concept of race, only that it is recommending that ordinary folks *revise* their concept of race to reflect its real (social) nature. In our terms, it is not that constructionists and ordinary folks have different concepts of race, but that ordinary users of the concept have a conception of race that doesn't track the deeper reality of race (allegedly captured by the constructionist's account). Glasgow (2009: 131) thinks the constructionist views of folks like Haslanger actually change the subject by abandoning the ordinary concept of race because he thinks that it is conceptually nonnegotiable of race that it is not determined by social facts. I'm arguing in this section that the case for this claim is not persuasive.

<sup>13</sup> Because he opts for an 'incomplete analysis' of the concept of race (2009: 78), one that "makes a few specific claims about the concept of race and even fewer positive claims about its content," Glasgow doesn't seem to be in

One nice upshot of this, for the constructionist, is that if the thin conceptually nonnegotiable core of our concept of race is simply that races are tied to or organized around visible characteristics, then the constructionist can distinguish races from witches—a case which is supposed to cause trouble for constructionists (see Glasgow 2009: 131 and Appiah 2018: 36-37). It is conceptually nonnegotiable of the concept ‘witch’ that witches make pacts with the devil and cast spells, a condition which appears not to be satisfied by anything in the world. That suggests, as Glasgow (2009: 131) says, that ‘witch’ fails to refer to anything rather than to some kind that is subject to social factors that structured certain people’s lives in times past. Unlike the concept ‘witch,’ groups in the world can satisfy the application conditions for race, insofar as it is conceptually nonnegotiable of the concept ‘race’ that they are simply groups organized around certain visible traits. As long as the conceptually nonnegotiable thin core of the concept ‘race’ can be realized in the world, the constructionist can maintain that ‘witch’ fails to refer while ‘race’ does not.

Glasgow and Woodward argue that it is conceptually nonnegotiable of race that race is *not* determined by social factors because we can conceive of possible situations in which intuitively race exists in the absence of the social factors identified by constructionists as constitutive of race.<sup>14</sup> Now these thought experiments may show that constructionism has unintuitive consequences. Of course, that doesn’t by itself show that the constructionist has abandoned the ordinary concept of race for another concept (anymore than the Kantian deontologist abandons the ordinary concept of wrongness by insisting that you ought not lie to position to insist that the disproportionate distribution of visible traits is necessary *and sufficient* for race, pace what he says on (2009: 119).

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<sup>14</sup> Glasgow and Woodward do recognize that further empirical and methodological considerations (such as those in Glasgow 2009: chapters 2, 4, and 6) need to be brought to bear to make good on their argument.



the murderer at the door).<sup>15</sup> But suppose (as I urged above) facts about what unify races into kinds are parts of various conceptions of race rather than nonnegotiable features of the concept of race. The constructionist and ordinary folk are both talking about actual groups of people whose members tend to have certain visible traits. These visible traits serve to ‘anchor’ (cf. Glasgow 2017: 174) talk of race so that they are not talking past one another. The thought experiments show that they differ about the nature of those groups, i.e., what it is that grounds races. Insofar as debates about the grounds for race are understood to be debates about various conceptions or theories of race, Glasgow and Woodward’s thought experiments may only reveal dividing lines between conceptions of race, rather than concepts of race.

#### **4. Surprise, You’re White! (And Black, and Mixed Race, and...)**

If this constructionist response is successful, then it undermines the claim that social constructionism about race runs afoul of our ordinary concept of race. Nevertheless, one thing Glasgow and Woodward’s paper helpfully reveals is that every metaphysics of race gives ordinary users of the concept a surprise. For their money, basic racial realism gives the smallest surprise, and one that does not force us to abandon the ordinary concept of race. They say that “[b]asic racial realism’s surprise is akin to learning that you have a bunch of cousins you did not know about” (2015:461). Of course, it is consistent with concept of cousins to find out that you have a bunch more than you thought you did. But as I argued above, Glasgow and Woodward do not give much of an argument for the claim that finding out that you belong to a bunch more

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<sup>15</sup> Glasgow (2009: 131-2) also recognizes that the mere unintuitiveness of an analysis of a concept C does not entail that the analysis is really about something other than C.

racess than you thought you did is consistent with the ordinary concept of race.

“Constructionism’s surprise,” they assert, “is akin to learning that your cousin can go from being your cousin to not being your cousin if we just forget that she’s your cousin and become re-related to you again if we remember” (2015: 461). The analogy with cousins is suggestive, but overstates the case against constructionism. It may well be that thinking your cousin can go from being your cousin to not if you forget about them violates the concept of cousin. But not every version of constructionism makes the analogous claim about race. The racial amnesia thought experiment only targets constructionist views on which race is entirely determined by our racial classificatory practices.<sup>16</sup>

Glasgow recognizes this (2019: 131) but argues that for any social factor the constructionist identified as grounding race, there will be situations in which that factor comes apart from facts about visible appearances, which he believes is at the core of the ordinary concept of race. Glasgow is certainly right that any social factor can come apart from distributions of visible traits. But it’s important to recognize that the scenarios that Glasgow and Woodward imagine involve radical change to our social world, e.g., re-structuring social arrangements, ending certain social practices, beginning others, and fundamentally altering the social meanings of human bodies (also see Glasgow 2009 and 2019: 133). For once we

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<sup>16</sup> Other constructionist views make different social factors central. Haslanger holds that races are positions in pervasive social structures determined by stable and repeated patterns of social interaction (2012, 2016). Mallon (2016) holds that races are social roles determined by a variety of social/cognitive mechanisms that stabilize these roles, making them real and fit for scientific investigation. Haslanger (2012), Sundstrom (2002), and Mallon (2018) emphasize the role that material aspects of the social world maintain racial categories. Du Bois (1996), Taylor (2000), Outlaw (1996), and Jeffers (2013; 2019) develop accounts of race on which it is determined by historical and cultural factors.

acknowledge the radical social change that these thought experiments involve, the respective surprises of basic racial realism and constructionism look somewhat different than Glasgow and Woodward suggest. Basic racial realism gives us this surprise: you discover that you *actually* belong to many more races than you thought, even ones you've never conceived of and some races you thought existed (e.g., Latinx and Arab) do not actually exist. Constructionism (of certain stripes) gives us this surprise: you discover that in some remote possible situation involving radical change in our social world that you are not of the race that you believe yourself to be in the actual world. Put differently, basic racial realism surprises us about what falls in the extension of our race talk; constructionism surprises us about the nature of the very same groups ordinary folks identify as races.

Glasgow and Woodward are correct that ordinary people might find it shocking to think races would disappear with social change. But the constructionist can interpret this shock as a response to the constructionist conception of race, to the constructionist's view of what unifies races. We need not see this shock as indicating that constructionist's have changed the subject or are using an entirely different concept. What I want to emphasize here is that basic racial realism also gives us quite a surprise. And if the arguments given above are correct, then it is doubtful that the surprise of basic racial realism is consistent with the ordinary concept of race.

In sum, the dialectical advantages that basic racial realism is supposed to have are less clear than Glasgow and Woodward suppose. Moreover, the constructionist conception of race may have a better claim to consistency with the ordinary concept of race than they acknowledge. Glasgow and Woodward deserve credit for expanding the scope of these debates, but I don't think the familiar positions in the debate should fear the newcomer.

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