

A Third Way in the Race Debate*

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IN recent years, philosophers, particularly those in the United States, have paid increasing attention to the public policy question of whether race should be retained in public discourse and practice. *Eliminativism* holds that we should purge racial terms from public discourse and abandon practices relying on those terms, and, in its strongest form, that we should eliminate race-thinking entirely.¹ Yet while this proposal is normative, concerning what we ought to do regarding racial discourse and practice, the supporting arguments are often ontological. That is, eliminativists such as K. Anthony Appiah, Lawrence Blum, J. Angelo Corlett, Ashley Montagu and Naomi Zack are not suggesting that we should ignore our racial make-up; rather, they argue that race is an illusion.² They are, in short, *racial anti-realists*.³ Following a similar dialectical strategy, those who want to retain racial discourse and practice—the *conservationists*, including W. E. B. Du Bois, Lucius Outlaw, Ron Sundstrom and Paul Taylor—are *racial realists*, who hold that race is indeed very real.⁴

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¹The eliminativist proposal is also getting popular attention in the US. (It has become “a national debate,” according to the front page of the *New York Times* (Nov. 9, 2003, p. 1.) California’s recently rejected “Racial Privacy Initiative” would have prohibited public agencies from classifying people on the basis of race. Similarly, syndicated columnist George Will has called for a ban on collecting racial data on national census surveys; Will, “Blurring Racial Issues May Bring Clarity,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 4, 2003, p. M5. (Much of the motivation behind popular eliminativism is to render race-conscious policies, such as affirmative action, nonsensical: e.g., Will’s reason for banning racial categories is to “fuel the wholesome revolt against the racial and ethnic spoils system that depends upon racial and ethnic categorizations.”) The issue, indeed, is international; for example, it has been a contentious matter in both France and Rwanda recently.

²At least this is true of Zack’s earlier work; see n. 11 for how Zack’s view has evolved.

³It would be more fitting to call these views error theories, since they all hold that racial discourse is truth-apt. (Thanks to Sally Haslanger for pointing this out in her comments as a referee for *The Journal of Political Philosophy*.) However, since “anti-realism” seems to have gained a foothold in the debate, I’ll stick with that term. Similarly, as I discuss below, it is not quite correct to say that the debate is about *terms*, such as “race;” strictly speaking, the normative debate is about whether we should eliminate our racial *concepts*, and the ontological debate is about whether those concepts pick out properties. But, again, as the conventional debate has loosely gone back and forth between talking of discourse, terms and concepts (without any apparent problematic implications), I’ll do the same here for the most part.

⁴What I am here calling “racial realism” is sometimes equated with what others call “racialism.” Racialism, however, is often taken to be a more robust view of race (such that, say, phenotypic features are correlated with intellectual capacities) than that suggested by realism (which just holds that there are races, however robust or austere they might be).

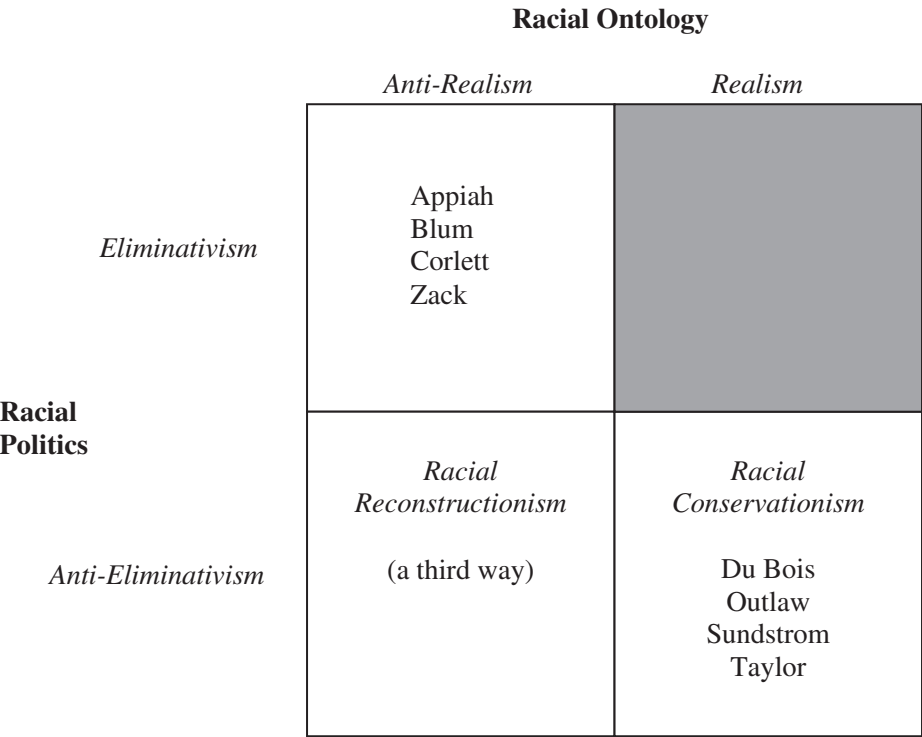


Figure 1.

I argue below that both of these standard positions in the race debate are unsatisfactory, and that their respective shortcomings reveal three adequacy constraints on theorizing about race. After drawing out these constraints, I will argue that, contrary to the conventional terms of the debate, these two positions do not exhaust our theoretical options. Instead, I will examine another theory of race that can satisfy those constraints. In brief, the ontological component to this view is that race is not real. However, since, I will argue, this fact does not entail that we should eliminate racial discourse, it remains possible that the normative import of racial discourse motivates rehabilitating it in a way that renders race real. I will call this third way of determining what to do with race, *racial reconstructionism* (see Figure 1).

I. THE ONTOLOGICAL AND SEMANTIC DISPUTES,
AND AN ONTO-SEMANTIC CONSTRAINT

While there are several variations on the eliminativist position, one common eliminativist argument is as follows:

- (E1) If race is an illusion, then racial terms should be eliminated from public discourse.
- (E2) Race is an illusion.

Thus,

(E3) Racial terms should be eliminated from public discourse.⁵

Below, I will target (E1) in order to create space for reconstructionism. However, since most of the elimination/conservation dispute has focused on (E2), and since the problems in this dispute partially motivate reconstructionism, I begin with it. One of the more prominent defenders of (E2) is Appiah, who has an overarching anti-realist argument that stands out across his writings:

(A1) Race is an illusion if there is no interesting biological basis for our racial categories.

(A2) There is no interesting biological basis for our racial categories.

Thus,

(E2) Race is an illusion.⁶

Appiah's considered view is more complicated than simple eliminativism as expressed in (E3), for he thinks that while race is illusory, racial identities are real. The more complicated view will be considered in section II. First, however, I want to focus on a common realist response to Appiah, namely that (A1) is false, because, for Appiah's critics, race can be real even if it has no interesting biological basis. Instead, because biologically uninteresting human groups are often socially interesting, races can be real as *social kinds*.⁷

The races-as-social-kinds account takes up Du Bois' point that while phenotypic features such as skin color play an important role in our practices of racially identifying one another, "the physical bond is least and the badge of color relatively unimportant save as a badge; the real essence of this kinship is its social heritage of slavery; the discrimination and insult..."⁸ So while

⁵Perhaps the most explicit statement of this argument is found in Montagu: "the concept of race is nothing but a whited sepulcher, [and] should therefore be dropped from the vocabulary of the anthropologist;" "The concept of race in the human species in the light of genetics," *The Concept of Race*, ed. Montagu (London: Collier, 1964), p. 3. J. Angelo Corlett writes: "Considerations of justice... are based on assumptions that certain names have referents. Where they do not, then policies based on such arguments can be dismissed as being implausible;" *Race, Racism, and Reparations* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2003), p. 41; cf. p. 46.

⁶This simplifies Appiah's extended arguments, but it represents his disagreement with the opposing views considered here. See Appiah, "Race, culture, identity: misunderstood connections," in Appiah and Amy Gutmann, *Color Conscious* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996), pp. 30–105, esp. 71–4. Cf. Appiah, "Illusions of race," in Appiah, *In My Father's House* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 28–46. Zack, *Philosophy of Science and Race* (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 3, also endorses (A1): "If race is not scientifically meaningful, then the meaningfulness of race in folk terms is thereby undermined."

⁷Others take issue with (A2). See Robin O. Andreasen, "A new perspective on the race debate," *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science*, 49 (1998), 199–225; "Race: biological reality or social construct?" *Philosophy of Science*, 67 (2000), 653–66; and Philip Kitcher, "Race, ethnicity, biology, culture," *Racism*, ed. Leonard Harris (Amherst, N.Y.: Humanity Books, 1999), pp. 87–117. For a response to this new-wave biological racial realism, see my "On the new biology of race," *Journal of Philosophy*, 100 (2003), 456–74. Appiah's argument that there is no biologically interesting basis for our racial categories can be found in "Race, culture, identity," pp. 67–74.

⁸W. E. B. Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction, 1984; originally published 1940), p. 117.

physical features might be a “badge” of race, race’s essence for this account lies in sociohistorical relations that have been produced by race-based practices.

Proponents of this view, whom I’ll call *social kinds racial realists*, see themselves as facing two theoretical hurdles. First, they must offer a defensible ontological framework according to which things that are not proper objects of study by the natural sciences, i.e., things that fall under social categories, can nonetheless be considered real. Second, they must argue that races in particular are real social kinds.

I here want to grant the first, general claim that social kinds can be real,⁹ for there is little disagreement on this point within the race debate. As Taylor points out, even Appiah allows the general reality of social kinds, when he argues that while races are not real, racial identities—which are themselves social kinds—are real.¹⁰ Appiah’s rejection of races as social kinds, then, should be read as stemming not from hostility to social kinds in general, but from the belief that if race in particular is real at all, it must be real *as a natural kind*. So within the race debate, the contentious question is whether *race* is a social kind.

The reason that Appiah denies that race is a social kind is that he takes the word “race” (and cognate terms) to purport to refer to something biological.¹¹

⁹This view is often motivated by considerations independent of race, such as taking the social sciences seriously. For a general picture of ontological pluralism and its application to race, see: Michael Root, “How we divide the world,” *Philosophy of Science*, 67 (2000), 628–39; Ronald R. Sundstrom, “Being and being mixed race,” *Social Theory and Practice*, 27 (2001), 285–307; “Race as a human kind,” *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 28 (2002), 91–115; and “Racial Nominalism,” *Journal of Social Philosophy*, 33 (2002), 193–210; Paul Taylor, “Appiah’s uncompleted argument: W. E. B. Du Bois and the reality of race,” *Social Theory and Practice*, 26 (2000), 103–28; and *Race: A Philosophical Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004), esp. pp. 90–2. Perhaps the most prominent general account of how social facts can comport with a broadly naturalistic ontology is John R. Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality* (New York: Free Press, 1995). I will not evaluate those versions of social kinds racial realism that are specifically directed at objections not advanced here. E.g., Robert Gooding-Williams, “Race, multiculturalism, and democracy,” *Race and Racism*, ed. Bernard Boxill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 422–47, defends the claim that social kinds views of race can make sense of passing. Linda Martín Alcoff’s analysis of race as “a particular, historically and culturally located form of human categorization involving visual determinants marked on the body through the interplay of perceptual practices and bodily appearance” can be found in “Philosophy and racial identity,” *Philosophy Today*, 41 (1997), 67–76 at p. 69. Cf. “Towards a phenomenology of racial embodiment,” *Radical Philosophy*, 95 (1999), 15–26; and “Is Latina/o identity a racial identity?” *Hispanics/Latinos in the United States*, ed. in Jorge J. E. Gracia and Pablo De Greiff (New York: Routledge, 2000), pp. 23–44. Alcoff’s view might be interpreted as arguing for a “critical analytical” approach similar to Sally Haslanger’s, which I discuss below. Though he doesn’t adopt the label “realist,” Charles W. Mills also seems allied with what I am calling social kinds racial realism in *Blackness Visible* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1998), chapter 3. Finally, Lucius Outlaw holds that race is a hybrid “social-natural kind” in *On Race and Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 7; cf. “‘Conserve’ races? in defense of W. E. B. Du Bois,” W. E. B. Du Bois on *Race and Culture*, ed. Bernard Bell, Emily Grosholz, and James Stewart (New York: Routledge, 1996), pp. 15–37.

¹⁰Taylor, “Appiah’s uncompleted argument,” p. 122.

¹¹Others agree. In the extreme version, Blum in “*I’m Not a Racist, but . . .*” (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2002), ch. 5, pp. 156–60 holds that race is not only supposed to be biological, but also carries older racist and essentialist connotations and therefore is not a social kind. For other accounts, see Walter Benn Michaels, “The no-drop rule,” *Critical Inquiry*, 20 (1994), 758–769 and Zack, “Life after race,” *American Mixed Race*, ed. Zack (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield,

This semantic position, rather than a global hostility to social kinds, is what motivates (A1), which states that racial categories are illusory if there is no interesting biological basis for those categories. Social kinds racial realists, by contrast, argue that race isn't supposed to be biologically real, since racial discourse only refers to some social reality.

What the ontological debate largely comes down to, then, is whether racial discourse is such that "race" can refer to a social kind or instead must refer to a biological kind. If Appiah (with others) is right that racial terms have biological connotations, then there must be a biological basis for race in order for it to be real (that is, (A1) is true). However, if Taylor (with others) is right that racial terms have social connotations, then race can be real even if it has no biological basis ((A1) is false). So just as controversial ontological theses underlie the main normative positions in the race debate, those ontological theses are themselves supported by an underlying racial semantics. Thus the parties to the dispute seem to have converged on an **onto-semantic constraint** on theorizing about race:

OSC: Ontological theories of race must be consistent with the best semantics of race.

So we need to identify the best semantics of race. Appiah devotes a great deal of space to defending the claim that "race" purports to be a biological term. His methodological principle is that, whether we adopt a descriptivist ("ideational") or causal ("referential") view of meaning, we must look at the *history* of race-talk, because "current ways of talking about race are the residue, the detritus, so to speak, of earlier ways of thinking about race." Furthermore, we must look at the history of *intellectual, elite* racial discourse, since historically "even ordinary users of the term 'race' . . . thought of themselves as using a term whose value as a tool for speaking the truth was underwritten by the experts."¹² Since Appiah's analysis of the experts (largely Matthew Arnold and Thomas Jefferson, but also Shakespeare, Herder and Darwin) reveals that they took race to be biological, "race" must be purport to be a biological concept. Taylor's response to this interpretation of the intellectual history of race is to cite such sources as Du Bois and Alain Locke as evidence that several experts took race to be a social, rather than biological, kind.¹³

1995), pp. 297–307; and "Race and philosophic meaning," *Race/Sex*, ed. Zack (New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 29–43. In her more recent *Philosophy of Science and Race*, Zack has allowed that we might work our way out of the biological "paradigm" of race. She has also backed off eliminativism somewhat (p. 8). It is unclear whether she also means in this work to back off anti-realism (for she lumps race in with witchcraft, Santa Claus, "varied deities" (p. 81) and astrology (p. 108)). The main claim of the book is that race is not *biologically* real and is instead a social construction, but it is unclear whether she considers social kinds real. In some places she appears to want it both ways: "Construction in itself need not entail lack of objectivity or *complete* lack of reality, especially in social contexts" (p. 4, emphasis added).

¹²Appiah, "Race, culture, identity," pp. 38, 41.

¹³Taylor, "Appiah's uncompleted argument," pp. 122–125; cf. *Race*, pp. 88–89.

There is much to admire in both Taylor and Appiah's interpretations of the intellectual history of racial discourse, but I think both suffer from an overly monistic approach to the meaning of "race:" each treats racial terms as if they could only purport to refer to either biological or social kinds. Yet their combined analyses suggest that the best account of historical expert discourse on race is that, as a group, the historical experts have purported to talk about *both* social and biological kinds. This pluralism in racial discourse entails that it is not true that because racial discourse purports to describe a wholly biological reality, (A1) race needs a biological basis to be real; nor is it uncontroversially true that because racial discourse does not purport to describe a biological reality, (~A1) race does not need a biological basis to be real. Rather it is only true that racial terms, as conceived by the historical experts, have *plural* connotations: they purport to refer to both social *and* biological kinds.

In short, on their own methodological principle, neither Appiah nor Taylor satisfies OSC, for each holds that racial terms' meanings are best determined by historical expert usage, and historical expert usage has been pluralist (some have treated race as a biological category, others as a social category, still others as a hybrid category), while each insists on monistic (thoroughly biological or thoroughly social) racial semantics.

One reaction to the pluralism of racial discourse is that when we face, in Taylor's phrase, "competing world descriptions," we should choose the one that is more useful.¹⁴ Thus, since the social semantics of race are more useful than the biological semantics of race (because of problems with finding an acceptable biological account of race), we should say that the meanings of racial terms have social connotations.

This raises two questions. First, does racial discourse carry too much biological baggage for race to be represented as a wholly social kind, and, second, even if it does, does that mean that we cannot talk about race as a wholly social kind anyway? If we agree with Taylor and Appiah that the meaning of the terms in contemporary racial discourse is determined by historical expert usage, then, I've argued, we are forced to say that racial discourse does have significant (though not only) biological connotations.

In a moment, I will briefly defend a sort of semantics of race that does not rely on historical expert usage and instead leaves semantic authority in the hands of the commonsense, competent speakers whose language might be eliminated or conserved. But this won't change much for the present purpose of identifying the best semantics, since at least armchair reflections on ordinary language use suggests that folk racial discourse still at least partly fixes the meanings of racial terms in biological ways, e.g., by reference to phenotypic features such as skin color. So even this route seems to attach purported biological reference to racial terms (though this is not to deny that there aren't also social connotations). The

¹⁴Taylor, *Race*, p. 108.

problem, then, with simply selecting more useful social meanings for the purpose of analyzing ordinary terms to be eliminated or conserved is that “we” might end up talking past one another (or the historical experts). That is, if, as seems likely, racial discourse still carries a fairly significant amount of biological baggage, theorizers of race must either stay within that discourse or risk talking about something else.¹⁵

Before addressing the folk-oriented view, though, we should note a third alternative that addresses the second question raised above. Albeit in different ways, both Appiah and Taylor, on the one hand, and the alternative folk analysis, on the other, seek to articulate our ordinary concept of race. But instead of those approaches, one might follow Sally Haslanger’s “critical analytical” approach and try to identify not “our everyday conceptual apparatus” but, rather, a semantics that possibly improves upon that apparatus by making the best—and most politically appropriate—sense of it. That is, on the critical approach we would just define our terms in the best way that serves our purposes: “it is up to us to decide what in the world, if anything, [race is].” Haslanger’s main purpose is to get a theory of race that is an “effective [tool] in the fight against injustice,”¹⁶ and towards this end she arrives at a definition of “race” as a social kind. (Taylor’s “choose the most useful definition” approach might also be interpreted this way.)

As will become clear below, my reconstructive project is similar to Haslanger’s critical project in that I too seek a revised, indeed improved, racial semantics. However, the project of reconstructionism is different than the critical project, and this is traceable to the fact that the two projects have different aims.¹⁷ The critical aim, again, is to figure out something like an ideal theory of race (primarily to combat injustice). The aim here, by contrast, is to engage the elimination/conservation dispute, which is about what to do with our “everyday conceptual apparatus.” As such, we are in a sense trapped in the everyday, since the whole question is what to do with our existing commonsense racial discourse. At the same time, however, the point of reconstructionism is that in another sense we are not trapped, because in addition to elimination and conservation there is a third option, namely reconstruction. So the question “What is the ideal theory of race?” is different from “What should we do with our racial discourse?”¹⁸ But in terms of prioritizing revisionist definitions, the two projects are complementary. Indeed, the reconstructive project partly piggybacks on the

¹⁵See Frank Jackson, *From Metaphysics to Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), esp. pp. 31 and 38.

¹⁶Haslanger, “Gender and race: (what) are they? (what) do we want them to be?” *Noûs*, 34 (2000), 31–55 at pp. 33–4, 36.

¹⁷See Haslanger, “Gender and race,” for discussion of various ways in which her critical project is constrained by the aims of her inquiry.

¹⁸At the end of her “Gender and race,” in which Haslanger articulates the critical project and her ideal account of race (and gender), she reserves the elimination/conservation question for another occasion (p. 51).

critical project: the idea of an acceptable revisionist account of what we want race to be (the critical project) makes room for the argument that instead of remaining stuck with either eliminating or conserving bankrupt existing accounts, we can revise our racial discourse to adopt the ideal account (the reconstructive project, as a way out of the elimination/conservation dilemma).

The view advocated here does, however, stand partly at odds with what Haslanger has elsewhere called a “debunking” project, which is an attempt “to show that a category or classification scheme that appears to track a group of individuals defined by a set of physical or metaphysical conditions is better understood as capturing a group that occupies a certain . . . social position.” The debunking project is neither a reconstructive recommendation nor a critical effort to come up with the most useful account of race.¹⁹ Rather, it attempts to show that in our *ordinary* terms we are already committed to social meanings that we might not be aware we are committed to. Just as, to take Putnam’s famous example, “water” referred to H₂O even when users of the term “water” were unaware of this, so “race” might refer to a social kind even if this isn’t what ordinary language users think.²⁰ Once ordinary users fix the paradigm cases of a term, it is up to the “experts” to determine the best account of what the term refers to. So even if there are no biological races, and even if ordinary, competent language users believe that “race” is supposed to have biological connotations, if the experts determine that “race” refers to a social kind, then it *does* refer to a social kind; this would be a classic debunk. And, as Haslanger points out, it is consistent with this semantic externalism to hold that the experts can be social theorists.²¹

One concern with this approach is that “race” and, say, “water” appear to be disanalogous in important ways with respect to semantic externalism. If we’re going to rely on the experts, we need to know who the experts are (even if it’s an idealized set of experts) and what they say (or would say) about the terms in question. With water, it’s fairly clear that the experts are chemists and that they uniformly say that water is H₂O. But who are the experts on race? While I’m unsure how we might answer such a question and unconfident that ordinary users of racial discourse intend to defer to extra-scientific, social experts, let’s assume we could come up with an appropriately charitable set of criteria for expert selection, which would include Haslanger. But it would also then include Appiah. So should we say, with Haslanger, that “race” ideally refers to a social kind,²² or should we follow Appiah’s view that “race” has been structured by social forces to purport to refer to an (illusory) natural kind? Indeed, there is

¹⁹Haslanger, “Social construction: the ‘debunking’ project,” *Socializing Metaphysics: The Nature of Social Reality*, ed. Frederick F. Schmitt (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), pp. 301–325 at pp. 318, 319.

²⁰Putnam, “The meaning of ‘meaning,’” in *Mind, Language, and Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), pp. 215–71.

²¹Haslanger, “Social construction,” pp. 320–321.

²²See “Gender and race,” p. 44 for Haslanger’s ideal definition.

even disagreement among the experts on the biological status of race.²³ As I've argued elsewhere, without expert consensus, externalism seems to stick us with a sort of semantic paralysis with respect to racial discourse.²⁴ At the least, we'd need some semantic tie-breaker, but it's unclear what tie-breaker would be acceptable.

Furthermore, there is reason here to contain debunking strategies (and Appiah's historical-expert approach) when it comes to "race" and cognate terms. As noted above, I think we ought, in this context, to leave semantic authority in the hands of ordinary users of racial discourse. While I cannot present the full argument for that position here,²⁵ I can defer to Putnam for an abridged version. As he points out, while certain terms, like "gold" or "water" exhibit a division of linguistic labor, i.e., a meaning whose intension is determined by experts rather than lay usage, other terms, such as "chair," do not.²⁶ Lay usage fixes the entire meaning of "chair." It is unclear what principle we should use to determine whether "race" is more like "chair" or "water" in this respect, but I submit that with respect to the question that guides us here—and this point is limited to the scope of this question—since we aim to determine what to do with ordinary racial discourse, we should focus on the ordinary meanings of our ordinary terms. Strictly speaking, the eliminativists claim not merely that we should abandon certain words; after all, they're willing to speak of a human "race" or a foot "race," and they would not be satisfied if we replaced our word "race" in this context with, say, "shmace," to cover the exact same ideas.²⁷ Instead, they seek a broader rejection of a network of ideas, conceptions, and meanings, including intensions, associated with race. Since it is this commonsense intensional and conceptual network that is at issue, the best semantics for our purposes is folk semantics. This doesn't mean that semantic externalism has no role to play; if folk usage intends to partially talk about biological kinds, then biologists will tell us what, if anything, underlies the putative kinds in folk usage. But it does mean that folk discourse sets the limits of externalism, since it is that discourse that we'll end up eliminating, conserving or reconstructing.

Return now to OSC. If privileging folk meanings is warranted in this context, then theories of race must be consistent with the fact that racial terms have both biological and social intensions, assuming certain (common) armchair intuitions about folk racial discourse. Neither Appiah's nor Taylor's semantics squares well with this account of the best semantics of race.

²³See n. 7 above.

²⁴See my "On the new biology of race."

²⁵I defend the privileging of folk meanings with respect to racial discourse in my "On the methodology of the race debate: conceptual analysis and racial discourse" (unpublished manuscript). Appiah's methodology is also endorsed by Robert Bernasconi, "Who invented the concept of race?" *Race*, ed. Bernasconi (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2001), pp. 11–36 at p. 30, and Zack, *Philosophy of Science and Race*, pp. 2–3.

²⁶Putnam, "The meaning of 'meaning,'" p. 228.

²⁷Thanks to Jan Dowell for discussion here, and for suggesting the "shmace" example.

But this leaves social kinds racial realists in a worse spot than Appiah, for Appiah can make his semantics OSC-compliant without adversely affecting his ontology, while social kinds racial realists cannot do this. All that an anti-realist needs to be OSC-compliant is to hold that races are supposed to be pluralistic, bio-social kinds, and there are no such bio-social kinds because the biological part of such putative kinds is an illusion. This comports with the best semantics of race (or so I've argued), and thus satisfies OSC. By contrast, and in addition to Taylor's particular account, social kinds racial realists cannot, in principle, modify their view to say that races are supposed to be bio-social kinds. For that is a more robust ontology than they allow for: their claim is that races are *wholly* social kinds. Since this ontology does not comport with the best semantics of race, it does not satisfy OSC.

II. THE NORMATIVE DISPUTE, AND TWO NORMATIVE CONSTRAINTS

Since only anti-realism satisfies OSC in principle (given doubts about other kinds of racial realism), racial eliminativism might also seem to be the better normative position, especially if one accepts the normative premise in the eliminativist argument, (E1). If race is illusory, then racial terms ought to be eliminated from our discourse. But, of course, it's not so easy to get an *ought* from an *is*.

Instead, one might adopt an error theory that there are no races, but also that the costs of eliminating racial discourse are nevertheless outweighed by the benefits of retaining it. It is this that allows for the lower-left cell in Fig. 1. More generally, since the elimination/conservation dispute is a policy dispute over what we should do with racial discourse, it is worth considering the normative reasons for eliminating or conserving that discourse.²⁸ The body of existing literature on this normative question is to my mind conclusive that we have good reason to try to preserve at least an austere form of racial discourse, so here I want to merely establish a *prima facie* case for this conclusion by briefly surveying some of the considerations that support it.

The imperatives that require racial discourse can be sorted, roughly, into three groups: political, prudential, and moral imperatives. One such political imperative is equal opportunity. Often, of course, it is a contentious matter whether equal opportunity requires certain race-conscious policies, such as affirmative action for college admissions. Many equal opportunity policies requiring racial discourse, however, are less divisive. For instance, given that the so-called "Black Okies" of California's San Joaquin Valley have been systematically denied a proportional share of public resources dedicated to

²⁸Cf. Taylor, "Appiah's uncompleted argument," pp. 126–128. A kind of error theory that differs from reconstructionism holds that we should act as if races exist, even though they don't, and that we'll have to abandon racial discourse once we "get past" racism. Taylor, *Race*, pp. 93–5, calls this view "quasi-racialism."

poverty relief, it is plausible that we should earmark some resources for that population, such as a Head Start program for equal education.²⁹ And, since the disparity here is a disparity between races, we cannot fulfill such an obligation without using racial terms: we could not say that a Head Start program should be instituted in this black community if we can't talk about black communities.³⁰

Now consider some prudential reasons to sustain racial discourse. Here, *racial identities*, rather than *race*, become particularly salient. As others have pointed out, in many locations a person's identity often is constructed around and informed by her racial identity. One explanation for this is that maintaining a strong group identity is an important response to oppression that one faces simply by virtue of one's membership in that group. Some hold, for instance, that racial solidarity in the face of oppression can add necessary self-esteem as a result of seeing others overcoming obstacles, that the oppression itself justifies a feeling of connectedness and that it forms the basis for important political alliances.³¹ So if racial identities are a psychologically healthy response to racism, then it is prudentially valuable to maintain racial identities.³² Furthermore, many take racial membership to be itself an important part of their overall identities, so eliminativism would require a potentially damaging disintegration of that identity. Finally, one's own racial identity can provide resources for accurately predicting what one will experience (such as, to take the stock example, one's ability to successfully hail a taxi cab).³³ Now if the above arguments for racial anti-realism are sound, then racial identities will be based on certain false beliefs. But if for the moment we bracket this epistemic problem, it seems that other things being equal such identities are prudentially valuable.

²⁹See Mark Arax, "The black Okies," parts I and II, *Los Angeles Times*, Aug. 25 and 26, 2002.

³⁰Michael O. Hardimon points out that we need a concept of race to even make sense of, and be able to talk about, racism, "The ordinary concept of race," *Journal of Philosophy*, 100 (2003), 437–55 at pp. 454–5; cf. Taylor, *Race*, p. 126. (A version of eliminativism that I will call "substitutionism" can accomplish this, too; I address the comparative merits of substitutionism vis-à-vis reconstructionism below.)

³¹Anna Stubblefield, "Racial identity and non-essentialism about race," *Social Theory and Practice*, 21 (1995), 341–68 at p. 364; Michele M. Moody-Adams, "A commentary on *Color Conscious: The Political Morality of Race*," *Ethics*, 109 (1999), 408–23 at pp. 420–1; and Corlett, *Race, Racism, and Reparations*.

³²If the value of racial identities only lay in resisting the negative psychological impact of being oppressed, then presumably there would be no justification for white identity in societies that privilege whiteness. Perhaps this is a good thing; perhaps if there is no white identity, there can be no white supremacism. Marilyn Frye suggests something close to this when she holds that we ought to eliminate "whitely" ways of being, but not non-whitely ways of being, to help end racism; "White woman feminist 1983–1992," *Race and Racism*, ed. Bernard Boxill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 83–100. But Frye does not offer a reason to think that white supremacism would not simply be replaced by some sort of non-raced supremacism. Additionally, there seem to be some affirmative reasons to make room for white identity: white folks have a special responsibility in eradicating racism. Indeed, some see this as an acceptable basis for white identity (e.g., Taylor, *Race*, p. 115), and others articulate white identity in terms of both the recognition of, and awareness of white resistance to, white privilege; Alcoff, "What should white people do?" *Hypatia*, 13 (1998), 6–26.

³³For these last two considerations, see Taylor, *Race*, pp. 113–5; cf. 142.

Finally, consider some moral imperatives. Some of these should be evident by now, such as ensuring equal education to children, which at times might require repairing race-oriented disparities in resource allocation. Another important moral duty that is relevant here, however, is that we should treat people as they want to be treated, and this means that we should identify people as they want to be identified, other things being equal. Of course this cannot always be done: we should not identify a convicted perpetrator of corporate fraud as a law-abiding citizen simply because he claims to identify as a law-abiding citizen. However, when this can be done, i.e., when all other things are equal, we should identify people as they wish to be identified. To refuse to do so without some important overriding obligation, i.e., without other things being *unequal*, seems morally problematic. Now, as indicated by the pretend law-abider, one overriding factor might be when one's identity is based on a relevantly false belief. A similar obligation overrider might, then, be when racial identities are based on the belief that race is real, or biological. Again, I will return to this epistemic concern shortly.

Initially, though, it seems that there are several significant political, prudential, and moral imperatives that require racial discourse, which is a point in favor of conservationism. At the same time, however, this justification for using racial discourse has been qualified by an "other things being equal" clause. Many think racial discourse incurs serious costs, and so they would argue that other things are not equal. In the remainder of this section, I argue that four of five such costs do not in the end motivate eliminativism. The fifth—epistemic—cost will complicate things a bit.

First, some hold that all labels are objectionable, since "they do not necessarily accurately reflect the innate capabilities, interests, or potential of the person to whom the label is applied."³⁴ Second, Appiah worries that identities can "go imperial:" some identities—racial identities in particular—are "tyrannical" enough to generate "scripts" for proper ways of acting that dominate other identities. This is one main reason why he recommends eventually abandoning racial identities. A third potential cost of racial identities and racial groups is that they are unnecessarily divisive. Appiah, for instance, observes that the imperial tendencies of racial identities keep people from forming significant cross-racial relationships on the basis of racially irrelevant shared interests and identities, such as being film buffs or violinists.³⁵ And Blum suggests that "racial thinking implies a moral distance among those of different races" and imposes a "false commonality" on members of the same race.³⁶ Fourth, the retention of race may facilitate various racist beliefs, attitudes, etc.³⁷

³⁴Stubblefield, "Racial identity," p. 349.

³⁵Appiah, "Race, Culture, Identity," pp. 97–9, 103–4.

³⁶Blum, "I'm Not a Racist, But . . .", pp. 102–3.

³⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 103–5. Blum is very pessimistic (to a degree not common to most other eliminativists) about the proposition that we have left behind old, deeply racist conceptions of race in our racial

But, first, the potential to mislead is not a decisive reason to eliminate labels altogether. Rather, it is a reason to label only on the basis of good information, preferably including information from the subject of the label, and to be open to revising our labels as circumstances dictate. And, of course, we need to keep in mind that no label can adequately capture the full nature of any individual and that we should not overly constrain those who opt for identities in ways that don't perfectly fit standard norms.³⁸ Similarly, as Taylor notes, the possible threat of identity-imperialism underdetermines the elimination question.³⁹ Risk-taking is warranted when the threat is low enough and the potential benefit high enough. Accordingly, we must mitigate the threat of imperialism by guarding against racial identities dominating our individual complexities, but this threat does not necessitate abandoning racial identities altogether. Third, while social separation based on race might warrant extra effort to reach across the boundaries that concern Appiah, it does not entail that we should get rid of race or racial identities altogether. Instead, as Outlaw puts it, it only requires "the formulation of a cogent and viable concept of race that will be of service to the non-invidious conservation of racial and ethnic groups—a formulation, and the politics it facilitates, that also avoids the quagmire of chauvinism."⁴⁰ Finally, while of course racial discourse *might* be used for racist purposes, it need not be so. Below, I will articulate the view that we need to reconstruct racial discourse. For our purposes here, the main goal of this reconstruction will be to eliminate biological pretensions in that discourse, but it goes without saying that another important and related goal is to eliminate any remaining racist pretensions.

The main task in this section has been to examine whether normative considerations support eliminativism or conservationism. So far we have seen several significant imperatives that require racial discourse, and while we have seen four potential costs of racial discourse, these costs can be mitigated by anti-eliminativism. On balance, then, the benefits of racial discourse seem to outweigh its costs, as long as we use racial discourse in ways that do in fact mitigate those costs. Here the discourse we need has two other core requirements: it must allow for racial identities (to satisfy the moral and prudential imperatives) and it must allow for racial groups (to satisfy the political imperatives). I will call racial

thinking. As will be clear, I don't share the view that merely using racial discourse traps us in this way. In a similar vein, Appiah, "Race, culture, identity," p. 32, holds that "if we are to move beyond racism we shall have . . . to move beyond current racial identities." For a direct response to this claim, see Taylor, "Appiah's uncompleted argument," p. 127; cf. *Race*, pp. 125–7. For objections to the broad claim that using racial discourse is racist, see Henle Lauer, "Treating race as a social construction," *Journal of Value Inquiry*, 30 (1996), 445–451; Albert Mosley, "Are racial categories racist?" *Research in African Literatures*, 28 (1997), 101–11; Ruth Benedict, "Racism: The *ism* of the modern world," *Racism*, ed. Harris, pp. 31–49; and Hardimon, "The ordinary concept of race," pp. 454–5.

³⁸Cf. Taylor, *Race*, pp. 128–9.

³⁹Taylor, "Appiah's uncompleted argument," pp. 126–7.

⁴⁰Outlaw, "'Conserve' races?" p. 22. Moody-Adams makes similar claims in "A commentary on *Color Conscious*," pp. 420–1.

discourse that fulfills all three requirements *normatively necessary* racial discourse. This generates a **normative constraint** that expresses the strongest point in favor of conservationism:

NC1: There is a presumption in favor of retaining (normatively necessary) racial discourse to satisfy the political, prudential, and moral imperatives that it serves.

NC1 reflects what is so dissatisfying about eliminativism: it throws out morality, prudence, and justice with erroneous racial discourse. Now Appiah does acknowledge that even if race is an illusion, social use of those illusory racial concepts can still have a real impact on people whose lives are affected by racial discourse.⁴¹ In particular, we are left with the practice of using racial labels, which have both social and psychological effects that shape “‘identification’: the process through which an individual shapes her projects—including her plans for her own life and her conception of the good—by reference to available labels, available identities.”⁴² On this account, identities are formed by both ascription of the racial identity by others and identification with the racial identity by the subject.⁴³ So, since Appiah’s austere account of racial identity acknowledges that real racial labeling results from practices leaning on an illusory concept, we can have resultant racial identities even if we have no races.

Yet it is important to note that this is not enough to satisfy NC1. For, first, it cannot supply the tools to fulfill many of NC1’s imperatives, precisely because the imperatives are targeted at racial groups, such as programs that specifically focus on non-white youth, and Appiah denies the existence of those groups even if he countenances racial identities. Second, while Appiah does think that some good comes from racial identities, in the end these too must be done away with according to him, because of their imperialistic tendencies. Thus when we look at the race debate from a normative, rather than an onto-semantic, perspective, eliminativism seems weaker than conservationism.

However, I have postponed consideration of a fifth normative point for eliminating racial discourse: we simply should not encourage false beliefs, and if anti-realism is true, then racial discourse runs afoul of this rule, insofar as terms like “race” purport to somehow describe the world when they really do not describe anything. Thus, whatever political, prudential and moral imperatives racial discourse might serve, if race is an illusion, then racial discourse causes epistemic harm by encouraging false beliefs. (One might lump epistemic goods under prudential goods; I’m abstracting here simply to focus on the different merits of conservationism and eliminativism.) So conservationists must confront a **second normative constraint**:

NC2: There is a normative presumption against accounts of race that encourage false beliefs. Therefore, anti-eliminativism must show either that the benefits of

⁴¹Appiah, “Race, Culture, Identity,” pp. 74–82.

⁴²*ibid.*, p. 78.

⁴³*ibid.*, pp. 80–82.

racial discourse override the obligation not to encourage false beliefs, or, alternatively, that there is some way in which racial discourse does not encourage false beliefs.

On the one hand, then, using racial discourse seems justified by its role in making it possible to satisfy certain political, prudential and ethical imperatives (NC1). On the other hand, if race is an illusion, then there is also an epistemological presumption against using racial discourse (NC2). Social kinds racial realists, of course, attempt to negotiate this dilemma: they can advocate continued racial discourse in line with NC1, and claim that their view consistently satisfies NC2, since, on their theory, racial discourse does not encourage false beliefs. However, I've argued that social kinds racial realism is ontologically inadequate, which entails that it in fact fails to satisfy NC2. At the same time, though, NC2 seems to tether anti-realism to eliminativism, which in turn means giving up the benefits of racial discourse, in violation of NC1. This dilemma appears to be the most basic problem in the race debate: justice, well being and morality seem to require racial categories and identities, but how can we have racial categories and identities if there are no races? In the next section I articulate and defend the basic structure of a third way to think about race that can satisfy all three constraints.

III. RACIAL RECONSTRUCTIONISM

(E1) states that if race is illusory, then racial terms should be eliminated from public discourse. This premise seems to be granted by all sides in the race debate. However, (E1) only makes sense if we accept what I will call the **Conventional Methodological Orientation** (CMO) of the traditional race debate: Whether or not racial discourse should be eliminated depends on whether or not race is real, and whether or not race is real depends on whether racial terms purport to refer to natural or social kinds.

That is, CMO makes the semantic prior to the ontological, and the ontological prior to the normative, with respect to race. But, with respect to race, I believe that the asymmetrical nature of CMO can be successfully challenged. On this reorganization, the normative import of racial terms can determine whether or not we should make race a real kind of thing, which in turn will determine what the meanings of racial terms should be. To say that CMO should be challenged is not to say that it won't help to clarify meanings before trying to answer ontological or normative questions about race.⁴⁴ Rather, it is to say that those meanings themselves may need to be tweaked to come into equilibrium with the best answers to the ontological and/or normative questions (which answers themselves may need to be tweaked, of course).

⁴⁴As advocated by, e.g., Taylor, *Race*, pp. 12–14.

If this is right, then we can countenance the basic tenet of **racial reconstructionism**: *we can and should create a (normatively necessary) discourse that makes room for real racial identities and races, by reconstructing the meanings of racial terms to be semantically, ontologically, and normatively kosher.*⁴⁵

For racial reconstructionism to be defensible, we need adequate semantic, ontological and normative accounts of how this will work. The normative task of this view is satisfied by NC1: other things being equal, we should try to make room for a discourse that is consistent with the political, moral and prudential imperatives discussed above. Of course, NC2 shows us that other things are not obviously equal: racial discourse threatens to encourage false beliefs. But rather than either eliminating or endorsing a corrupt discourse, the rejection of CMO promises a third option: repair the discourse to make race real and therefore epistemologically kosher.

However, while the normative component of reconstructionism seems fairly straightforward, the ontological and semantic tasks are more complicated. If we continue with the supposition that social kinds are ontologically kosher, we should focus on what is unique to them. One distinctive property of social kinds is what we might call their “existential social malleability.” The existence of ballplayers, professors, Supreme Court Justices and citizens is socially contingent. Obviously, it would now take quite a bit of work to wean these identities out of existence, but it is in principle possible. More to the point, it was very possible to *create* these identities. Given the goods of knowledge, productivity, stability, recreation and so forth, we were able to justify creating new identities of being a professor or a Supreme Court Justice. This exposes the existential social malleability of social kinds: we can bring them into existence, and, sometimes perhaps, we can eliminate their existence, all through “mere” convention. Obviously, biological kinds do not offer the same kind of existential malleability.⁴⁶

So, *if* race can be made relevantly similar to judges, professors and ballplayers, then we can go ahead and “create” races. That is, while at present race is not real, we can in principle change that fact: since we can create social kinds, we can “create” races as real social kinds, through a three-stage process. First, we must supply a general justification for the social kinds we are concerned with here, races and racial identities. Again, this work is done in the argument for

⁴⁵Zack’s more recent view, in *Philosophy of Science and Race*, may be similar, for now she too holds that the “best option” (p. 7) is to revise racial discourse to eliminate its biological pretensions (cf. pp. 111–16). (This elimination is one of the key components of racial reconstructionism, as will become clear). However, she neither indicates that she now rejects CMO nor offers a reconstructive theoretical framework for this evaluation.

⁴⁶That is, they would have to be created through biological manipulation and eliminated via extermination. To say that these are different *kinds* of creation and elimination is not to say that eliminating or creating biological kinds is *harder* than eliminating or creating social kinds; in many cases, indeed, it seems that the reverse is true.

NC1: certain important imperatives can only be fulfilled by a discourse that allows for races and racial identities.

Second, we must find an adequate ontological and semantic framework under which race can be real, and we must “create” it within that framework. It is important to emphasize that this framework must be adequate. For example, a proposal to create biologically real races by forcibly isolating humans into distinct groups and then embarking on a state-run eugenics program would be morally inadequate. There are other kinds of inadequacy besides the moral kind, particularly ontological and semantic inadequacy. Since racial reconstructionism justifies the “creation” of real races by NC1, it should be morally adequate. In order to forestall the objections to social kinds racial realism made above, OSC must be satisfied. I will explain how this is done shortly; for now the sketch is simply that if it can be done, we will have an adequate ontological and semantic framework for the reality of race, which will in turn satisfy NC2.

The final stage is to account for the property or properties shared by members of each race. While in principle several such accounts are compatible with racial reconstructionism, one austere way to satisfy this requirement would be to simply say that a race will be composed of people with similar racial identities.⁴⁷ The group “black” will be composed of people with black racial identities, “white” of people with white racial identities, and so on. Just as we created the identity of “professor,” if we create coherent identities of “black person,” or “Latino/a,” or whatever racial identities we deem appropriate, then people with similar identities will form racial groups.⁴⁸ It is worth emphasizing here that such identities are complex psychological and social elements. As others have discussed in more detail than I will here, racial identities are “two-dimensional.” That is, in Appiah’s language that we saw above, our identities are formed by both the subject’s identification with the identity and ascription of the identity by others. In some contexts, one dimension alone may be sufficient for identity construction, such as with infants or immigrants who have not (yet) identified with any identity but who are nonetheless racially identified by other-ascription.⁴⁹ So saying that races will be composed of people with similar racial identities is not to suggest that both subject-based identification and other-

⁴⁷Additionally, we can borrow Taylor’s Duboisian point that we do not need *strict* criteria for identifying the morphological “badge” of race, which, recall, is something like a public identifier rather than an intrinsic property of demarcation. Rather, it is sufficient that folk usage contains a working method of identification, allowing for borderline and vague cases.

⁴⁸I am only sketching a general model for reconstructionism here. Details about which particular identities we want and what particular justifications we can offer for those identities would have to be provided to complete the picture. Some of these tasks are currently being tackled by those working on more concrete issues of identity.

⁴⁹I am grateful to Sally Haslanger for comments on this point and these examples. In addition to Appiah, this two-dimensionality is emphasized by Sundstrom (“Being,” p. 295). See also Blum, “*I’m Not a Racist, But . . .*,” pp. 148–149; Corlett, *Race, Racism and Reparations*, p. 130; Gooding-Williams, “Race, multiculturalism, and democracy,” p. 429; and Haslanger, “Social construction,” pp. 309–315.

directed ascription are always necessary for the identity to take root. One dimension may be sufficient.

Again, however, while the first and third stages of racial reconstruction seem straightforward, the second stage involved a promissory note to explain how racial reconstructionism satisfies OSC. OSC requires that, in the context of our aims here, theories of race must reflect the plural meanings of racial terms. To comply with this constraint, we can simply *start* by acknowledging the bio-social complexity of those terms. So, if we continue to grant that there are not even partially biological races, OSC commits us to saying that race is not real. Reconstructionism, then, begins with racial anti-realism.

A way to nevertheless satisfy NC2 and not encourage false beliefs, while satisfying NC1 and retaining racial discourse, is to acknowledge the flawed meanings of racial terms and simultaneously recognize a need to converge on meanings of racial terms that adequately speak to social life. In short, the suggestion is that while we presently do not do this, we should neither eliminate nor conserve, but instead reconstruct, racial discourse to treat races as groups thoroughly structured by social forces.

One might object here that it is impossible to change the meanings of racial terms.⁵⁰ But the reconstructed definitions are, by hypothesis, stipulated (as the ideal definitions). (The stipulated definitions are not arbitrary, since the reconstruction is motivated by our imperatives.) Because of this stipulative element, there is no conceptual problem in thinking that we can change the meanings of racial terms. Furthermore, semantic revision is not a practical impossibility with respect to race. As we have seen, race has been a volatile subject, repeatedly changing its meaning. One of the more obvious examples of this is that the once widespread belief in a natural or even metaphysical racial hierarchy is disappearing (even if some insidious remnants remain). This change is the result of, among other things, intellectual debate, social activism, racial conflict, a resultant improved science and so forth. This history indicates that it is not impossible to treat conceptions of race as open to change and improvement, rather than as having fixed designations for some object that is “out there.” Indeed, following Taylor’s analysis of the history of the meaning of “race,” it makes some sense to say that the socially-directed process of semantic revision has been going on for some time now.⁵¹

Reconstructionism can thus retain Taylor’s pragmatist intuition that “[r]ace-related oppression exists and we have a need to identify its mechanisms and resist

⁵⁰Zack (“Life After Race,” p. 307) suggests this, though I am unsure how it squares with her (then) eliminativism, given that eliminativism also requires fighting entrenched discourse.

⁵¹Taylor builds on the historical analysis of “Appiah’s uncompleted argument,” in *Race*, pp. 38–48 and 73–80. For other analyses concluding that race has evolved from a scientific concept to a social one, see Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States*, 2nd edn (New York: Routledge, 1994), pp. 63–5 and David Theo Goldberg, *Racist Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1993), pp. 61–74. Again, however, this evolution seems incomplete, and its completion is required by OSC for race to be considered a social kind.

it; that need may be better served by maintaining and using some of the institutions made available by modern racialism than by rejecting those institutions wholesale and searching for a new set of social theoretic, existential, and political tools.”⁵² Racial reconstruction does not require new tools; rather, it requires repairing existing tools so that they function properly. Accordingly, it does not ask us to create races out of thin air to replace the old ones. Indeed, while I’ve talked of “creating” races (with scare-quotes fully intact) the proposal is not to literally create races in the sense of creating new objects in the material world. Rather, reconstructionism is a project that requires honing our *conceptual* resources, to reconceive the categories into which people fall, so that those categories end up representing a (socially) real kind of thing. This proposal, then, does not seem to be a practical impossibility. It merely rejects the exclusivity of the conservation-or-elimination disjunction and asks us to improve our racial discourse.

Again, then, in contrast to social kinds racial realism’s contention that race is actually a social kind, the semantic facts seem to require the more austere position that racial discourse is laden with too much biological baggage to be composed of terms with thoroughly social connotations. As such, race (as we ordinarily talk about it) is not real. At the same time, however, because the shift from biological to social connotation must be completed for race to be real, because NC2 requires that racial discourse match the facts in order to prevent epistemic harm, and because NC1 suggests that we need racial discourse, reconstructionism urges us to pursue this shift in meaning. Thus, this third way is anti-conservationist in that it does not incorrectly presuppose that racial discourse is already wholly social, and it is anti-eliminativist in that the conclusion is not to eliminate racial discourse, but, rather, to make sense of it. If the semantic approach taken above—that for the purposes of the question “What should we do with popular racial discourse?” we should give folk usage semantic authority—is correct, then this will mean that actual social change is required by reconstructionism. That is, it is folk usage that will have to change.

A different sort of objection to reconstructionism would be that if racial discourse does change, we won’t be talking about race any more.⁵³ To be sure, we won’t be talking about race in exactly the same *way*; indeed, that’s the point of the revisionist view. But two points suggest that we will still be talking about race. First, as our conception of race has evolved from a deeply confused essentialist association of biological traits with moral, intellectual or cultural traits to a less essentialist and more socially nuanced view, we’ve still been talking about race this entire time. Our *conception* may have changed, but we’ve still had the same *concept*.⁵⁴ Second, this sustainability makes sense in light of the fact that our more recent views have certain resemblances to our older views,

⁵²Taylor, “Appiah’s uncompleted argument,” p. 111.

⁵³Thanks to Jan Dowell, David Sobel, and Steve Wall for discussion here.

⁵⁴See Hardimon, “The ordinary concept of race.”

such as extensional resemblance. If, then, the proposed reconstructions leave a concept of race that resembles the current view, such as by keeping roughly the same racial groupings, then it would be safe to say that we are still talking about race.

So, if discourse and practice sufficiently change to thoroughly treat race as a social kind, race can be considered real at that point.⁵⁵ In turn, this means that after racial terms gain wholly social connotations, the reconstructive project will be over, and races will be real social kinds. At *that* point, racial reconstructionism would cease to be an error theory and would merge with social kinds racial realism, and the lower-left cell in Figure 1 would fade to gray.

Perhaps it is worth emphasizing here that racial reconstructionism is not an anthropological, psychological, historical or sociological *description* of how racial discourse has been formed in the U. S., such as we find in Omi and Winant's theory of racial formation.⁵⁶ Nor is it the view that races have been socially constructed. While it shares certain affinities with some such views, racial reconstructionism is not a theory about how racial discourse has come about. Rather, it is a *normative* program for making a coherent conceptual architecture for the reality of race and racial identity, insofar as this reality is required for satisfying the imperatives that motivate NC1 without causing epistemic harm and violating NC2.

Both the similarities and the differences between reconstructionism and social construction descriptive theories of race are significant. The central similarity is that both emphasize the revizability and contingency of racial discourse. At the same time, however, social construction accounts of race do not get at the main point of reconstructionism. Its main point is not that racial discourse has been revised, nor that it can be revised in the future, nor even that it should be revised to rid it of any racist pretensions⁵⁷ and achieve a more just society,⁵⁸ though all of these points are important subsidiary steps in the reconstructionist project. Rather, the main point is that certain kinds of revision to racial discourse are required by NC2 if that discourse is to be available to us in an epistemologically legitimate way, and we need that discourse in order to satisfy NC1's political, prudential and moral imperatives. Note also that it is not claimed here that the reconstruction of racial discourse and race's attendant reality are themselves sufficient for satisfying those imperatives. For as Alcoff urges, we need not only

⁵⁵This answers Taylor's query to Appiah: "Why can't we just say that the processes of racial identification and ascription bring *races* [as distinct from racial identities] into being?" ("Appiah's uncompleted argument," p. 122). For Appiah, this is impossible because he sees "race" as an inextricably biological concept. Reconstructionism, by contrast, sees "race" as a concept that can be weaned off any biological pretensions. Thus it can countenance bringing races into being.

⁵⁶Racial formation is "the sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed." This theory is intended to explain how "the concept of race continues to play a fundamental role in restructuring and representing the social world" (*Racial Formation*, p. 55).

⁵⁷Mosley, "Are racial categories racist?" p. 108.

⁵⁸Alcoff, "Is Latina/o identity a racial identity?" pp. 39–40.

change our “word usage,” but also our “perceptual habits.”⁵⁹ However, for the purposes of engaging the elimination/conservation dispute, it is sufficient to observe that racial reconstruction is necessary for satisfying those imperatives.

Another potential objection to reconstructionism is that in rejecting CMO, we incorrectly put the normative cart before the onto-semantic horse. This complaint is based on a sensible view of language, reality and normativity. The usual way of thinking about the intersection of these areas is that terms mean what they mean and reality is what it is. Accordingly, political, prudential and ethical considerations must conform to language and reality, not the other way around. Racial reconstructionism might seem to violate this piece of commonsense by recommending ontological and semantic changes on the basis of normative considerations.

The commonsense ordering is intuitively plausible, and I won’t suggest here that the practical is primary to the descriptive or that normative considerations by themselves actually make things real. Instead, the claim is that normative considerations give us *reason* to make changes to our language and therefore our social world, in a manner that comports with independently fixed ontological and semantic constraints. For when it comes to social kinds, the normative is often the motivation for bringing social facts into existence, which is made possible by social kinds’ existential social malleability. Think, for instance, of relatively benign social kinds, such as those involved in basketball. The meanings of “ballplayer” and associated terms (e.g., “basketball,” “point,” “referee,” “foul,” etc.) are what they are precisely because they serve practical purposes. If a foul made for a worse rather than better game, we would either eliminate the word from basketball discourse—and thereby eliminate the thing we call a “foul”—or revise its meaning to improve the game. Or, we might even add some new contents to our conceptual suitcase (as was done with the concept of a three-point basket). Thus, making ontological and semantic changes to our social world based on normative considerations can be normatively, ontologically and semantically kosher. It does not put the cart before the horse.

Finally, it is worth comparing the merits of reconstructionism with those of a related but importantly different theory, a variant on eliminativism that we might call “substitutionism.” According to substitutionism, race is not real and therefore should be eliminated; but we should at the same time replace race-talk with some other, proximate discourse. For instance, the proposal to substitute ethnicity-talk for race-talk has received widespread attention. I’m sympathetic with many of the existing critiques of that kind of substitutionism, and I’ll not pursue that discussion here.⁶⁰ But another form of substitutionism is more

⁵⁹*ibid.*, p. 39; see also Alcoff, “The Phenomenology of Racial Embodiment.”

⁶⁰There are several such critiques. For just a few, see Taylor, *Race*, pp. 53–57; Blum, “*I’m Not a Racist, But . . .*” pp. 167–169; and Alcoff, “Is Latina/o identity a racial identity?” One ethnicity-oriented substitutionist is Corlett, *Race, Racism, and Reparations*. Blum’s critique is directed at Orlando Patterson, *The Ordeal of Integration: Progress and Resentment in America’s “Racial” Crisis* (Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 1997), pp. 72–7.

directly relevant to evaluating racial reconstructionism. According to Blum's substitutionism, we should eliminate race-talk, but, roughly, in order to satisfy the demands of NC1, we should keep talking about "racialized groups."⁶¹ So the question arises as to whether reconstructionism or Blum's substitutionism is a better way of satisfying the three constraints.

Racialization-oriented, in contrast to ethnicity-oriented, substitutionism can directly supply some of the conceptual resources for addressing specifically race-based issues that are also supplied by reconstructionism. For instance, rather than target a Head Start program at a black community, substitutionism would target it at a community that has been (erroneously) racialized as black.⁶² Nevertheless, reconstructionism has other advantages over substitutionism.

One comparative objection to reconstructionism is that race-talk is so wrapped up in old, problematic theories that we won't be able to strip it of its problems, in which case we should altogether substitute racialized group-talk for race-talk. I'm less pessimistic than Blum about the extent to which our race-talk has already shed some of these outdated problems. His view is that "[r]acialization does not, but race does, imply inherent characteristics, a virtually unbridgeable moral, experiential, and cognitive gulf among racial groups, and a hierarchy of worth."⁶³ This seems to me to neglect the dynamic history of race thinking in general and the ways in which it has been significantly (though not, of course, entirely) stripped of such "inherentism." Now since this is merely a stand-off between two sets of armchair-based intuitions about the connotations of ordinary racial discourse, it may be difficult to resolve which account better captures that discourse. So I can only ask the reader to consult her own intuitions as to whether or not conventional, mainstream race-talk seems substantially and ineliminably inherentist.⁶⁴

However those intuitions shake out, there may be other comparative advantages to reconstructionism. Alcoff suggests that if the point is to continue progressing down the anti-inherentist road, "it may be easier to help 'race' slowly evolve than to try to do away with it as a first step."⁶⁵ That is, while semantic reconstruction may be hard to execute, elimination followed by substitution is harder. Another problem with substitutionism concerns the prudential issue of identity integration. While reconstructionism allows overall identities to stay integrated by allowing the preservation of racial identities, Blum's substitutionism would require that those who care about being, say, black, have to stop thinking of themselves as members of a race and instead conceive of themselves as members of erroneously racialized groups. Thus,

⁶¹Blum, *I'm Not a Racist, But . . .* chs 8–9.

⁶²*ibid.*, pp. 165–6.

⁶³*ibid.*, p. 162; cf. ch. 5 and pp. 160, 169–71.

⁶⁴Another possibility might be to leave the armchair and gather empirical data about ordinary discourse, but the psychological literature has just begun to explore this sort of question and gather the data, and interpretation of existing data is still a matter of debate.

⁶⁵Alcoff, "Is Latina/o Identity a Racial Identity?" p. 41.

Blum's view seems to require a relatively greater disintegration of some people's identities, and unnecessarily so if reconstructionism is a viable alternative. Substitutionism also unnecessarily requires us to not treat some people as they wish to be treated by identifying them as they wish to be identified. Blum argues that we should not let these concerns worry us: "If there are no races, then any racial solidarity presuming them is without foundation."⁶⁶ But this presupposes, first, that race can't be made real and, second, that racial identity relies on racial solidarity, which need not be the case. Indeed, racial identity need not have a political agenda at all. For instance, on Outlaw's evaluation of the importance of racial identities, "the continued existence of discernable race- and ethnic-based communities of meaning is highly desirable *even if, in the very next instant, racism and perverted, invidious ethnocentrism in every form and manifestation would disappear forever.*"⁶⁷

IV. CONCLUSION

The race debate has been carried out as if the only two policy alternatives are to eliminate or conserve conventional racial discourse. The third way argued for here is that we should neither eliminate nor conserve, but instead revise that discourse. On the one hand, the political, prudential and moral imperatives considered above tell us not to give up on race, against the suggestion of the eliminativists. On the other hand, if we go the route of conservationism based on racial realism, we seem stuck with a bankrupt ontology of race. But since both of these traditional views assume the contestable Conventional Methodological Orientation, we can avoid grasping either horn of this dilemma. In short, racial reconstructionism is a way of splitting the difference to find a manageable model for retaining the plausible portions of both anti-realism and conservationism without being committed to their respective flaws.

⁶⁶Blum, "I'm Not a Racist, but . . .", p. 169.

⁶⁷Outlaw, *On Race and Philosophy*, p. 157, emphasis in original.