

Where in our discourse and how should we posit 'race'?

by Naomi Zack

English Abstract

Debating Race, Ethnicity, and Latino Identity: Jorge J. E. Gracia and His Critics, edited by Iván Jaksic is already a layered critical work about Gracia's comprehensive philosophical system of ethnicity, race, and nationality, evident in *Surviving Race, Ethnicity, and Nationality*, as critiqued in this work and then further explicated by Gracia. Gracia and his critics share substantive constructions of race as a starting point. My main critical contribution is to question their posits of 'race' as a *definiendum* referring to 'something' with a certain metaphysical reality, when much of the point of recent constructivist claims about biological race has been exactly whether 'race' has such reality.

Resumen en español

Debating Race, Ethnicity, and Latino Identity: Jorge J. E. Gracia and His Critics, editado por Iván Jaksic es ya un trabajo crítico concebido en múltiples capas sobre el comprehensivo sistema filosófico en torno a la etnicidad, la raza y la nacionalidad de Gracia, expuesto en el libro *Surviving Race, Ethnicity, and Nationality* tal y como es criticado en su trabajo y posteriormente explicado por el mismo Gracia. Gracia y sus críticos comparten importantes construcciones del concepto raza como punto de partida. Mi contribución crítica más importante es cuestionar sus postulados sobre "raza" como un *definiendum* que refiere a "algo" con cierta realidad metafísica, teniendo en cuenta que gran parte del argumento del constructivismo reciente sobre el concepto biológico de raza consiste exactamente en si la "raza" ostenta tal realidad o no.

Resumo em português

Debating Race, Ethnicity, and Latino Identity: Jorge J. E. Gracia and His Critics, editado por Iván Jaksic já é uma obra crítica em muitos níveis acerca do abrangente sistema filosófico de etnicidade, raça e nacionalidade de Gracia, evidente em *Surviving Race, Ethnicity, and Nationality*, tal como criticado nessa obra e posteriormente mais desenvolvido por Gracia. Gracia e seus críticos partilham substantivas interpretações de raça como ponto de partida. A minha principal contribuição crítica é questionar a maneira como postulam "raça" como um *definiendum* que refere a "algo" com certa realidade metafísica, quando grande parte das recentes alegações construtivistas acerca da raça biológica está exatamente em saber se "raça" tem esse tipo de realidade.

I wrote the following endorsement for this book:

This contemporary collection brings issues of Hispanic/Latino identity and philosophy into a well-deserved leading role in philosophy of race and ethnicity—it both disrupts the black/white binary and moves the whole discussion forward. The leading scholars who contribute chapters engage key ideas from Jorge J. E. Gracia's magisterial and comprehensive contributions to the field of race and ethnicity. They examine positions developed by Gracia on Hispanic/Latino identities and histories in terms of philosophy, race, ethnicity, and nationality. And they critique him on philosophy, metaphysics, society, identity, politics, and the descriptive-normative divide. Gracia's incisive responses succeed in refocusing and reanimating debate. Altogether, this work will be a classic for study and research on Hispanic/Latino identity as a vital part of the philosophy of race and ethnicity.

I continue to stand by this endorsement, but of course, now it is required to dig a little deeper in the way that we honor our colleagues by dissecting their most secure assumptions and cherished ideas. Such criticism is, I believe, in the spirit of the present anthology. *Debating Race, Ethnicity, and Latino Identity* has the general form of a festschrift and Iván Jaksic as editor expertly relates Professor Gracia's role and contributions as a founder of contemporary Latin American philosophy. However, as Jaksic also relates, the contributors are all critics who disagree about key issues amongst themselves and with Gracia. In Part I, "Race, Ethnicity, Nationality, and Philosophy," Lucius Outlaw, Linda Alcoff, Anthony Appiah, Lawrence Blum and then Jorge Gracia, grapple with metaphysical and epistemological problems of an unusually fascinating philosophical complexity. Their focus is on Gracia's 2005 monograph, *Surviving Race, Ethnicity, and Nationality: A Challenge for the Twenty-First Century*. Given reflection on my own earlier work in philosophy of science and race and a commitment to philosophy (whatever that may be) shared with Gracia, I cannot resist adding my two cents to this discussion, although my remarks here are confined to Part I. I will begin with exposition before developing what will be even further criticism of an author responding to his critics, who I understand will also have something to say to the critics on this panel, who, like me, are not simply critiquing a book but critiquing responses to his earlier criticism of the first order critics of another book. (That is, behind the book that is the subject for this panel, there stands another book. And both that book and the subject book are already full of criticism, before what we have to say here.)

Everyone, including Gracia, agrees that *Surviving Race, Ethnicity, and Nationality* develops the following theses: Race, ethnicity, and nationality are each distinct and coherent concepts necessary for understanding society, that philosophy has a privileged role for clarifying; race, ethnicity, and nationality are all relational properties and social constructions. Gracia's exact definitions proceed as follows:

Ethnicity: "the relational property of belonging that characterizes the members of an ethnos."

Ethnos: "a subgroup of individual humans who satisfy the following conditions: (1) they belong to many generations; (2) they are organized as a family and break down into extended families; and (3) they are united through historical relations that produce features that, in context, serve (i) to identify the members of the group and (ii) to distinguish them from members of other groups." [1]

Raciality or race: "the relation of belonging that characterizes members of a race."

A race: "a subgroup of individual human beings who satisfy the following two conditions: (1) each member of the group is linked by descent to another member of the group, who is in turn also linked by descent to at least some third member of the group; and (2) each member of the group has one or more physical features that are (i) genetically transmittable, (ii) generally associated with the group, and (iii) perspicuous." [2]

Nationality: "the relational property of belonging to a nation that characterizes its members."

A nation: "a subgroup of individual humans who satisfy the following conditions: they (1) reside in a territory, (2) are free and informed, and (3) have the common political will to live under a system of laws that (i) aims to ensure justice and the common good, regulating their organization, interrelations, and governance, and (ii) is not subordinated to any other system of laws within the territory in question." [3]

We might note that the relational aspects of ethnicity, race, and nationality belong to individuals in terms of somewhat substantial entities—ethne, nations, races.

Now for the critics: Both Lucius Outlaw and Linda Alcoff object to the grand, overriding role assigned to philosophy. They are skeptical of the ability of philosophy to perform this role and its efficacy even if it could. Alcoff suggests that Gracia's ideal of philosophy as "queen of the sciences" is antiquated; Outlaw notes that philosophy has flubbed many opportunities for clear conceptual analysis regarding race, so that he cautions Gracia, "Don't write checks with your mouth that your ass can't cash." (I looked up this expression. It goes back to at least Flip Wilson and means "Don't promise what you cannot deliver.") While Outlaw retains confidence in individuals to think clearly about race, he also asks why Gracia believes that human survival depends on clarity about these notions.

Alcoff is skeptical about the referents for Gracia's ideas of ethnicity, race, and nationality, because in reality, race and ethnicity are often difficult to distinguish and rarely encountered separately. She therefore suggests that it would be more accurate to develop a concept of *ethnorace* than insist on the theoretical distinction. Also, according to Alcoff, nationality is often difficult to distinguish from ethnicity and it is rarely voluntary

as Gracia claims, because most of us are born into it. Overall, Alcoff is skeptical about unchanging concepts for realities of constantly changing groups.

Appiah observes that ethnic groups, races, and families share varied requirements of descent. He notes that people may belong to more than one extended family and that family membership may be contingent depending on whether one is male or female in a matrilineal or patrilineal context. (Appiah notes that his mother's extended family was patrilineal and his father's matrilineal, so that neither one thought he was a member.) Appiah argues that we cannot make sense of ethnic groups without positing common ancestry. But introducing the idea of descent, to the idea of ethnicity, entails that races are subsets of ethnic groups, which Gracia denies. Overall, Appiah discloses a skepticism about descriptive metaphysics and concludes that Gracia's models of ethnicity and race are revisionary.

Blum, similarly to Alcoff, notes that there are racial aspects of ethnicity, as well as important differences within ethnic groups as Gracia defines them. Nationals who live in their nation of origin, compared to those who reside in other nations as ethno-national minorities, arguably have different ethnicities, but Gracia does not allow for that, e.g., Mexicans in Mexico compared to Mexican-Americans. Blum claims that Gracia's definition of race assumes that different races have symmetrical requirements. While this model may work for Latin American ideas about race, it fails to capture the asymmetry of the American one-drop rule, whereby a person with black ancestry who looks white is still considered black in U.S. culture, but would be designated white according to Gracia's definition.

Now for Gracia's response: Overall, I think that Gracia handily accommodates the objections of these critics with further explanation of his models and project. He demonstrates a modest, deflationary view of philosophy, while in my opinion correctly reserving for philosophers a rare ability to think about absolutely anything. Gracia describes his project as theoretical, sharing in the nature of all theories to explain what we know and extend that explanation to a different vision of some aspect of reality. In this way, Gracia agrees with Appiah that all metaphysics and indeed all theories, have a revisionary dimension. However, it is ironic that what remains unaddressed in this exchange is the tendency of mainstream philosophers to express skepticism about whether philosophical analyses of race and ethnicity really are philosophy.

Gracia insists that the generality of his definitions of ethnicity and race tell us how things "hang together" as Appiah suggests, but that they are not meant to apply to specific criteria for ethnic or racial distinctions as Alcoff and Blum seem to demand. While this is a correct response given the generality of his models, it may not be philosophically responsive to the concerns of those who are engaged in specifically liberatory discourses about ethnicity and race. That is, some scholars or philosophers of race address race generally, while others address blackness, Asianness, Latin Americanness (to the extent this is a race), and so forth. But, overall, returning to the revisionary nature of all theories, and this one, perhaps theories are not all descriptive

or normative but pluralistic in that regard. If this is correct, then Gracia could say that the specific concerns about race and ethnicity are usually strongly normative, while his concerns are more descriptive about what race and ethnicity really and truly are.

I did not see a reply to Alcoff's characterization of Gracia's model of nationality as idealistic but he could have said that insofar as nations are social constructions, he meant to capture an aspirational dimension of nationality that is rooted in the Enlightenment.

Now for my two cents: My main objection is, why begin with "race" in a way that assumes its reality? Kant correctly noted about the question of the existence of race, that we are always talking about races because if there were only one race it would be coincident with homo sapiens. Of course, Kant accepted the self-evidence of the existences of human races, referring to no less an authority than the esteemed David Hume, who had said that the existence of races was self-evident. Kant and Hume were talking about races as biological natural kinds, and it is their ideas (together with those of Hegel and others) that cognitively grounded the modern idea of race.[4] The human biological sciences have since rejected the existence of races as independently supported by biological human differences, and from this we know that the ideas about race developed by Hume and Kant and their heirs, are social constructions. So if we can grant that the biologists, and also population geneticists, are right about biology, then biological, as well as psychic, ideas about race are social constructions. But they are a special kind of social construction insofar as these ideas refer to something imaginary in physical terms. A biological taxonomy of human race is imaginary in the same way that varied gods are imaginary.

However, race in that sense has not been an idle fancy or a game to while away the time, but systems of beliefs about human differences that have worked as ideologies to justify oppression. The modern view of race began with the modern sciences of biology and anthropology. These sciences posited a now falsified taxonomy. To the extent that people continue to believe in the old biological foundation, their ideas about race are what medievalists would have called "false ideas." And insofar as Gracia begins with "race," I would say that he is accepting the validity of what George Berkeley criticized as an "abstract general idea," that is, an idea that has no referent in experience. But, the idea of "the social construction of race" does have reference to experience. Therefore, my first question to Professor Gracia is: "Why do you speak of race as a relation instead of the idea of a relation, or common beliefs in society about human relations?"

Power, exploitation, and violence were an integral part of the formation of social races, a formation that was parasitic on realities of human reproduction. For instance, now falsified ideas of racial essence, lingering on in the one-drop rule depend on biological genealogy. My second question is: "How is it possible to have a model of race that ignores oppression?" Gracia's theory of what race is presents races as mere human varieties. He might answer that the oppressive and unjust aspects of "race" are

not part of metaphysics in the way he pursues it here, but rather, subjects for social-political philosophy and ethics. However, the oppressive and unjust aspects of “race” may be *primarily* matters of social-political philosophy and ethics. Why make them a metaphysical subject? If they are a metaphysical subject because people believe in an ontology of human races, then at best, such belief that we know to be false in a biological sense is a subject of epistemology. Epistemology can address falsehood, whereas metaphysics is supposed to truly tell us about what exists. Gracia could respond that his neutral metaphysical models are meant to be revisionary of both social construction and normativity. This would suggest that the subtext of his proposals is that our ideas of race that are now socially constructed and oppressive *should be* metaphysical and neutral. And I would in turn ask: “Why do we need new metaphysical ideas about race? And, how is such neutrality going to be achieved?”

Past remarks similar to what I have just said have been sufficient to place me in the “eliminativist” camp on these issues. The term has the connotation of at worst advocating something like ethnic cleansing (this was Outlaw’s characterization of Appiah’s position at the Rutgers conference in 1994—which I will say more about, soon) or, at best, telling the social or intellectual world what it should think. I believe it would be delusional to expect that a philosopher could waive her wand and get rid of a false idea as widespread, pernicious, and ideologically useful to oppressors as race. But, and this is in keeping with Gracia’s reference to the intrinsic value of figuring things out, here is my third question: “If members of the U.S. ethnic and racial groups were relieved of oppression and the race -and ethnicity- related slander, prejudice, discrimination, and oppression committed against them, how would Gracia’s theory of race and ethnicity be informative or useful?”

I strongly agree with the impossibility of giving criteria for ethnic groups on the general level of Gracia’s model of ethnicity. But we should also remember that historically, the very idea of an ethnic group in the U.S. was invented by twentieth century sociologists in response to the great waves of non-English speaking European immigrants, at the turn of that century. After restrictions against immigration from South America and Asia were eased in 1965, there have been comparable waves from these parts of the world. The very designation of ethnic group has never been a matter of mere variety any more than race has: in the twentieth century the main issue was assimilation and in the twenty first century it has been undocumented immigration, with less enthusiasm about assimilation, on all sides. Earlier European immigrants did succeed to a large extent in assimilating, and becoming “white ethnics” in that process. But while the white ethnics benefit from a social hierarchy, in comparison with Latino or Hispanic, East Asian, or Middle Eastern ethnic groups, dominant Anglo groups continue to elude these distinctions by surpassing the hierarchical range. Their position was aptly expressed by an exchange between Matt Damon and Joe Pesci in “The Good Shepherd.” On the brink of deportation, by the CIA, Pesci’s character says, “We Italians have our families and our church; the Jews have their Tradition; and even the (N-Word)’s got their music. What have people like you got, boy?” Damon’s reply is, “The United States of America. And, you’re all just visiting.” Such seamless coincidence of

race, class, national origins, and national power raises the kinds of questions Alcoff raised with her suggestion of “ethnorace,” although here a more apt term might be “nationrace.”

To Conclude: All of this notwithstanding, I want to close by thanking Jorge Gracia for his extraordinary inclusiveness as a philosopher of race and ethnicity. In 2005 I participated in the conference he hosted at the University at Buffalo, “Black Ethnicity/ Latino Race,” which resulted in his 2007 anthology, *Race or Ethnicity?: On Black and Latino Identity*. The Buffalo conference was a reunion of many who had participated in the 1994 philosophy conference at Rutgers University, “Race: Its Meaning and Significance”. The Buffalo conference, present anthology, and this panel reflect Professor Gracia’s ongoing inclusivity. He writes and speaks about, as well as he supports, contemporary Latin American philosophy in relation to contemporary African American philosophy and both of these as integrated with the discipline of philosophy. And finally, most important, he succeeds in keeping afloat a discourse among participants who genuinely disagree. Thus, while, or because, I am one of those who does fundamentally disagree with him, philosophically, it is professionally elevating and inspiring to be able to do that.

Naomi Zack, PhD
Professor of Philosophy
Philosophy Department
239 Susan Campbell Hall
1451 Johnson Lane
1295 University of Oregon
Eugene, OR 97403
phone- Office-541-346-1547
nzack@uoregon.edu

Notes

[1] Jorge J. E. Gracia, *Surviving Race, Ethnicity, and Nationality: A Challenge for the Twenty-First Century*, Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005, p. 54.

[2] *Ibid.* p. 85.

[3] *Ibid.* p. 130.

[4] Naomi Zack, *Philosophy of Science and Race*, New York, NY: Routledge, 2002.