

In Defense of the Actual Metaphysics of Race

Abstract. In a recent paper, David Ludwig (2015, 244) argues that “the new metaphysics of race” is “based on a confusion of metaphysical and normative classificatory issues.” Ludwig defends his thesis by arguing that the new metaphysics of race is non-substantive according to three notions of non-substantive metaphysics from contemporary metametaphysics. However, I show that Ludwig’s argument is an irrelevant critique of actual metaphysics of race. One interesting result is that actual metaphysics of race is more akin to the metaphysics done in philosophy of science than mainstream analytic metaphysics.

1. Introduction

In David Ludwig’s (2015, 44) recent article “Against the New Metaphysics of Race,” he argues for the provocative thesis that “the new metaphysics of race” is “based on a confusion of metaphysical and normative classificatory issues.” Furthermore, to continue to engage in such a “methodologically dubious metaphysics of race” is, in Ludwig’s (2015, 262) opinion, “a bad idea.” Key to Ludwig’s critique is that he defines “metaphysicians of race” as “committed to the ideal of one fundamental ontology of race,” much like other metaphysicians engaged in mainstream analytic metaphysics (Ludwig 2015, 245). Furthermore, for Ludwig, “the new metaphysics of race” consists of disputes about “one fundamental ontology of race” (Ludwig 2015, 245). In his critique, Ludwig focuses on two debates in the new metaphysics of race.

The first is the debate about whether races exist according to the one fundamental meaning of ‘race’ in current, ordinary English in the United States (Ludwig 2015, 257). I’ll call this *the US race debate**.¹ According to Ludwig (2015, 251, 253, 256, 260), some interlocutors

¹ The asterisk is intentional. I’m calling this debate ‘the US race debate*’ because I think Ludwig has changed the focus of the relevant debate. I borrow the convention of using an asterisk to flag when the meaning of a term has been changed from Joshua Glasgow (2009, 140).

in the US race debate* are Anthony Appiah, Joshua Glasgow, Michael Hardimon, Sally Haslanger, Quayshawn Spencer, and Naomi Zack.

The second debate in the new metaphysics of race is about whether humans have races according to the one fundamental meaning of ‘race’ in the life sciences (Ludwig 2015, 254). I will call this *the biological race debate**. Ludwig (2015, 251, 253, 259) claims that, among others, the interlocutors of the biological race debate* are Robin Andreasen, Bernard Boxill, A.W.F. Edwards, Adam Hochman, Jonathan Kaplan, Koffi Maglo, Armand Leroi, Massimo Pigliucci, Neven Sesardic, and Alan Templeton.

Ludwig defends his thesis using an argument premised on the claim that the new metaphysics of race is non-substantive according to three notions of non-substantive metaphysics from contemporary metametaphysics: one from Eli Hirsch, one inspired from Theodore Sider, and one from Ludwig himself. The relevant background here is that recent metametaphysics has been preoccupied with what constitutes a “substantive” metaphysical dispute, which, roughly, is a dispute that is *really* about metaphysics as opposed to some other topic, like how we use language (Hirsch 2005, 67).

While I agree with Ludwig that to engage in a metaphysics of race that confuses metaphysical and normative classificatory issues is a bad idea, and while I think that the new metaphysics of race (as Ludwig defines it) might be based on such a confusion, I will show that the work that *actual* metaphysicians of race are doing involves no such confusion. In other words, the point of this paper is show that Ludwig’s argument is an irrelevant critique of the actual metaphysics of race.

For clarity, by ‘actual metaphysicians of race’, I’m talking about the same group of scholars that Ludwig is talking about in his critique, and by ‘actual metaphysics of race’ I’m

talking about the same body of work that Ludwig is talking about in his critique.² However, unlike Ludwig (2015, 245), I will not require actual metaphysicians of race or actual metaphysics of race to be “committed to the ideal of one fundamental ontology of race,” even with respect to a particular linguistic context.

I will begin by clarifying Ludwig’s argument and his defense of each premise. Second, I will show that even if Ludwig’s argument is a good critique of the new metaphysics of race, it’s irrelevant to the actual metaphysics of race. Finally, I will provide closing remarks where, among other things, I will clarify how the actual metaphysics of race is more akin to the metaphysics done in the philosophy of science than mainstream analytic metaphysics. As for objections, I will respond to them along the way.

2. Ludwig’s Argument and Its Defense

2.1 The Basic Argument

Though Ludwig does not state his argument explicitly, a charitable reconstruction of it is below:

- (1) If the new metaphysics of race is non-substantive, then it is based on a confusion of metaphysical and normative classificatory issues.
- (2) The new metaphysics of race is non-substantive.
- (3) So, the new metaphysics of race is based on a confusion of metaphysical and normative classificatory issues.

² For instance, like Ludwig (2015, 244), I consider Joshua Glasgow to be an actual metaphysician of race, and, like Ludwig (2015, 263), I consider Glasgow’s actual metaphysics of race to consist of work like his book *A Theory of Race* and his article “On the New Biology of Race.”

Ludwig states (3) as his thesis in the first paragraph of his opening remarks.³ Ludwig states (2) in his opening remarks as well and at several points throughout his paper.⁴ Ludwig also treats (2) as a reason for adopting (3).⁵ However, since there is a logical gap between (2) and (3), it's charitable to add (1) as a suppressed premise.⁶

2.2 Ludwig's Defense of His Premises

Though Ludwig takes the truth of (1) for granted, he offers three, in-depth defenses of (2) that utilize three different notions of non-substantive metaphysics. Ludwig's first defense of (2) is the following:

- (4) The new metaphysics of race is substantive only if there is exactly one allowable and fundamental ontology of race for each of its race debates.
- (5) If there is a plurality of legitimate biological subdivisions below the species level or a plurality of equally allowable specifications of 'race' for each race debate in the new metaphysics of race, then there is a plurality of allowable ontologies of race for each race debate in the new metaphysics of race.
- (6) The antecedent of (5) is true.
- (7) So, it's not the case that the new metaphysics of race is substantive.

Ludwig claims (4) in section 3.1 and justifies his constraint on substantive metaphysics from how he defines 'a metaphysics of x .' For Ludwig (2015, 245, 251), a project on the

³ See Ludwig (2015, 244).

⁴ See Ludwig (2015, 245, 260-262).

⁵ See, especially, sections 3.1-3.3 and 4 in Ludwig (2015).

⁶ [removed for blind review]

“metaphysics of x ” assumes that metaphysicians of x are committed to “one fundamental ontology” of x that rules out “a plurality of equally allowable ontologies” of x , at least for the relevant linguistic context.⁷ Since a substantive metaphysics of x must at least be a metaphysics of x , it follows that a substantive metaphysics of x requires exactly one allowable and fundamental ontology of x . Substituting ‘race’ for ‘ x ’ gives us (4).

As for (5), Ludwig states that the first disjunct of (5)’s antecedent leads to (5)’s consequent in section 2. Here Ludwig (2015, 247) follows Kaplan and Winther (2013) in arguing that if there is a plurality of equally legitimate but distinct ways of subdividing species into “legitimate biological kinds,” then “[e]mpirical evidence underdetermines the ontological status of race,” which in turn, permits a plurality of allowable ontologies of race (Ludwig 2015, 246-247). In particular, Ludwig (2015, 245, 247-249) argues that “both racial realism and antirealism” are allowable ontologies of race given different equally legitimate ways of subdividing a species, and even in the same race debate. An example is how Zack (2002) uses the fact that humans have no subspecies to defend racial anti-realism in the US race debate*, while Spencer (2014) uses the fact that humans have a population subdivision that matches the current US census racial scheme to defend racial realism in the same race debate.

Ludwig states that the second disjunct of (5)’s antecedent leads to (5)’s consequent in section 3.1. In his words, “If there is a plurality of equally allowable specifications of ‘race’, there is also a plurality of equally allowable ontologies of race” (Ludwig 2015, 251). Interestingly, Ludwig never defends this assertion because he takes it to be obviously true.

⁷ See Ludwig (2015, 251) for (4) and see Ludwig (2015, 245) for Ludwig’s view on the metaphysics of x .

Next, Ludwig defends (6) by defending the truth of each disjunct in the antecedent of (5). As for the first disjunct, Ludwig (2015, 246-247) argues that there is a plurality of legitimate biological divisions below the species level (e.g. population subdivisions, monophyletic levels, subspecies, etc.) because, first, legitimate biological kinds are *interest dependent*, and, second, there is a plurality of “explanatory interests” among biologists in different research contexts (e.g. population genetics, phylogenetic systematics, etc.). As for the second disjunct, Ludwig reaches it by making an induction from what’s going on in the two most popular race debates in the new metaphysics of race: which are the US race debate* and the biological race debate*.

Ludwig (2015, 254) argues that there is a plurality of equally allowable specifications of ‘race’ in the biological race debate* since biologists in different research programs use ‘race’ in different ways that suit their needs. For instance, Ludwig (2015, 254) points out that ‘race’ is often used as a synonym for ‘subspecies’ in systematic biology, but often used as a synonym for ‘ecotype’ in ecology. As for the US race debate*, Ludwig takes a more circuitous route to the conclusion that there is a plurality of equally allowable specifications of ‘race’ in that debate. First, Ludwig (2015, 255) appeals to Glasgow et al.’s (2009) empirical research on how Americans use ‘race’ to argue that ‘race’ is “polysemous” in the current US. Next, Ludwig (2015, 257-258) argues that the *context* for the US race debate* has not been “sufficiently specified” to narrow the debate to “exactly one fundamental candidate meaning of ‘race’ in the United States.” Hence, according to Ludwig, from induction, the second disjunct of (6) holds as well.

Ludwig’s second defense of (2) utilizes Hirsch’s notion of non-substantive metaphysics. The second defense is below:

- (8) A dispute is merely verbal if each side can plausibly interpret the other

side as speaking a language in which the latter's asserted sentences are true.

(9) A dispute is non-substantive if it is merely verbal.

(10) Each side can plausibly interpret the other side as speaking a language in which the latter's asserted sentences are true in the new metaphysics of race.

(11) Thus, the new metaphysics of race is non-substantive.

(8) is a direct quote from Ludwig (2015, 259), which is itself a summary of Hirsch's (2005; 2008) view on non-substantive metaphysics.

Hirsch defends his distinction between merely verbal disputes and ones that aren't with several examples from the history of science and philosophy. For instance, Hirsch (2005, 73) shows that the dispute among classical physicists about whether a projectile's final velocity is equal to its initial velocity on Earth was not a merely verbal dispute because physicists on both sides could not charitably interpret the other side's assertions as true. In other words, both sides were using the same meanings of 'projectile', 'velocity', 'Earth', etc., and what they disagreed about were the laws of motion. In contrast, Hirsch (2008, 407-408) shows that the dispute between John Locke and Joseph Butler about whether a tree can survive a change in its parts was merely verbal since either side could charitably interpret the other side's assertions as true using the other's meaning of 'identity'. In short, a merely verbal dispute for Hirsch is one where the disputants are either talking past one another or merely arguing about how we do (or should) use language.

As for (9), we can infer that it's a premise from how Ludwig (2015, 259-260) uses 'merely verbal' and 'nonsubstantive' at this point in his paper. Furthermore, Ludwig's

vocabulary here is uncontroversial since it's the same vocabulary that Hirsch (2005, 67) uses.

As for (10), Ludwig endorses it when he says the following:

Realists like Andreasen, Edwards, Leroi, Sesardic, and Spencer can interpret antirealists as speaking the truth in a language in which 'race' refers to subspecies, populations with visible traits that mark relevant biological differences, populations with cognitive differences, and so on. Antirealists like Glasgow, Lewontin, Hochman, Maglo, and Zack can interpret realists as speaking the truth in a language in which 'race' refers to genetic clusters, patterns of mating, clades, and so on (Ludwig 2015, 259-260).

Finally, Ludwig defends (2) in a third way using his interpretation of Sider's notion of non-substantive metaphysics. Ludwig's third defense of (2) is below:

- (12) A dispute about an expression *E* is non-substantive if its disputants are endorsing multiple, equally joint-carving candidate meanings for *E*.
- (13) The new metaphysics of race is a dispute that is non-substantive according to (12).
- (14) The new metaphysics of race is non-substantive.

(12) is directly from Ludwig (2015, 261), and is a rough summary of Sider's (2011, 46-49) view of non-substantive metaphysics. Sider defends the non-joint-carving condition in his definition of 'non-substantivity' from his stipulation of what metaphysics is about.

For Sider (2011, vii) the "central task" of metaphysics is "to discern the ultimate or fundamental reality underlying the appearances." We are supposed to describe this reality using a privileged language, so-called Ontologese, which is privileged exactly because all of its expressions (e.g. terms, quantifiers, etc.) are "joint-carving," which means that they carve out the

world's fundamental structure (Sider 2011, vii).⁸ So, naturally, when we find that one or more of the expressions that we've used to formulate a question Q does not have exactly one, best joint-carving meaning, it's likely that a debate about Q is not about the fundamental structure of the world, and thus, is not a substantive metaphysical debate in Sider's sense.

With that said, it's important to note that Ludwig's summary of Sider is rough, and does not reflect Sider's (2011, 49) "revised" definition of a non-substantive dispute. What Ludwig presents is Sider's unrefined view, which occurs at the beginning of section 4.2 in chapter 4 of Sider's *Writing the Book of the World*. However, later on in section 4.2, after Sider considers multiple problems with his unrefined view, he settles on what he calls his "revised" definition.⁹ Nevertheless, since Ludwig uses Sider's unrefined notion of non-substantivity in his critique, that's what I'll focus on as well. However, for clarity, I'll say that (12) expresses *Sider-style non-substantivity* as opposed to Siderian non-substantivity.

In any case, Ludwig (2015, 261) asserts and defends (13) when he says that Spencer's, Leroi's, Pigliucci's, and Hochman's biological definitions of 'race' are all "equally joint-carving candidates" for 'race' because they are all "objective ways of distinguishing between populations below the species level." Furthermore, Ludwig (2015, 261-262) bolsters his support for (13) when he says that Hardimon's, Glasgow's, Feldman and Lewontin's, and Appiah's biological definitions of 'race' are also equally joint-carving candidates for 'race' because they are all "non-joint-carving" meanings.

3. Why Ludwig's Argument is an Irrelevant Critique of Actual Metaphysics of Race

⁸ For Sider's clarification of "Ontologese," see Sider (2011, 171-173).

⁹ For Sider's "revised" definition, see Sider (2011, 49).

Even though Ludwig has provided a valid argument that may be sound as well, it turns out that Ludwig's critique does nothing to undermine the actual metaphysics of race. The latter is partially because Ludwig's critique is not *about* the actual metaphysics of race, it's about a hypothetical metaphysics that he calls 'the new metaphysics of race'.

Remember that the new metaphysics of race is, according to Ludwig (2015, 245), and by definition, constituted by disputes about "one fundamental ontology of race." Furthermore, remember that Ludwig claims that people like Glasgow, Haslanger, Appiah, and Spencer are engaged in one such dispute, the US race debate*, and people like Andreasen, Pigliucci, Kaplan, and Templeton are engaged in another such dispute, the biological race debate*. However, these last two claims are simply false.

For one, the term 'fundamental ontology' is not even a phrase used in actual metaphysics of race. For instance, it does not appear *once* among the actual metaphysics of race that Ludwig (2015, 263-265) cites, and he cites 40 such publications. Second, some actual metaphysicians of race embrace a pluralist ontology for the nature of race in the relevant context. For example, at the beginning of Spencer's (2014, 1026) article on the "national" meaning of 'race' in the US, he concedes that ordinary Americans are using multiple "geographic" and "ethnic" meanings of 'race'. In fact, Spencer (2014, 1026) explicitly says, "Hence, I acknowledge upfront that there are several ways that Americans use 'race'."

However, Ludwig could object here. Specifically, Ludwig (2015, 257) interprets Spencer's focus on the national meaning of 'race' in the US as an endorsement of it being "the only relevant candidate meaning for philosophical debates about the referent of 'race' in the United States." While the latter is a possible interpretation of Spencer's project, it's not the most charitable one given how he presents his project at the beginning of his article. Spencer (2014,

1025) begins by saying upfront that his project is merely “to debunk” the idea that “folk racial classification has no biological basis.” Spencer attempts to accomplish that goal by showing that ‘race’, in its national meaning in the current US, is a directly referring term for a biological entity—a set of particular human populations—that presently happens to be biologically real in virtue of being a level of human population structure. Thus, given how Spencer (2014, 1026) presents his own project, his race theory is compatible with there being a pluralist nature of race in the current US context. Furthermore, this interpretation best explains why Spencer (2014, 1026) says that “there are several ways that Americans use ‘race’.”

There are other actual metaphysicians of race who embrace pluralism about the nature of race as well. For instance, Pigliucci and Kaplan (2003, 1162-1163) are happy to grant that both the ecotype and the subspecies are equally legitimate ways of dividing a species into biological races. It’s just that they believe that humans have ecotypes, but not subspecies. In fact, Pigliucci and Kaplan (2003, 1163) explicitly say, “Races, then, can be defined and picked out in a number of ways.”

Finally, there are plenty of actual metaphysicians of race who do not embrace pluralism about the nature of race, but who do entertain pluralism as a metaphysical possibility, which is enough to show that they do not presuppose that there is a single fundamental ontology of race in the relevant context. For instance, after obtaining messy results about how ordinary Americans use ‘race’ and race terms in a widely distributed survey, Glasgow (2009, 75) entertains the possibility that ordinary Americans are sometimes “talking past each other” when they use ‘race’, much like we sometimes do when we use ‘jade’. In fact, Glasgow (2009, 75) explicitly says, “So maybe ‘race’ is used in some contexts to refer to a social kind of thing and in other contexts to a biological kind of thing.” That doesn’t sound like somebody who presupposes that

there is a single fundamental ontology of race in the US context. Now, even though Ludwig's argument is not about actual metaphysics of race, it could still be a relevant critique of actual metaphysics of race. So to that I now turn.

In order to know whether Ludwig's argument succeeds in critiquing the actual metaphysics of race, we need to know more about the debates among actual metaphysicians of race. Clearly, the US race debate* and the biological race debate* are not debates among actual metaphysicians of race. However, the US race debate and the biological race debate are. *The US race debate* is the debate about the nature and reality of race according to what 'race' means in the ordinary discourse of contemporary Americans, but only when 'race' is used to classify humans. The latter debate actually exists because all of the individuals that Ludwig places in the US race debate* have expressed an interest in the focus I've just articulated.¹⁰ *The biological race debate* is the debate about whether humans have any races in a nontrivial biological sense of 'race'. The latter debate actually exists as well.¹¹ These are the two race debates that Ludwig was attempting to critique, and given these distinctions, we can see that Ludwig's argument really isn't relevant to these two debates.

For one, neither the US race debate nor the biological race debate satisfies Hirsch's criterion for a non-substantive dispute. The US race debate is not a merely verbal dispute because racial realists in that debate, such as Haslanger and Spencer, cannot plausibly interpret racial anti-realists in that debate, such as Appiah and Glasgow, as speaking a language in which

¹⁰ For evidence, see Appiah (1996, 42), Glasgow (2009, 15), Haslanger (2012, 133), and Spencer (2014, 1025).

¹¹ For evidence, see Andreasen (1998, 200-201, 205), Pigliucci and Kaplan (2003, 1161-1164), Maglo (2011, 362-363), and Templeton (2013, 262-263).

anti-realist race theories are true, and vice versa. For instance, if Glasgow (2009, 33) is correct about (H1*) being part of the non-negotiable semantic content of ‘race’ in the ordinary discourse of Americans, then Spencer (2014, 1026) is incorrect about ‘race’ directly referring to a set of human populations in the national racial discourse of Americans, and vice versa.¹² The biological race debate is not a merely verbal dispute either. For instance, if Pigliucci and Kaplan (2003, 1165) are correct that humans subdivide into “biologically significant” ecotypes, then Hochman (2013, 347) is incorrect that humans do not subdivide into “meaningful biological units,” and vice versa.

Next, even if the US race debate or the biological race debate is non-substantive in a Ludwigian or Sider-style sense, that fact does not imply a “confusion about metaphysical and normative classificatory issues” as (1) claims. This is because actual metaphysicians of race are adopting a different view of *substantive* metaphysics—namely, one that does not require metaphysical disputes about race to presuppose a single fundamental ontology of race or anything about joint-carving. Thus, while Ludwig’s argument is relevant to the hypothetical new metaphysics of race, it doesn’t make contact with actual metaphysics of race.

Interestingly, when Ludwig defines ‘the new metaphysics of race’, he anticipates the worry that his focus on it may mischaracterize actual metaphysics of race. In response, Ludwig (2015, 245) says, “However, I do not want to engage in a verbal dispute about the meaning of “metaphysics of race”... this article only challenges a certain type of metaphysics of race while proposing an alternative deflationist and normative metaphysics of race.” However, this reply is

¹² (H1*) is the claim that a race is, at least, a group of human beings that is distinguished from other groups of human beings by visible physical features, of the relevant kind, that the group has to some significantly disproportionate extent (Glasgow 2009, 33).

perplexing because if the new metaphysics of race is a purely hypothetical metaphysics that does not describe the disputes in actual metaphysics of race (as I've shown), and, in addition, if the disputes in actual metaphysics of race already do away with monist and fundamentalist assumptions about race (as I've shown), it's hard to imagine what the purpose is for lodging Ludwig's critique in the first place. In any case, we can rest assured that actual metaphysicians of race are immune to Ludwig's critique because they've already been vaccinated against monist and fundamentalist assumptions about race.

5. Closing Remarks

In this paper, I've shown that Ludwig's critique of the new metaphysics of race is irrelevant to the actual metaphysics of race. However, I've said little about the conditions of substantivity that actual metaphysicians of race adopt. In addition to the bare minimum of "not talking past one another" (Glasgow 2009, 28), actual metaphysicians of race embrace disputes about how certain linguistic communities actually use 'race' (e.g. Pigliucci and Kaplan 2003, 1162-1163; Glasgow 2009, 6), and embrace disputes about how certain linguistic communities should use 'race' (e.g. Haslanger 2012, 221-247; Hochman 2014, 80). However, actual metaphysicians of race do not embrace disputes that have unimportant social and scientific consequences. For instance, Haslanger (2012, 300) motivates the US race debate by pointing out that engaging in it will help us frame and evaluate social policies and appropriately address stubborn inequalities in health. Also, Pigliucci and Kaplan (2003, 1170) point out that engaging in the biological race debate can help biologists debunk hereditarian hypotheses about race and intelligence, yield insights into human evolutionary history, and yield insights into human migration history.

Interestingly, the criteria for substantive metaphysics that actual metaphysicians of race adopt make the metaphysical disputes in the actual metaphysics of race more akin to metaphysical disputes in the philosophy of science (e.g. the species debate, the nature of natural kinds, the ontic structural realism debate, etc.) than those in mainstream analytic metaphysics (e.g. debates about the nature of fundamentality, grounding, modality, substantivity, etc.). For instance, Matthew Slater's (2015) stable property cluster theory of natural kinds has a real shot at explaining why some kinds support epistemically reliable inductions in a domain while others don't, which could help systematic biologists achieve more agreement about how they should classify organisms into species and higher taxa. So, much like disputes in the actual metaphysics of race, there are practical payoffs to science or society for engaging in metaphysical disputes in the philosophy of science. However, mainstream analytic metaphysics does not guarantee a payoff for science or society. For instance, what exactly is the payoff for science or society in debating about "the" nature of substantive metaphysics?

Perhaps Sider (2011, 47) sums up my point best when he says, "... this concept is not intended to apply to everything that might justly be called "nonsubstantive". For example, it isn't meant to apply to equivocations between distinct lexical meanings (as in a dispute over whether geese live by "the bank", in which one disputant means river bank and the other means financial bank)... Nor is it meant to capture the shallowness of inquiry into whether the number of electrons in the entire universe is even or odd (an inquiry that is substantive in my sense, but pointless)."

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