

24.00: Problems of Philosophy
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Rational Belief, Ideology and Racisms

A man and his son are driving in a car. They get stuck on a railway crossing and get hit by a train. The man is killed outright, the son is taken seriously hurt to hospital and into the operating theatre. The doctor walks into the operating theatre, takes one look at the patient, and says: "I can't operate on him! He's my son!"

How can this be?

I. Worries about Pragmatism: Ideology and Systematic Distortion

What is ideology?

"practical consciousness": usually inarticulate beliefs, ideas, values, plus common practices, rituals, etc. These "beliefs" or "associations" may include stereotypes in Blum's sense.

"explicit ideology": an articulation of a group's practical consciousness, in e.g., philosophy, religion, morals, common sense.

Example: Religion. It is "an *expression* of real suffering and a *protest* against real suffering." It is also "the *opium* of the people". (in selection from Marx)

Questions:

1. Is explicit ideology inevitably "distorted"? Is there always an "imposed" ideology? Is such imposition "intentional"?
2. Is it possible for individuals to "see through" the distortions of their group's ideology?
3. What determines the shape and content of a group's ideology? How do we change existing ideologies?
4. Is science ideological, or is it a route to undistorted understanding?

Contrast two critiques of religion: *evidential critique* and *critique of suspicion*. The critique of suspicion asks: what are the motives that lead to religious belief? And what function does it serve, i.e., what does it do for the individual or the community who subscribes to it?

Philosophers of suspicion, e.g., Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, suspect that religious beliefs are sustained, not because there is good evidence for them, but because they satisfy some desires or serve some interests; moreover, we should question these desires and interests. Whose interests are really being served? Should we cater to the desires in question?

Note also that what we believe has an effect on those around us. Studies suggest that if a math teacher believes that the girls in his class cannot do math as well as the boys, this seems have the effect that the girls do worse; people tend to fulfill the expectations that others have of them. Blum also raised the issue of *stereotype threat*: where cultural stereotypes of a group exist, members of the group tend to perform worse than they would otherwise because they are distracted by the fear of fulfilling the stereotype. So Clifford may not be so far wrong in suggesting that unjustified belief can be harmful, even if only indirectly.

More generally we must be attentive to the fact that self-confirming beliefs can lead to things that are desirable (e.g., love), but also ones that are undesirable (e.g., failure, subordination). How do we evaluate when James' pragmatist principle should guide us, and when not? Consider some examples of James's "special class" of propositions:

Theism: God exists.

Love: [So and so] cares about me. (God loves me.)

Morality: It is morally right/good to give generously to the poor.

But what about the following:

Intrinsic racism: People of racial group X are inherently morally inferior.

Extrinsic racism: People of racial group X tend to have the property P, and P is a morally objectionable property (e.g., dishonesty, laziness), or warrants subordinating treatment (e.g., stupidity, irrationality).

Intrinsic/extrinsic sexism: (same as above, substituting sexes for races)

(Meritocratic) Classism: People earn what they deserve: those who make more money work harder/contribute more than others.

Ethnocentrism: The [American way of life] is preferable to all others.

Do these claims sometimes, for some people, present genuine choices where evidence does not decide the matter? Does "faith" in such matters sometimes "make it so"? Should we conclude that believing them in such cases is "rationally permissible"?

Further questions:

1. In the cases of racism, sexism, etc. is it true that there is no compelling evidence to decide between the proposition or its negation? Has compelling evidence been earnestly sought? Has the evidence been properly evaluated?
2. Why do we find ourselves considering whether to believe p (or not)? Have there been influences over what count as live or dead options for us that have prevented us from considering other viable hypotheses?
3. What is required to exercise rational autonomy over our beliefs? To say that it is "rationally permissible" for us to believe p, the suggestion seems to be that we may exercise our autonomy in choosing to believe p. But can we be truly autonomous in matters for which there is no (compelling) evidence? Aren't we just driven by custom (ideology?), habituation, or impulse, rather than reason in such cases?

II. Racist Propositions

Appiah distinguishes three importantly different ideas relevant to race and racism:

Racialism:

...there are heritable characteristics, possessed by members of our species, that allow us to divide them into a small set of races, in such a way that all the members of these races share certain traits and tendencies with each other that they do not share with members of any other race. These traits and tendencies characteristic of a race constitute, on the racialist view, a sort of racial essence; and it is part of the content of racialism that the essential heritable characteristics...account for more than the visible morphological characteristics – skin color, hair type, facial features – on the basis of which we make our informal classifications. (5)

In other words: A racialist is one who maintains that people who appear similar on the basis of certain inherited physical characteristics (such as skin color, hair type, facial features) share a distinctive "racial essence" that is responsible for a range of psychological and behavioral traits and tendencies.

- Appiah argues (elsewhere) that racialism is false: There is no "racial essence" (genetic or otherwise) underlying the morphological features shared by members of what we count as

racism that is responsible for (supposed) similarities in traits and tendencies among members of racial groups. In other words, even if there are what we might call *superficial races*, i.e., groups of people who share certain inherited visible features, there are no *racial kinds*, i.e., groups unified by sharing a racial essence.

- Appiah maintains that racialists are wrong in the sense that they hold a false or incorrect view, but because racialism makes no moral or evaluative claims (it doesn't say anything about what's good or bad, what we ought to do or not do), there is nothing wrong *morally speaking* in being a racialist. As he puts it, racialism "seems to be a cognitive rather than a moral problem." (5)

Extrinsic racism:

...extrinsic racists make moral distinctions between members of different races because they believe that the racial essence entails certain morally relevant qualities. The basis for the extrinsic racists' discrimination between people is their belief that members of different races differ in respects that *warrant* the differential treatment, respects – such as honesty or courage or intelligence – that are uncontroversially held...to be acceptable as a basis for treating people differently. (5)

In other words: An extrinsic racist maintains that people of racial group X tend to have the property P, and P is a morally objectionable property (such as dishonesty, laziness, irrationality, etc.) So we are warranted in treating people of racial group X differently (i.e., worse) than others (for at least some apparent racial group X).

Intrinsic racism:

...*intrinsic racists*...are people who differentiate morally between members of different races because they believe that each race has a different moral status, quite independent of the moral characteristics entailed by its racial essence....an intrinsic racist holds that the bare fact of being the same race is a reason for preferring one person to another. (5-6)

In other words: An intrinsic racist maintains that people of racial group X are inherently morally inferior (for at least some apparent racial group X).

- Appiah points out, however, that it would be "odd" to call someone a "racist" if they just happened to be ignorant of all the facts. E.g., someone brought up in a remote location might have only false information about X's and so come to hold what look like racist beliefs; but if in the face of new (and better) evidence she easily corrects her beliefs, then even if she holds some racist beliefs, there is a sense in which *she* is not a racist. In Blum's terms, she may have a false belief, but not a stereotype.

- So, he suggests, *racism* (at least "real live racism") is not just a matter of what you believe, but how you believe it: does your belief rest on the evidence you have available to you (or could easily get), or are you unable or unwilling to take advantage of the available evidence? Those who exhibit a pattern in their inadequate attention to the evidence have a "cognitive incapacity" – on Appiah's view this is a form of irrationality--and this "cognitive incapacity" is the source of their racism. They exhibit "distortions of judgement" (8) possibly due to self-interest, self-deception, internalized racist stereotypes, etc.

IV. Racial Prejudice

Given these observations, Appiah defines "racial prejudice" as follows:

Racial prejudice consists in "the deformation of rationality in judgment [viz., their systematic "incapacity" to collect and assess evidence responsibly] that characterizes

those whose racism is more than a theoretical attachment to certain propositions about race." (8)

On this view, racial prejudice is a kind of cognitive flaw. For those who are ignorant and hold racist propositions because they have not been exposed to all the evidence, there is hope that more information will lead them to see the error in their views. But those who suffer from racial prejudice need more than information; they need to learn skills of critical reflection that enable them to see through the distortions of ideology and self-interest. (9-10)

Question: In her essay, "Habits of Hostility: On Seeing Race," Linda Alcoff suggests that racial distinctions have become imbued in our perception of others. She says:

...racializing perceptual practices are used to produce a visual registry of any given social field. This field is organized differentially to distribute the likelihood of intersubjective trust, the extension of epistemic credence, and empathy. A body that is racialized, then, is over-determined through racial classifications and their associated attributions. (31)

She continues:

Perceptual processes involved in cognition can become organized, like bodily movements used to perform various operations, into integrated units that become attenuated to such a degree that they are experienced as simple, uninterpreted perception. (31)

If racism becomes built into perception in this way, what is the solution? Is it correct to say that someone is *irrational*, or has a cognitive deficit, if they responsibly form beliefs based on their perceptions? Blum also suggests that our perceptions are guided by stereotypes ("...the existence of the stereotype in the culture shapes the stereotyper's perception of the group in question, so that the alleged characteristic (aggressiveness, dishonesty, emotionality) is 'seen' in the group and its members, whether it is actually present or not." (Blum, 255) How do we change what we "perceive"?

V. Racism and Morality

Appiah suggests that *racism is symptomatic of a kind of irrationality*. In the case of extrinsic racists, it consists in a failure to be responsive to evidence concerning the (supposedly inferior) racial group in question, e.g., to evidence whether they really have the questionable property P, and to reasoning concerning the link between generalizations about the group and moral judgments.

In the case of intrinsic racists, however, the racism does not lie in the incorrect attribution of certain observable properties to members of a group (it is not like miscalculating whether Whites can jump, or whether Blacks "have rhythm"); the attribution in question concerns moral worth. The intrinsic racist asserts that some groups have greater moral worth than others (or that some individuals, because of their race alone, are more worthy of my regard or loyalty, etc.). Is the intrinsic racist irrational? Is intrinsic racism a cognitive error? Or is it, as Appiah sometimes suggests, (also? instead?) a kind of moral failure?

Appiah suggests that the intrinsic racist exhibits a kind of distorted rationality insofar as he under the influence of an ideology that serves the dominant group (8) and uses the racist beliefs "as a basis for inflicting harm" (10). Sometimes intrinsic racism is not used as a basis for harm and is not connected to the power of the dominant group, in which case it is not clearly racism, and not clearly irrational. For example, racially subordinate groups sometimes build solidarity with each other – Appiah mentions Zionists and Black Nationalists – by maintaining that race,

in and of itself, is morally significant. Although one might argue that at least some members of these groups use race as a basis for inflicting harm, the relevant question is whether it is ever permissible to hold views that are intrinsically racist. Appiah suggests that it is. Do you agree? Are intrinsic racist beliefs less problematic for some groups than others?

But the "distorted rationality" Appiah is trying to point out in the case of intrinsic racists is nothing like a failure to appreciate evidence. Ultimately Appiah's argument is that intrinsic racists misunderstand the nature of public morality. It may be that we are allowed to form special attachments to others, attachments that are based on arbitrary likes and dislikes, in the private domain, e.g., of family. But these special attachments are not allowed to influence us in contexts where morality is at stake. It may be OK to give a birthday gift to your mother and not your professor; but it is not OK to keep your promise to your mother and not to your professor. You must keep all your promises. *What the intrinsic racist fails to understand is that from the moral point of view, race is not a legitimate basis for making distinctions between individuals.* So the intrinsic racist, on Appiah's view, doesn't simply exhibit a cognitive failure, but also a moral failure.

Questions:

- On what basis does Appiah claim that race is not morally relevant? He suggests that to deny this is to go "against the mainstream of the history of Western moral philosophy" (14). But does he have an argument for it? Does he have evidence for it? How could one go about arguing that race is not morally relevant?
- Could an intrinsic racist charge that Appiah's reliance on the idea that race is morally irrelevant is itself a bit of ideology, i.e., that it is the articulation of a particular "practical consciousness" found in the West? Does saying this show that the idea is false or distorted or problematic?
- Is it true that we are not allowed to let special attachments influence us in considering things "from a moral point of view"? Doesn't one have moral obligations to one's parents and other loved ones that differ from those we have to strangers?

VI. Return to Pragmatism

Is Pragmatism a good guide to what we are epistemically justified in believing, i.e., does it guide us adequately in finding truth and avoiding error? Consider this instance of the Pragmatist principle:

Faced with a genuine choice about whether or not to believe *extrinsic racism*, where there is no compelling evidence in favor of either *extrinsic racism* or not, we are "free" to decide whether or not to believe *extrinsic racism*.

The question arises: When is there "no compelling evidence" to settle the matter?

- (a) when *I* lack compelling evidence?
- (b) when *no one* has found compelling evidence (so far)?
- (c) when there is, *in principle*, no compelling evidence?

If (a) or (b), then it would seem that the lack of compelling evidence may be due to systematic distortion (my irrationality, or the ideological influences in society that prevent evidence from being properly collected and evaluated). But if systematic distortion is a plausible hypothesis, shouldn't we say that we should withhold belief, and that belief either way is not rationally permissible? However, if we strengthen the Pragmatist principle to require that we withhold belief until all possible evidence is collected (so going for (c)), then we would miss out on many of the advantages James mentions (e.g., in love) and it isn't clear how far Pragmatism offers an improvement over Evidentialism. Thus it seems that Pragmatism is not a good guide to what's

rationality permissible, understood as a matter of *epistemic* rationality, i.e., how we should proceed in our search for knowledge.

If we consider forming beliefs as a kind of action, does Pragmatism provide a good guide to when we are practically justified in forming beliefs? Consider a different instance of the Pragmatist principle:

Faced with a genuine choice (at time *t*) about whether or not to believe *intrinsic racism*, where there is no compelling evidence (at *t*) in favor of either *intrinsic racism* or not, we are "free" to decide whether or not to believe *intrinsic racism*.

According to Appiah, intrinsic racism is not refutable by (scientific) evidence (8). On his view, however, it is a distorted ideology that can be used to support injustice. If it is sometimes a genuine choice whether to accept intrinsic racism, and if there is no compelling evidence one way or the other – even in principle – then it would seem that according to Pragmatism it is rationally permissible to accept intrinsic racism. But to continue with Appiah, one who endorses this sort of intrinsic racism can be charged with a deep moral failing. Appiah suggests this is not a "cognitive incapacity", but a "moral error" (12).

If one holds intrinsic racist beliefs "unthinkingly" then it is unclear that we have a case of autonomous rational behavior at all (see Appiah, 9). Alternatively, if the intrinsic racist is autonomous in this choice of belief (and harmful action based on it), then we should say that Pragmatism allows that morally reprehensible beliefs (and the actions they justify?) are rationally permitted. Is this enough to show that Pragmatism is not a good guide to what's rationally permissible, understood as a matter of *practical* rationality, i.e., of how we should proceed in our efforts to act rationally?

Question: Is there some way to understand or modify Pragmatism to avoid these conclusions? On what basis is a belief rational?