

Racisms

I. 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 races 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.

• A consequence of Appiah's denial of racialism is that if there are any psychological/behavioral similarities ("common traits and tendencies") among members of "superficial races", this is due either to historical/cultural/social causes, or it is due to contingent natural correlations, e.g., it might be that the members of genetically isolated groups are similar in many ways, both visibly and psychologically, but in such cases one cannot assume that there is an underlying "nature" or "essence" that explains all the similarities. The correlation of visible and psychological features may be accidental, or due to contextual features, and may break down immediately when the group disperses or when the group's genetic isolation ends.

• 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 racists maintains that people of racial group X are inherently morally inferior (for at least some apparent racial group X).

i 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.

i So, he suggests, 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.

II. 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)

III. 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 judgements.

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's failing, if it is a failing, a cognitive error? Is it a failure of rationality? Or is it, as Appiah sometimes suggests, (also?) a kind of moral failure?

Appiah suggests that the intrinsic racist exhibits a kind of distorted rationality insofar as he is 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:

i On what basis does Appiah claim that race is not morally relevant? He suggests that it 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?

ii 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?

IV. Return to Pragmatism

Is Pragmatism a good guide to what is epistemically justified? Is it a good guide to what is practically justified? Consider first epistemic justification, using 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*.

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

Consider pragmatic justification using a different instance of the 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 the intrinsic racist holds the 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?

Summary: The phenomena of wishful thinking, ideological distortion, irrational adherence to unfounded beliefs, all call into question our ability to determine if and when we have come to a point when we can be confident there is no evidence to settle the matter and that we're permitted to just choose what to believe. Even if we do reach such a point, we must be aware that our choice of what to believe may have problematic moral consequences. So Pragmatism is not without problems. All things considered is Evidentialism the better choice? Are there further alternatives to these two approaches?