

Philos 117AC, Fall 2017

Setting the stage:

Ozawa v. United States

Main text:

Kwame Anthony Appiah, “Race, Culture, Identity: Misunderstood Connections”

For the U.S. Supreme Court, it made a difference what “race” Takao Ozawa belonged to. The Court took it as given that:

- he was a member of the Japanese race
- he was not a member of the African race, and that
- an alien was eligible for naturalization only if they were a member of either the white or African race.

The Court decided that since

- no member of the Japanese race could be a member of the white race,
- Ozawa was not eligible for naturalization.

This is an *instance* of the *pattern* of thought and action that this course is about.

- X classifies Y (perhaps = X) as belonging to group G not H.
- Because X classifies Y as belonging to G, not H, X takes Y to have rights or responsibilities that are different from the rights or responsibilities that someone otherwise like Y would have if they belonged to H.

Very natural (and, I think, correct) to react: “The law was racist!” This raises a host of questions.

- What makes something racist?
 - Any judgment that fits the above pattern where G is a race?
 - A judgment that a race is inferior?
- Assuming that racism is wrong, why is it wrong?
- Even if the law hadn’t been racist, would it still have been wrong? Because it was wrong to deny someone like Ozawa from becoming a U.S. citizen? But then...
 - What is it to be citizen?
 - Why should anyone care about being a citizen?
 - When should someone be entitled to become a citizen?

For now, however, let’s just consider just the Court’s judgment that Ozawa was not white. Was *that* judgment a mistake? If someone who was totally clueless about racial classifications in the U.S. asked you whether someone of entirely Japanese ancestry, which could be traced back to the 17th century, who “looked Japanese,” was white, would you say “yes”?

Like the Court, we seem to classify people by race all the time, often pretty confidently. But what is the point of doing this? And what even are we doing?

Appiah’s opening thought experiment—how to help a Cantonese immigrant in the 1920s fill out an immigration form—brings out how strange this system of classification is.

Appiah argues that, whatever we are doing, we are making a mistake. *There are no races.*

What is Appiah’s argument? He begins by asking what the word “race” means. Once we know what the word “race” means, then we can see whether there is anything to which the word “race” applies. Two approaches in the philosophy of language:

Ideational view of meaning: What thoughts and actions are associated with uses of “race”?

- *Strict criterial theory:* X is a race just in case *all* of the *criterial beliefs* are true of X.

Consider the beliefs:

- “People with very different skin colors are of different races.”
- “Your race is determined by the race of your parents.”

Why does this present a problem for the SCT?

- *Vague criterial theory*: X is a race just in case *most* are true of X.
- Even if one doesn’t think that there are any races, it is still useful to understand the criterial beliefs that determine what people mean by “race.”
 - Compare “witch.” Even if you don’t think there are witches, if you are a woman who finds herself transported back to 17th century Salem, it would be good, for your own personal safety, to know what “witch” means.

Referential view or meaning: What things do we refer to when we use “race”?

- *Causal theory of reference*: The referent of a word, “W,” is what best causally explains our talk about Ws.
- How is this different from the criterial theory? Because what *best causally explains* our talk about Ws can diverge from *our standard beliefs* about Ws.
- On this view, Davy meant “proton donor” by “acid,” or at least was correct in saying, “There are acids,” even though acids are proton-donors, and Davy had no conception of protons whatsoever.
- In the case of other words, however, there’s just *nothing* out there in the world causally explaining our use of those words. There are no witches explaining why your cow suddenly fell ill, no animal spirits that explain how nerve fibers function, no ether in which lightwaves propagate.
- So, Appiah is arguing that “race” more like “animal spirit” and less like “acid.”

Ideational view: Appiah reviews past theories of race, by people treated as experts at the time (e.g., Jefferson, Arnold).

- Why focus on “expert” theories, rather than the beliefs of the man in the street? Because of the phenomenon of *semantic deference*. Often people let what their words mean be settled by what the experts mean.
- Why focus on the past? “because current ways of talking about race are the residue, the detritus, so to speak, of earlier ways of thinking about race”
- The view of race that emerges is:
 - Human beings belong to “races,”
 - which share certain unique heritable, physical, moral, intellectual, and cultural characteristic,
 - which are necessary and sufficient for someone to be a normal member of the race, and
 - which are accounted for by some underlying essence.
- On the ideational view, then, there are no races, since nothing satisfies these beliefs.

Referential view:

- If there was, out there in the world, some (interesting? unified?) cause of our talk of “races,” it would presumably be something recognized by the science of biology.
- But organisms are the product of huge number of genes. And there’s no reason to expect correlations among the genes responsible for certain characteristics: e.g., skin color and moral fiber.
- Moreover, there are often continuous differences in characteristics (e.g., in skin color), due to gradual changes in selective pressure (e.g., proximity to the equator).
- Moreover, human populations interbreed.
- The best candidate for “race” in biology would be a reproductively isolated local population, different in some biologically interesting way from other members of the species (understood in terms of being capable of producing fertile offspring).
- But there aren’t races in this sense in the case of human beings, at least not any that would correspond to anything like the races that we recognize in the U.S.
- So, on the referential view, there are no races—or, to be more careful, “There are races” at very least does not express a truth.