

Philos 117AC, Fall 2017

Setting the stage:

Ijeoma Oluo, “The Heart of Whiteness”

Main texts:

Sally Haslanger, “A Social Constructionist Analysis of Race”

Charles Mills, “Racial Equality,” but only section, “Race and Racism”

Oluo’s interview brings out a kind of paradox. On the one hand, it seems like race is a matter of fiction and myth. On the other hand, it seems real, not something that we can just choose. Indeed, there’s something not only mistaken, but also morally objectionable about thinking that you can just choose it, or at least about a white person thinking that she can just choose to be black. How can both of these thoughts—race is a fiction, race is a reality not up to us to decide—be true?

A constructionist account of race:

Two questions:

- Are there races?
- Which concept of race is most useful?
 - In fighting racism or racial injustice?
 - For other purposes, e.g., medical purposes?

Contrasting views about races:

- *Traditional racialists*: There are races. There is a natural racial essence, which gives rise to important psychological, moral, etc. differences (Jefferson, Arnold).
- *Eliminativists*: Since “race” gets its meaning from traditional racialism, and since TR is false, it is not true to say, “There are races.” “Race” is like “witch” (Appiah).
- *Naturalists*: While traditional racialism is false, ordinary racial divisions *do* correspond to biologically important differences. So there are races. And this is practically important, e.g., BiDil prescribed for African-Americans.
- *Constructionists*: What “race” means is a group demarcated by certain social practices. There are such groups. So there *are* races.

As with Appiah, a key question is what “race” means.

- Can’t we settle disputes about meaning just by asking competent users?
- No, because of *externalism*: what we “mean is determined not simply by what we think or intend, but at least in part by facts about our social and natural environment”
- And because of *reference magnetism*: “type-terms... pick out a type, whether or not we can state the essence of the type, by virtue of the fact that their meaning is determined by a selection of paradigms together with an implicit extension of one’s reference to things of the same type as the paradigms.”
- If so, then eliminativism is false.
 - For, we can confidently identify paradigms of membership of different races.
 - Hence, “‘Black’ and ‘White’ pick out the best fitting and most unified objective type of which the members of the list are paradigms—even if I can’t describe the type or my beliefs about what the paradigms have in common are false.”

- So, even if the eliminativist is right that we *think* of races in terms of natural essences, it doesn't follow that that is what "race" *means*. What "race" means isn't determined simply by what we think, but instead by the objective type.
- And the objective type—the "reference magnet"—might be unified by *social* features rather than *natural* features.
- This leads us to the constructionist account of race...

"races" =

- groups demarcated by observed or imagined bodily features
- presumed to be evidence of ancestral links to a certain geographical region
- which makes its members socially positioned as subordinate or privileged along some dimension (economic, political, legal, social, etc.).

So, race *depends on social context*. Some groups are not currently racialized, but have been or could be (e.g., Irish, Polish).

The constructionist account of race is *useful* for combatting social injustice, because it tracks what matters for social justice.

Racism:

"Ideational" racism:

- Not (only) a matter of intentions and emotions, but (also) beliefs.
- Which belief? Traditional racialism (i.e., a racial essence which accounts for certain significant characteristics) + some races are *superior* to others.
- The supposed essence might be *cultural*, rather than *biological*.

"Socio-structural" racism:

- Ongoing, systemic racial inequality.
- Must it involve official, "ideational" racism?
- Or even unofficial, "ideational" racism?

Questions:

1. According to Haslanger's constructionism, is it true to say: "There are witches"?
2. If race is a social construction, does this mean that you can choose your race?
3. Is Haslanger's view closer to what Appiah called the "ideational" theory or the "referential" theory of meaning?