

Charles Mills - 'White Ignorance'

Mills argues that there is a particular form of *active* ignorance he terms white ignorance. White ignorance is a kind of ignorance connected to the subordination of people of color, and in which (the social construct of) race plays a causal role. There is shared ignorance among white people about people of color and about the reality of race and racial relations (in the U.S. and elsewhere).

I

Individual and Social Epistemology:

The tradition of Anglo-American epistemology is individualistic and abstracts away from the ways in which a knower might be embedded in the social world - in race, class, gender, etc. Influential 20th century epistemologists (Quine, Kornblith, and Goldman) challenged individualistic epistemology by proposing a naturalized and therefore socialized epistemology which 1. Focuses on the social paths to knowledge, and 2. Isn't restricted to believers taken singly.

A *veritistic* epistemology is one which asks 'which practices have a comparatively favorable impact on knowledge as contrasted with error and ignorance?' An *individual veritistic* epistemology asks this question for nonsocial practices; a *social veritistic* epistemology asks this question for social practices (16). Feminist and critical race theorists have incorporated gender and race into socialized epistemology.

Ignorance:

False belief and the absence of true belief. Social epistemologists who want to understand ignorance look at how social groups get knowledge wrong - at the social mechanisms behind the 'spread of misinformation' and the 'distribution of (possibly massive) error' within the 'larger social cluster', and at the sometimes pernicious social practices that encourage such widespread error. Mills claims that there is a certain form of pervasive ignorance about race spread throughout the 'larger social cluster' of white people. Mills intends the term 'white ignorance' to imply that there is a possibility of a contrasting knowledge, and asks what are the social mechanisms which produce and encourage white ignorance.

II

There is (or was) minimal philosophical literature on racial epistemology. But - Mills claims that white ignorance has been a theme of many of the classic fictional and nonfictional works on the African American experience and the experiences of many other people of color:

- Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*: an epistemological novel, asking questions about how we demarcate false insight from real insight, apparent truth from real truth: 'For what it recounts is the protagonist's quest to determine what norms of belief are the right ones in a crazy looking-glass world where he is an invisible man "simply because white people refuse to see me...they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination - indeed, anything and everything except me" due to the construction of their "inner eyes"' (18).
- Herman Melville's *Benito Cereno*: Amasa Delano's interpretation of the scene aboard the ship - that the whites were in control of the black slaves, as was proper - persisted despite what we

might regard as overwhelming evidence to the contrary. This is a ‘self regulation by racist assumptions and blind ‘innocence’’ (19).

- James Baldwin - “I have spent most of my life, after all, watching white people and outwitting them so that I might survive” (18).
- Du Bois on the *veil* (that which stands between POC and white people, such that while people can’t properly see POC) and *double consciousness* (the black self-conscious recognition of white ignorance, a ‘sense of always looking at oneself through the eyes of others’) (19).

These examples describe an ‘asymmetry between typical white views of blacks and typical black views of whites’; ‘colored people of this country know and understand the white people better than the white people know and understand them’. Mills’ aim in the rest of the chapter is to ‘gesture toward some useful directions for mapping’ this kind of white ignorance, and for developing ‘epistemic criteria for minimizing it’ (20).

III

‘What I want to pin down, then, is the idea of an ignorance, a non-knowing that is not contingent but in which race - white racism and/or white racial domination and their ramifications - plays a crucial causal role’ (20):

1. ***White ignorance is an historicized concept***: Mills accepts social construction about race (denies that race is biological). Thus, white ignorance is a phenomena existing in certain time periods and cultures.
2. White ignorance is to be ***distinguished from ‘general patterns of ignorance prevalent among people who are white but in whose doxastic states race has played no determining role*** (e.g., widespread ignorance among white people (and everyone else) about the exact temperature of the earth’s crust or precise income distribution in the U.S.).
3. Sometimes it will be difficult to adjudicate whether certain ignorance should be understood as white ignorance (i.e., whether race has played a causal role in such ignorance).
4. ***White ignorance can be caused by racist motivation and/or by impersonal social structures which operate regardless of a cognizer being racist*** - e.g., while a cognizer might express white ignorance in their explicitly racist beliefs (e.g., that blacks are inferior), a non-racist cognizer might also express white ignorance about a subject matter (e.g., black peoples access to opportunities after abolition) because there has been *social suppression of the relevant knowledge*.
5. White ignorance isn’t necessarily confined to white people - ***black people can also manifest white ignorance*** - i.e., have false beliefs about black people and the reality of race - due to the fact that white ideology is pervasive and (almost) hegemonic.
6. White racial ignorance can produce a doxastic environment in which particular varieties of black racial ignorance can flourish, but we might hesitate to call this white ignorance (e.g., beliefs that white people are ‘blue eyed devils’).
7. ***‘White ignorance’ includes ignorance about factual matters and, Mills argues, about moral matters*** - white ignorance can involve ‘incorrect judgements about the rights and wrongs of situations’. Mills claims that ‘improvements in our cognitive practice should have a practical

payoff in heightened sensitivity to social oppression and the attempt to reduce and ultimately eliminate that oppression' (22).

8. White ignorance is not the only kind of privileged group-based ignorance - e.g., male ignorance (accepting that gender is a social construct).
9. Speaking generally about white ignorance doesn't commit one to the claim that it is uniform across the white population. People have individual histories and are socially situated in a variety of ways - this can help destabilize white ignorance, and some white people work to overcome and undo the white ignorance they have socially inherited.
10. ***White ignorance isn't just a sociological concept - it is a normative one.*** Mills takes it that we should be trying to reduce white ignorance - 'there are typical ways of going wrong that need to be adverted to in light of the social structure and specific group characteristics, and one has a better chance of getting things right through a self-conscious recognition of their existence and correspondingly self-distancing from them' (23).

IV

What are the individual and social mechanisms through which white ignorance operates? How does race affect individual and social processes of cognition? Mills looks at 5, complexly interrelated, processes of cognition and how race can affect them.

Perception and Conception

Perception is never 'raw' but is always mediated by concepts, including social concepts. Many of these concepts are not neutral but are 'oriented toward a certain understanding, embedded in sub-theories and larger theories about how things work' (27). White perception can be mediated by racist concepts or concepts/ideologies of white superiority/ white normativity. When these concepts/ideologies are socially entrenched, it is very difficult for any individual cognizer to not perceive *through* them.

- White normativity: Historically whiteness has been 'coextensive' with full humanity, people of color viewed as less than fully human or as savages. This is why it didn't seem contradictory to claim that lands 'teeming with people' were 'uninhabited', or for the declaration of independence to enshrine equality between all men while declaring Native Americans as savages. The concept of white normativity 'drove perception with whites being aprioristically intent on denying what was before them' (27). In these cases, certain concepts 'blocked' accurate vision and caused/produced white ignorance.
- Color-blindness: The 'transition away from old-fashioned racism has not put an end to white normativity but has subtly transformed its character...if previously whites were color demarcated as biologically and/or culturally superior, now through a strategic color-blindness they are assimilated as putative equals to the status and situation of nonwhites on terms that negate the need for measures to repair the inequalities of the past...whites refuse to recognize the long history of structural discrimination that has left whites with the differential resources they have today, and all of its consequent advantages in negotiating opportunity structures' (28).

Memory

There is collective memory and collective amnesia. The way such memory is managed affects what individual cognizers are able to know and widespread patterns of ignorance - how textbooks are

written, what is memorialized in museums, statues, national holidays, songs, what is covered by the press, etc.

- How slavery is written about in textbooks and popular media (the ‘magnolia myth’)
- Erasure of Jim Crow
- Persons and communities massacred in colonization (Native Americans and the Indian-white wars, Indigenous Australians)
- ‘The Great Forgetting’ of the Belgian Congo.

Mills claims that how collective memory is managed is a part of collective identity and self-representation: ‘there will be an intimate relationship between white identity, white memory, and white amnesia, especially about nonwhite victims’ (e.g., colorblindness, the myth of the meritocratic U.S.).

Testimony

It’s now widely accepted in philosophy that much of what we know relies on taking the testimony of others seriously. But, when one entire group is cast as epistemically suspect - untrustworthy or unintelligent - then their input won’t be solicited or will be treated with suspicion. This can result in a ‘closed circuit of epistemic authority that reproduces white delusions’ (34).

- Marginalization of African American scholars and journals
- Fear in speaking out about lynchings or race riots
- Contemporary examples? Testimony about police violence, racism on college campuses, etc.

Social Group Interest

Phenomena like self-deception and the connection between individual interest and individual cognition are widely recognized in philosophy. Mills extends this to a social context informed by the ‘realities of race’ and of ‘domination and exploitation’. As a group, whites have interest in the racial status quo, and this encourages cognitive distortions of various kinds.

- Race is the ‘primary social division’ in the U.S., and sociological data indicates that whites generally see black interests as opposed to their own. This will affect white social cognition - the concepts favored and used, the refusal to see racial discrimination, amnesia about the past, and hostility to black testimony.

So - racialized perception, conception, memory, testimony, and social group interests are all interlocked and determine one another, ‘jointly contributing to the blindness of the white eye’ and producing collective modes of denial (35).

‘White ignorance has been able to flourish all of these years because a white epistemology of ignorance has safeguarded it against the dangers of an illuminating blackness or redness, protecting those who for “racial” reasons have needed not to know. Only by starting to break these rules and meta-rules can we begin the long process that will lead to the eventual overcoming of this white darkness and the achievement of an enlightenment that is genuinely multiracial’ (35).

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