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24.02 Moral Problems and the Good Life  
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## Racism, Sexism and Oppression

### I. Racism, Sexism and Prejudice

*Hypothesis 1:* Sexism and racism are a matter of (false) prejudicial belief.

An individual person P is *sexist* if and only if P has the belief that females are inferior to males.

An individual person P is *racist* against the race R if and only if P has the belief that Rs, as such, are inferior to members of other racial groups.

But:

- Inferior along what dimension?
- What if the belief is easily changed in the face of new evidence?
- What if the belief has little effect on action?

*Hypothesis 2* (Appiah's proposal): Sexism and racism are a matter of deeply entrenched prejudicial beliefs that are resistant to contrary evidence and which inform action.

- Extrinsic racists believe that all or most members of group R have some morally relevant property M which justifies treating them as inferior to members of other races.
- Intrinsic racists believe that members of group R are intrinsically morally inferior, e.g., due to their racial essence..

*Hypothesis 2+:* Sexism and racism are a matter of deeply entrenched prejudicial beliefs...that are held in place by a failure of due care and concern. (A failure of the heart *and* mind.)

E.g., An individual person P is racist against the race R if and only if P has a deeply entrenched belief that Rs, as such, are (in a broad sense) inferior to or less valuable than members of other racial groups, i.e., a belief that resists evidence to the contrary, and P sometimes acts intentionally on this belief.

But:

- Aren't people sometimes put in situations where they have to act on sexist or racist rules or norms even when they don't have the problematic beliefs? (E.g., Princeton admissions policies in the 80's.)
- Can an act be sexist/racist even if the person is not? Can a rule be sexist/racist even if the one applying the rule is not?
- Can sexism/racism occur even if no one intends it? (E.g., disparate impact v. disparate treatment). Consider standardized tests: do they predict success?

*Hypothesis 3* (Frye's first proposal): Sexism and racism occur whenever sex and race categories serve as a basis for action even though they are irrelevant, i.e., the default should be that we are color-blind and sex-blind, except where color and sex genuinely matter.

The term 'sexist' in its core and perhaps most fundamental meaning is a term which characterizes anything whatever which creates, constitutes, promotes or exploits any irrelevant or impertinent marking of the distinction between the sexes. (18)

Question: when do color and sex matter?

Example:

If a company is hiring a supervisor who will supervise a group of male workers who have always worked for male supervisors, it can scarcely be denied that the sex of a candidate for the job is relevant to the candidate's prospects of moving smoothly and successfully into an effective working relationship with the supervisees...Relevance is an intrasystematic thing...The workers' attitudes and the surrounding customs of the culture make a difference to how they interact with their supervisor and, in particular, make the sex of the supervisor a relevant factor in predicting how things will work out. (18-19)

Question: if a supervisor hires a man because a man is likely to be more effective then, according to hypothesis 3, it is not sexist. But isn't there sexism here?

Conclusion: Sexism isn't just a matter of individual beliefs and actions. "...the locus of sexism is primarily in the system or framework, not in the particular act." (19)

## II. Structures and Power

Historically, the notion of oppression has been associated with the idea of dictators and tyrants. The model of power underlying this is one in which individuals hold power over others and exercise that power unjustly. Oppression in this sense (let's call it *individual oppression*, though it may be a group rather than an individual who is the dominant force) may still occur—found in many domains, from governments to families—but it is now generally recognized not to be the only form of oppression.

Another form of oppression occurs in structures and institutions, and so reasonably is called *structural oppression*. The power at issue in structural oppression is not held by an individual but is diffused in a system. Consider, for example, a democratic system in which majority rules. In such a system there is no tyrant dominating others, nevertheless the majority hold power and can make decisions that benefit them and disadvantage the minority. Power is circulated in even seemingly trivial matters, e.g., the design and distribution of restroom facilities.

Frye offers a characterization of the phenomenon of oppression in terms of a cage:

The experience of oppressed people is that the living of one's life is confined and shaped by forces and barrier which are not accidental or occasional and hence avoidable, but are systematically related to each other in such a way as to catch one between and among them and restrict or penalize motion in any direction. It is the experience of being caged in: all avenues, in every direction, are blocked or booby trapped. (4)

Although Frye emphasizes the idea that when one is oppressed, all of one's options are blocked and one is *trapped*, this is not necessarily the case. What's at issue in oppression is that by virtue of one's membership in a particular group one is subject to a set of structures that cause unjust subordination. The birdcage analogy is useful to see how structures rather than individuals may be to blame for one's subordination, it is important not to be misled by the analogy.

## III. Group membership

Oppression is structural, and it applies to individuals by virtue of their membership in groups. Is there a way to make this clearer? It is helpful to view societies as very complicated sets of relations between people. There are professors and students, landlords and tenants, employers and employees, bus drivers and riders, etc. Such relationships a part of an economy, which exists within a social-political structure. For example, without a background system of private property there could be no landlords and tenants; without institutions of higher learning there could be no professors and students. The nature of such relationships is defined by laws, institutional rules, and social norms. Oppression occurs when the relations constituting a social system—or part of a social system—are unjust and where exit from the relations is either impossible, or extremely costly for the individual in the subordinate position. To take an extreme example, slavery is oppressive because the relation between slave and master is unjust and slaves have little or no option for exit. Sweatshops are oppressive because the relation between owners and laborers is unjust (the laborers are being exploited), and the laborers have no reasonable economic alternatives for supporting themselves and their families.

So what can we say about oppression?

1. Oppression is objective. It is not a subjective feeling of being trapped. Whether one is systematically disadvantaged by a structure is something that can be empirically established.

2. Oppression is structural and systematic. Although individuals may be involved in enforcing and perpetuating the structure, the oppressing force is the unjust structure. Members of subordinated groups may also enforce and perpetuate oppressive structures that disadvantage themselves.
3. One is subject to oppression by virtue of one's membership in a group. Oppression involves two groups in relation to a structure: the subordinated and the privileged. The privileged are those who (unjustly) benefit from the structure; the subordinated are those who (unjustly) bear the costs.
4. Oppression occurs or is most problematic when one's membership in the subordinated group is either non-voluntary, or a central member of one's identity, so exit from the group is not a reasonable option.

#### **IV. Structural sexism and racism?**

Frye's final proposal: "The term 'sexist' characterizes cultural and economic structures which create and enforce the elaborate and rigid patterns of sex-marking and sex-announcing which divide the species, along lines of sex, into dominators and subordinates." (38)

*Hypothesis 4:* A cultural or economic structure is sexist/racist if and only if the relations between the sexes/races in that structure are unjust, and there is little or no room for exit from these relations.

Corollaries: An individual is sexist/racist if they knowingly contribute to creating or maintaining these structures. An individual benefits from sexism/racism if they are a member of a privileged group in such a structure.

How does sex-marking become the major site for sexism, according to Frye? Frye is arguing that sex-marking is not "natural" and is not "inevitable" but is a structure that systematically disadvantages those who are not men. (Can we say the same about race?)

1. Sex-marking is pervasive and systematic.
2. Sex-marking is compulsory (Frye suggests: because of the taboo on homosexuality); females are required to sex-mark or sex-announce *as female* and males *as male*.
3. The system of sex-marking and the corresponding sex roles disadvantage women and transgendered people.
4. Therefore, sex-marking is oppressive, i.e., it is a form of structural sexism.

#### Questions:

- Is the current US society sexist? Is it racist? What are examples of unjust relations between the sexes, or the races?
- Is sex compulsory? Is race?
- Should we really understand racism and sexism as analogous? Aren't there important differences?
- Even if some racism/sexism is structural, isn't there also bigotry? And isn't bigotry different from structural oppression?