

Appiah and the Meaning of 'Race'

Reading:

Appiah, selection from the Tanner Lectures (pp. 92-101)
<http://philpapers.org/archive/APPRCI.pdf>

I. Reflections on *Race: The Power of an Illusion* (screened last class)

Do races exist? Are there any races? Am I a member of the white (black, Asian, Latina/o, native/indigenous) race? How do we determine the answers to these questions?

Semantic strategy: What does the term 'race' mean? Is it ever true to say that, e.g., Sally is white or Isaac is black?

II. Is 'race' a meaningful term?

Let's adopt a convention:

Terms in single quotes such as 'race' refer to the word occurring between the quotes. So 'race' refers to the word spelled 'r'-'a'-'c'-'e'. Terms in italics such as *race* refer to the concept associated with the word in italics. Terms without either quotes or italics pick out the referent or extension of the term.

Is 'witch' a meaningful term?

Well, there seems to be a concept associated with 'witch.' If someone tells us that they saw a horror movie about witches, we understand what they mean. But there are no witches: the concept *witch* applies to no existing individuals.

Fregean/ideational theory of meaning:

There are two senses of 'meaning': sense and reference. The sense of a term is the concept (or set of ideas) associated with it. The reference is what the term picks out. And the sense/concept determines reference/extension.

On this view, the term 'cockapoo,' say, is associated with a concept: a breed of dog resulting from a cross between a Cocker Spaniel and a Miniature Poodle. This articulates the sense of 'cockapoo.' The extension of 'cockapoo' consists in all those dogs that fit that description. 'Cockapoo' would have a meaning, even if the breed were destroyed by a cockapoo-virus.

Problems:¹

- The concept/ideas associated with a term can be wrong and not apply to the referent/extension of the term. Examples: 'arthritis,' 'beech/elm.'
 - Moral: Division of linguistic labor: experts are required to figure out the concept that actually determines the reference/extension.
- Even the experts can be wrong: no one might have an adequate concept that determines the extension. Examples: 'water' ('hudór') as used by Ancient Greeks.
 - Moral: The concept associated with a term does not determine its extension. There is only one kind of meaning, viz., the referent/extension of a term.

Millian/referential theory of meaning:

Appiah: "On the referential view, we are required to find something in the world that best explains the history of usage of the term." (Tanner Lecture, 98)

¹ A classic source for some of these problems is in Hilary Putnam's "Meaning and Reference":
<http://home.sandiego.edu/~baber/metaphysics/readings/Putnam.MeaningAndReference.pdf>

On the Millian/referential theory, there is only one kind of meaning, viz., whatever in the world the term picks out. We must distinguish the meaning of ‘*Cockapoo*’ and the meaning of ‘Cockapoo.’ The meaning of ‘*Cockapoo*’ is a concept – a set of ideas. The meaning of ‘Cockapoo’ is a breed of dogs. In this case, our concept is apt and applies to the breed. But in other cases our concept may not be apt or apply to anything.

III. Appiah’s argument against the existence of race

1. Suppose the ideational theory is correct. What is our concept of race?

From Jefferson to Arnold, the idea of race has been used, in its application to humans, in such a way as to require that there be significant correlations between the biological and the moral, literary, or psychological characters of human beings; and that these be explained by the intrinsic nature (the “talents” and “faculties” in Jefferson; the “genius,” in Arnold) of the members of the race. (Appiah 98)

Note that this is not just an account of the “ordinary” ideas associated with race, but the “experts” views.

2. No set of human groupings satisfies this concept.

3. Suppose the referential theory is correct. What best explains our usage of the term ‘race’?

a. Populations: The community of potentially interbreeding individuals at a given locality. (Appiah, 99-100)

- There are no interesting clusters of humans who are biologically differentiated in interesting ways but still can interbreed.
- There are no reproductively isolated human groups.

b. Phenotypically similar groups: “groups defined by skin color, hair, and gross morphology, corresponding to the dominant pattern for these characteristics in the major subcontinental regions: Europe, Africa, East and South Asia, Australasia, the Americas, and, perhaps, the Pacific Islands.” (Appiah, 101)

- These groups are not biologically interesting.
- Many people we would want to count as having a race are mixed.

4. No human groupings explain our usage of the term ‘race.’

5. “The bottom line is this: you can’t get much of a race-concept, ideationally speaking, from any of these traditions; you can get various possible candidates from the referential notion of meaning, but none of them will be much good for explaining social or psychological life, and none of them corresponds to the social groups we call “races” in America.” (Appiah, 101) I.e.(?) ‘race’ is not a meaningful term?

6. There are no races.

Questions:

- Whose ideas count?
- What usage are we trying to explain?
- If we are willing to modify or adjust our ideas/usage, then what?

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