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Implicit Bias & Racist Attitudes

Oppression & Justice (Fall 2013)

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Challenge

- What makes implicit bias morally problematic?
 - Is implicit bias **intrinsically** problematic?
- Possibilities:
 - Leads to **harmful or unfair consequences**
 - **Failure of rationality**
 - **Affective and volitional distortion** (contrary to benevolence)
 - **Cognitive distortion** (perpetuates disrespectful content of stereotypes)

Harmful or Unfair Consequences

- Evidence that IB can be predictive of behavior
 - Small-scale (friendliness) to large-scale (shooting black person holding a wallet)
- Concern that no one can have IB without it affecting behavior or judgments to some extent
- If bias is only problematic when it has bad consequences, then it is not ever **intrinsically** problematic.



Failure of Rationality

- Explicit racial bias is mostly or completely irrational.
- If IB is the mere association of words, there could be, in some cases, *limited* reasons for those associations to be rational...



Newton



Are racial IB problematic because of failures of rationality?

Standards of rationality cannot clearly tell us whether IB are immoral

Moral virtue tied to epistemic virtue

Rationality of associations → determine moral wrongness of IB

IB almost always extend beyond what is rationally justified; merely mitigate moral wrongness of having IB

Moral virtue separable from epistemic virtue

Rationality of associations → would not determine moral wrongness of having IB

Can still have moral constraints on belief; standards of kindness/compassion overriding

Affective & Volitional Distortion

- Racism as “disregard for, or even hostility to, those assigned to the target race” (Garcia, qtd. on 530)
- **Intrinsically** opposed to benevolence and justice
- Unclear whether IB have these features...

Cognitive Distortion

- Biases contain content of stereotypes
 - **Intrinsically** disrespectful of other persons' individuality and humanity
- Contribute to **moral distancing**: “the stereotyper sees the stereotypee as more ‘other’ than he or she really is, and this corrodes her sense of a common, shared humanity” (532)
- Seems to more easily apply to cases of IB...

Wrongful vs. Blameworthy

- IB formed rapidly, from external sources, uncontrollable (to some extent?)
- IB can be **wrong without being blameworthy**
 - Depends on whether person identifies with the bias or is able to subject it to scrutiny

Discussion Questions

- Do you think IB are morally problematic?
 - If so, why?
 - Actual/potential harmful consequences, failure of rationality, affective/volitional distortion, cognitive distortion, something else?
- Are you inclined to believe that IB are *intrinsically* problematic?
- Do you think that people are ever blameworthy for their IB?
 - Does it depend on the content or source of IB?



Questions? Comments?