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Racial Misperceptions
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Knowledge and Reality, Lecture 24

Brian Weatherson

11/28/22

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Summary

- The book doesn't have a traditional summary or conclusion.
- But I think it's a good idea for us to look over what it covered.

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Rationality of Perception

- The traditional philosophical view is that perceptual states are arational states that ground other rational states.
- Siegel thinks that the perceptual states themselves can be rational or, crucially, irrational.

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Rationality of Perception

Two key theses:

1. Perception is **rich**
2. Perception is **inferential**

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Richness of Perception

Siegel thinks we can perceive things like *That person is dangerous.*

- This contrasts with views on which perception doesn't have contents; it is just a presentation of the world (like a window)
- It also contrasts with the (more common) view that we just perceive shapes, colors, sounds and the like.

Inferential Perception

Siegel this that:

1. Perceptual states are downstream of other attitudes, including beliefs.
2. These transitions from the other states to perceptions are **inferences**.

Inferential Perception

The first thesis contrasts with views on which perception is **encapsulated**, i.e., insensitive to other information the world contains.

- The existence of illusions is some evidence for encapsulation.
- But the existence of skilled perceivings is evidence against, and Siegel takes this to be stronger.

Inferential Perception

The second thesis contrasts with views on which the way perception relates to background views involves something like "mental jogging".

Inferential Perception

- People often believe that salt and pepper are often found together.
- They also frequently transition from thoughts about *salt* to thoughts about *pepper*.
- But the latter is not really an inference, it is just jogging.

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Five Possibilities

1. Poor support for premise
2. Poor transitions
3. Circularity
4. False premisess
5. Poor maintenance

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Poor Support

0. The largest city in a state is always the capital.
1. Detroit is the capital of Michigan (from 0)
2. So, this university is about an hour's drive from the Michigan capital.

- In normal circumstances, 0 is unsupported, so if it's the reason for 1, the inferential belief 2 is not well-founded.

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Poor Transition

1. Most Fs are Gs.
2. So, most Gs are Fs.

- This one might be relevant to some of the racial stereotype inferences.

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Circularity

1. The scale says that the cup weighs 100g.
2. The cup weighs 100g.
3. So, the scale accurately measured the cup.

- If 1 is the reason for 2, this isn't a good inference. And this is funny because 1 is normally a good reason for 2, and 1+2 entails 3.

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False Premises

1. Mother says the water from this faucet is safe to drink.
2. So the water from this faucet is safe to drink.
3. So when I want water, I'll get it from this faucet.

- Siegel agrees with what's probably the most common view that the even if 2 is false, the transition from 1 to 2 to 3 could be a rational inference.

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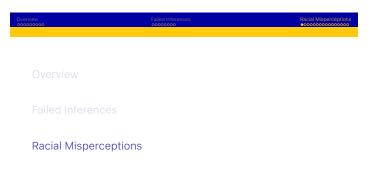○○○○○○○○○○○○○○○

Maintenance

This is harder to get a clear example for, but note the following is a way for a belief to be irrational.

- It is originally formed by a reasonable process.
- But once the belief is formed, it is not well maintained.

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Poor Maintenance

Some possible things that could go wrong.

- Blocking off from sources of counter-evidence.
- Ignoring counter-evidence.
- Using the belief itself as a reason to reject counterevidence.
- Using the belief itself as a reason to get more evidence.

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Big Picture

- There are a lot of racial misperceptions.
- These are downstream of widely shared racial (well, racist) beliefs that are widely shared in the community.
- At least in many (most?) cases, there is enough individual culpability in acquiring or maintaining these background beliefs that the perceptions are not well-founded.

Racial Misperceptions

Note how many, and how varied, the misperceptions at the start of the chapter are.

- They include seemingly innocuous things like age.

Why So Many

Siegel is responding to a (possible) criticism that some of these misperceptions might be grounded in accurate beliefs about racial disparities.

Why So Many

- Some of the explaining away here seems to rely on bad inferences, e.g., from Most Fs are Gs to Most Gs are Fs.
- But in some of the experiments, it's hard to see what beliefs about the world could make the beliefs about ages justified.

Minimal Connections

The range of experiments also helps respond to another kind of concern.

- Imagine that a person has developed a kind of association between 'black' and 'dangerous' like the association between 'salt' and 'pepper'.
- That looks pretty dubious morally, arguably worse than on Siegel's positive view, but it's not obviously within the range of epistemic evaluation.

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Minimal Connections

Siegel's theory is that perceptions are irrational because they are bad inferences.

- Whatever inferences are, they are richer than the connection between 'salt' and 'pepper'.
- So she needs to rule out the possibility that there is the same kind of connection here.

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Minimal Connections

I was a little unsure why the association picture would fail to explain most of these experimental results.

- But it's really hard to see how it helps with the age test.
- And more generally, having a broader range of data helps to make it harder for an opponent.

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Testimony

But the opponent Siegel spends the most time on concedes that the background beliefs are false.

- They argue that the inferences are nonetheless rational (or well-founded) because the false beliefs were formed in a reasonable way.
- And that reasonable way is testimony from trusted sources.

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Testimony

There is one defence Siegel could offer here, but does not. In fact, she expressly rejects it.

- It is what we might call the transfer model of testimony.
- Testimony only ever transfers the rationality/reasonableness/well-foundedness of a belief from speaker(s) to hearer(s).
- So if the initial beliefs are ill-founded, as they are here, so will the subsequent beliefs be.

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Testimony

Siegel rejects the transfer model because of the example of the well-meaning mother.

- A child is entitled to trust their mother's safety advice, even if it turns out to be false and ill-founded.

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Contrasts

What are the contrasts between this case and casually absorbing racist beliefs?

1. The mother is well-meaning and has the child's best interests at heart.
2. The racist beliefs require poor maintenance to be sustained.

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Contrasts

The first of these is not particularly compelling.

- For one thing, what really matters is whether the person seems well-meaning, not whether they are.
- For another, it isn't clear that racists spreading racist beliefs to people like them are not well-meaning, in the sense of trying to improve (by their lights) the well-being of their audience.

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Contrasts

What about the second of these?

- It seems fairly contingent at best that the belief requires poor maintenance.
- Someone who grows up in a very homogenous (and racist) community won't have much opportunity to do any useful maintenance.

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Vigilance

A better model might be that the person who simply absorbs racist beliefs is (in most realistic situations) not going to be particularly vigilant.

- And that might be a difference with the case of the misleading mother.

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For Next Time

We'll look at some actual critics of Siegel's book.

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