

Racial Epithets

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A puzzle

Explain why all of the following are racist (in decreasing order):

1. Niggers stink.
2. Niggers don't stink.
3. It is not the case that niggers stink.
4. He said that niggers stink.
5. He didn't say that niggers stink.

Compare these to:

1. He said that 'niggers' stink.

Another puzzle

David Hume, *On the Standards of Taste*:

“Where *speculative* errors may be found in the polite writings of any age or country, they detract but little from the value of those compositions. There needs to be but a certain turn of thought or imagination to make us enter into all the opinions which then prevailed and relish the sentiments or conclusions derived from them. But a very violent effort is requisite to change our judgment of manners, and excite sentiments of approbation or blame, love or hatred, different from those to which the mind from long custom has been familiarized [...] I cannot, nor is it proper that I should, enter into such [vicious] sentiments.”

Our puzzle:

Try to imagine the following fictional mini-story to be true:

“In killing her baby, Giselda did the right thing; after all, it was a girl.”

“...the puzzle of explaining our comparative difficulty in imagining fictional worlds that we take to be morally deviant.” (Gendler 2000: 56)

A range of solutions

In recent philosophical discussions, imaginative resistance has been explained by:

- (i) our refusal to imagine (Gendler);
- (ii) our difficulty of imagining (Hume, Moran, Currie); or
- (iii) our inability to imagine certain propositions (Walton, Weatherson, Yablo).

Weatherson's supervenience principle:

“If p is the kind of claim that, if true, must be true in virtue of lower-level facts, and if the story is about those lower-level facts, then it must be true in the story that there is some true proposition r which is about those lower-level facts such that p is true in virtue of r .”

An alternative suggestion

Distinguish, with Yablo, response-dependent from response-enabled concepts. A response-enabled concept like “oval” is picked out, but not analysable in terms of our perceptual responses: while we pick out oval things as those that look roughly egg-shaped, it is not necessary that oval things look egg-shaped – even in a world where perceivers have radically different perceptual mechanism than we do, there still would be oval things.

Distinguish, with Currie, belief-like from desire-like imagining:

“...if it is difficult [for the reader] to have the desire-like imagining that female infants be killed, she can have the belief-like imagining that female infanticide is right only at the expense of the harmony between belief-like and desire-like imagining which is the natural stance of the intelligent and sensitive reader.”

An alternative to the voluntarist explanation:

1. Evaluative judgments are tied up with feelings.
2. Feelings either cannot be simulated or they can be simulated only in rather special ways (as some kind of make-believe feelings, as perhaps they are when we go to the movies).

Compare this with the imaginative resistance of a vegetarian to “if you haven’t had a good steak for days, you just feel terribly hungry”.

- (1) Suppose that murder is right.
- (2) Imagine that murder is right.
- (3) Accept as fictionally true that murder is right.
- (4) Pretend that murder is right.
- (5) Make-believable approve of murder.

(1), even by Gendler’s lights, is easy. (2) is what she takes to be difficult, understanding it as (at least entailing) (3). She takes the difficulty of (4) to explain the difficulty of (3). I think the difficulty of (2) is explained by the difficulty of (5).

How wide is the phenomenon of imaginative resistance?

- (i) We have difficulty in imagining, of a really lame joke, that it is funny (Walton).
- (ii) We have difficulty in imagining, of sour milk, that it smells good (Ginet).
- (iii) We have difficulty in imagining, of a monster truck rally, that it is sublimely beautiful (Yablo).

Distinguish

1. fear, understanding, assertion, having as formal objects the dangerous / meaning (?) / truth.
2. quasi-fear (in movie theaters), quasi-understanding (e.g. empathy), quasi-assertion (on stage); same psychological feel, but different connection with action and reasoning.
3. make-believe / as-if fear, understanding, assertion (supposition): no or different psychological feel

You can make-believable understand “kdfkdsf” if reading a story in which you do, but you do not quasi-understand it. You can make-believe fear and suppose fearing it, but you cannot quasi-fear something you do not at the same time take to be dangerous.

Compare

1. He said that ‘philosophers’ stink.
2. He said that ‘niggers’ stink.

Are scare quotes monsters?

References

Gendler, Tamar Szabó. “The Puzzle of Imaginative Resistance.” *The Journal of Philosophy* 97(2), pp. 55–81, 2000. 1