

## 15. Mills 2007: White Ignorance

Kevin Dorst  
kevindorst@pitt.edu

PHIL 1460  
March 10, 2021

NOTE: There's a *lot* in Mills's piece. He starts with a methodological critique of contemporary epistemology in §I—please do read this, but don't worry about trying to understand all the nuances and references. Focus on §§III–IV.

### I. Standpoint theory

*Standpoint theory* comes out of feminist epistemology. Core idea:

- What we can know is highly dependent on our *social location*.
- Often (not always), people in comparatively marginalized social locations are able to know *more*—especially about the true structure of society, and its problems.

**Example:** group A occupies all positions of power; group B occupies none. A-members think society is meritocracy, and B-members just happen to have less merit; B-members, in attempts to gain access to power, realize that not so.

Clearly this *can* happen. Very plausibly, it often does. Relevant info is gotten on a “need to know” basis. Dominant group doesn't need to know how to navigate marginalized spaces; marginalized group *does* need to know how to navigate dominant-group spaces.

Mills's starting point: if standpoint theory is right, a corollary is that dominant groups can often be *worse* off wrt knowing about the structure of society. In case of race: *White ignorance*.

### II. What Is White Ignorance?

**White Ignorance:** ignorance that is causally induced and maintained by White racial superiority.

- Causal, but can be indirect.
- Needn't be operative in individual attitudes that would be recognized as clearly “racist”; rather, can work through societal structures.
- Doesn't apply only to White people.
- Not uniform over population.

Toole (2019)

Both physical and social status.

Whisper networks carrying info of sexual harassment vs. safe spaces; the Green Book.

Keep in mind individualist vs. collectivist notions of WI.

Think about Siegel on culturally-normal belief.

Or, I think, even predominantly to them, once we move from individualist to collectivist WI.

The picture:

- 1) Standpoint theory implies that (at a given time) White people are *often* worse at recognizing the racialized structure of their society than non-White people (at that time).
- 2) White people have historically dominated cultural institutions, including historical narratives, conceptual schemes, and patterns of trust and authority.
- 3) (1) and (2) combine so that society *as a whole* becomes more ignorant of its own racialized structure.

Here is *individualist* notion of WI.

Here is the *collectivist* notion of WI.

### III. Arguments

Arguments for (1):

Mostly §II

Broadly seen as a fairly immediate corollary of standpoint theory, which Mills says he takes largely for granted. Backs up with a series of examples:

- DuBois on double consciousness and second sight.
- Baldwin on having to “outwit” White people in order to survive.
- Ellison, *Invisible Man*, on what it’s like to not be seen by society.

Certainly rings true to my experience! Grew up in a mostly White, small town. Wasn’t until college and graduate school when I had close enough Black friends to realize the (embarrassing) extent of it: “What’s the one-drop rule?”; “How did your hair change so quickly?”; “What was so bad about the war on drugs?”; etc.

Important to emphasize the restricted scope of the claim. Not the (implausible) claim that marginalized social groups are *in general* better off epistemically. Just about certain key issues.

Still, good questions to ask about the scope of the claim, and how pervasive the asymmetry Mills needs there to be for his argument to work.

Arguments for (3): Mills discusses how a variety of epistemological processes can be distorted by (1) and (2)

Mostly §IV

- **Perception/cognition:** instead of just hijacked experiences (Siegel 2019), we can have hijacked *cognition* in the form of **ideology**.

E.g. Mercator map; Europe as continent.

E.g. notion of “Savage”, and ease with which Jefferson could say “all men” are created equal and then later refer to “merciless Indian Savages”.

E.g. today, “color-blindness” and meritocracy ideology, ignoring extent of the propagation of past harms through generational poverty, etc.

Think of Kelly and the available explanations we have of what we see!

Makes it so that even an *unbiased* person has trouble reasoning. Inverts Kant on concepts.

- **Selective Memory:** selective encoding or historical information to a narrative that flatters dominant class and status quo.

E.g. in education (civil rights movement), monuments (“lost cause” of civil war), etc.

Think Singer et al.! Only at collective scale.

- **Testimony:** establish norms of credibility and authority that disfavor those in marginalized positions or with marginalized views.
- **Motivated Irrationality:** vested interest in status quo leads to downplaying or ignoring narratives that question status quo.

Hold that thought for Lackey's work on epistemic injustice.

**Q1:** Suppose we buy Mills's story. What does it mean for our beliefs about race?

**Q2:** Striking that "irrationality" only comes in at the very end. What role does it play this process, according to Mills?

## *References*

Siegel, Susanna, 2019. 'The Problem of Culturally Normal Beliefs'. 1–30.

Toole, Briana, 2019. 'From Standpoint Epistemology to Epistemic Oppression'. *Hypatia*, 34(4):598–618.