

HOW NOT TO ACCUSE SOMEONE OF PREJUDICE

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In discussions of racism, sexism, and other forms of prejudice, two kinds of fallacious reasoning sometimes appear: the 'appeal to subjective response' and the 'accusation of privilege'. The first fallacy treats someone's subjective response to a comment as sufficient evidence of prejudice or insensitivity. This fails to acknowledge that the reasonableness of the response is always an open question. The second fallacy involves dismissing what people accused of prejudice say in their defence on the grounds that the privileged always speak that way. This insultingly treats what is said as an effect of causes rather than the result of rational reflection. Both forms of specious reasoning risk bringing the worthy cause of combatting prejudice into disrepute.

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A colleague recently responded to a memo I circulated by telling me they considered it unintentionally heterosexist. I didn't agree. After a brief exchange of e-mails that served only to sandpaper each other's sore spots, they called my attention to the following passage in Allen Johnson's book *Privilege, Power, and Difference*:

If someone confronts you with your own behavior that supports privilege, step off the path of least resistance that encourages you to defend and deny. Don't tell them they're too sensitive or need a better sense of humor . . . Listen to what's being said. Take it seriously. Assume for the time being it's true, because given the power of paths of least

resistance, it probably is. (Allen Johnson, *Privilege, Power and Difference* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2nd ed., 2005) 141.)

The passage is well-intended and, up to a point, reasonable. But in my opinion it should be read with caution, since it can easily encourage fallacious thinking and thereby harm the very cause it hopes to advance – a cause with which I fully sympathize. Of course, the tenor of the passage is to encourage a self-critical attitude, and we're all in favor of that. But the same kind of reasoning could also be used to fend off the advice being given. After all, one can easily imagine rewriting the passage to put the boot on the other foot:

If someone tells you you're being hypersensitive or unreasonable, step off the path of least resistance that encourages you to defend and deny. Don't tell them their behavior supports privilege. Listen to what's being said. Take it seriously. Assume for the time being it's true, because given the power of the paths of least resistance, it probably is.

As my colleague and I found, navigating these shoals in our everyday interactions, achieving the proper admixture of knowledge, understanding, self-awareness, sensitivity, and reason, can be difficult. Still, I believe that in our attempts to manage this, it is important that we recognize and respect basic logical parameters. If we fail to do this, we do our cause a disservice.

In discussions of sexism, racism, heterosexism, heteronormativity, and other forms of prejudice, I have sometimes encountered two particular forms of specious reasoning. I will label these the *appeal to subjective response* and the *accusation of privilege*. My purpose here is simply to explain what these are and what is wrong with them.

The *appeal to subjective response* involves inferring that an action or statement expresses some sort of prejudice

solely on the grounds that someone is hurt or offended by it. Reasoning in this fashion is unsupportable and leads to all kinds of problems. To see how this is so, let us consider two specific examples.

Example 1: A teacher says to a class: 'Imagine a doctor and nurse who work together and fall in love. Should he continue as her boss?'

This statement is possibly both sexist and heterosexist. I say 'possibly' because context in such cases is everything. It need not be objectionable if, for instance, it is just one of many varied scenarios thrown out by a creative writing instructor to illustrate plot possibilities. But if it belongs to a persistent pattern of stereotyped thinking, then it is open to criticism.

How would we justify the claim that the utterance is sexist? The standard procedure is to define the relevant concept and then show how a particular instance falls under it. So in this case, we would offer a definition of sexism that includes the act of presupposing harmful gender stereotypes or oppressive notions of normality and argue that the teacher in Example 1 is doing just that. The charge of heterosexism would be supported in a similar way.

Now contrast that with the following:

Example 2: A teacher says to a class: 'Imagine a doctor and a nurse who work together and fall in love. Should they keep working together?'

This seems unobjectionable: no sexist or heterosexist assumptions are being made. But suppose a student did object, saying that when they hear talk of a 'doctor and nurse' relationship, this conjures up in their mind – and makes them painfully aware of – a long history of hierarchical doctor-nurse relationships in which the doctors are male and dominant, the nurses are female and subservient,

and gay relationships of any kind are excluded from the picture. So although what the teacher says may not explicitly reinforce oppressive stereotypes, it may still be judged sexist and heterosexist in some sense – namely, relative to this student's subjective response informed by her particular experiences.

Is this a reasonable argument? Absolutely not. Yet some accusations of prejudice take essentially this form. One well-known example concerns the use of the word 'niggardly'. In 1999 a student at the University of Wisconsin-Madison complained to the faculty senate about a professor of English who had used the word while teaching a class on Chaucer. She charged the professor with using racially offensive language. It is, of course, possible to imagine someone using this word, perhaps emphasizing it repeatedly in remarks directed at African-Americans in a manner designed to produce discomfort. In that case, its use could certainly be judged racist. And if I was aware that my audience might dislike the term, perhaps because they mistakenly believed it to contain a racial slur, then my decision to use it could perhaps be criticized as insensitive. But notice, in both these situations we look at more than just the audience's reaction to decide whether the speaker is at fault. We also consider the speaker's intentions, or at least the speaker's levels of self-awareness and sensitivity. To conclude that the speaker's use of the word is racist – or blameworthy in some other way – *solely* on the basis of the listener's subjective response is a serious error.

In fact this sort of reasoning is not just unsound; it is harmful. For if we give it credence we will be forced to embrace a shifting, unstable notion of what constitutes prejudice, a concept that will be far less useful as a tool for criticizing real prejudice when we encounter it. Defining racist, sexist, or heterosexist speech solely, or even primarily, by reference to audience responses means that the same utterance made by the same person to the same audience can be innocent one day and prejudiced the next simply because, in the meantime, the listener has had

experiences that affect the way he or she responds. It means that *any* statement whatsoever could be deemed prejudiced, since if someone sincerely claims to be offended, oppressed, demeaned, or marginalized by something said, then that emotional response, in itself, validates their complaint.

This is not to imply that audience response is irrelevant. Obviously, one important indicator that something you've said might be objectionable is that someone objects to it; and if this happens repeatedly and with various audiences, it behooves you to reflect critically on the charges being made against you. After all, accusations of prejudice usually are prompted by words or deeds that express prejudice. But the mere fact that your listeners object or feel offended does not prove that their response is justified. They may have misunderstood your meaning or intention. They may be overreacting. Their reaction may be irrational.

The key point here is easily demonstrated. The subjective response of a listener or reader is *never* sufficient evidence that someone's words are racist, sexist or heterosexist since one can always ask the question: Is the response reasonable? Of course, this question itself does not always have a clear-cut answer, for the parties in dispute are likely to disagree here, too. But that is a different problem. The point still holds that the reasonableness of a person's response is always an open question.

Often, when there is a disagreement over this question, a secondary quarrel ensues about whether an apology is in order and, if so, what form it should take. Suppose you say something that I find hurtful or offensive and I tell you this. How should you respond? Unless you are going out of your way to be aggressively dismissive of my feelings, you will probably say that you are sorry. But 'sorry' can be said in many ways. You could be:

- a) Expressing *remorse* – You're sorry that you said something objectionable or insensitive, and you're asking for forgiveness.

- b) Expressing *sympathy* – You're sorry that I am suffering in some way.
- c) Expressing *regret* – You're sorry that what you said hurt or annoyed me. If you had known it would have this effect you might not have said it.

Notice that neither the expression of sympathy nor the expression of regret need carry any admission of wrongdoing. Both are, in fact, quite compatible with your belief that my reaction is unreasonable.

The wounded party naturally wants to hear an expression of remorse – in effect, an admission of guilt. But should you offer this if it is not sincere? Admitting guilt when we don't believe we've done anything wrong is something most of us find very hard to do. And any moral credit we might receive for our apparently self-critical receptivity to the perspective of others is more than offset by our insincerity. One could even speak here of a lack of integrity.

Faced with this dilemma – torn between wanting to be responsive yet also wanting to be sincere – we typically say we are sorry in one of the other two senses. The word 'sorry' then seems to convey the *form* of an apology; but in truth it merely expresses sympathy or regret. For the person offended, of course, this is not good enough. In fact, it seems to compound the initial offense by being patronizing. To them we seem to be saying: 'Yes, yes, I know you're offended, but there's really nothing to be offended about,' rather as we'd say to a child, 'I know you're afraid, but trust me, there's nothing to be afraid of.' Yet what is one supposed to do? To express indifference would be callous. To admit guilt would be insincere. Their asking me to try to understand why they might be offended is all very well; but shouldn't they, by the same token, try to understand why I don't feel able to apologize in good faith?

This secondary exchange leads us to the second fallacy mentioned earlier, the *accusation of privilege*, which might arise in something like the following way. Imagine Pat to be a straight white male, and Kim to be someone who doesn't

have one or more of these attributes. Pat says something that Kim criticizes as racist, sexist, or heterosexist. The conversation proceeds as follows:

Pat: I just don't get it. I don't see anything wrong with what I said.

Kim: That's because you don't know what it's like to be unprivileged, oppressed, and marginalized.

Pat: Well I just think you're being hypersensitive and unreasonable.

Kim: That's what the voice of privilege always says. You're attitude is dismissive.

Now Kim's claim that privilege often defends itself by accusing others of hypersensitivity or illogicality is undoubtedly true. But that doesn't make her riposte appropriate. On the contrary, it is misguided for at least two reasons.

First of all, it is logically irrelevant. Pat is denying that what he said is sexist. The appropriate response to this – to say it again – is to define the concept of sexism clearly and then show how what has been said falls under it. But in the above exchange, Kim evades this task. Instead, Kim first offers an explanation of why Pat 'doesn't get it' in terms of Pat's life story, and then tries to account for his charge of unreasonableness by claiming it is typical of his type. The explanations may be psychologically and sociologically astute, but they still evade rather than engage the issue at hand.

Recall a key point made earlier: it is always possible that one's subjective response to what another says or does is unreasonable. This is relevant here, too; it means that Pat might be right. Imagine, for instance, this extreme situation. A female student tells a male teacher that she finds his wearing a tie threatening: it smacks of authority, privilege, bondage, and ultimately, she says, threatens her subtly and symbolically with the noose. His response is to say, 'I don't get it. How can my wearing a tie suggest a threat to harm you? I think you're being unreasonable.'

Now if something like this occurs in normal circumstances, the chances are that the student is mentally ill. Yet she can still respond to the charge that she's being unreasonable by saying, 'That's what privilege always says.' But the fact that privilege very often does defend itself in this way is obviously beside the point here. It isn't a valid piece of reasoning or an additional bit of evidence that helps to justify her initial complaint. It's a *substitute* for a justification, a big fat red herring.

A second objection to the statement 'that's what privilege typically says' is that it closes down discussion. Moreover, it does so in a pernicious way.

How is Pat supposed to respond to the observation that he is saying 'what privilege typically says'? Presumably by stopping in his tracks, reflecting on things, and becoming more self-aware, more culturally sensitive, and so on. These would doubtless be excellent outcomes: we could all benefit from enhanced self-awareness and sensitivity. And pointing out to someone that what they are saying is what members of a group to which they belong typically say can certainly sometimes be useful. This is no doubt how Kim would defend her remark.

But Kim's observation moves the debate from a discussion about reasons to one about causes. This is what makes it pernicious. It says to Pat: 'I'm not going to bother showing how your claim is false or unjustified. Instead, I'm just going to point out what is causing you to speak as you do – viz. your position of privilege.'

Treating someone's utterances as mere effects of causes is one way of showing that person a profound lack of respect. The subtle implication is that what they say is not the result of reason or reflection but merely a consequence of other forces at work on them. Exactly the same strategy has been used countless times by men against women, whenever an idea has been dismissed as 'exactly the sort of thing women would say'. This move is insulting. Just how insulting can be gauged by considering the sort of occasion when we might consider it appropriate. One

instance that comes to mind is when we are dealing with people who are mentally deranged. Then there may, sadly, be times when we would be justified in ignoring the content of what they say and choose to focus, instead, on the condition responsible for their utterances ('It's not him that's saying those terrible things – it's the illness.').

Thus, whatever the intention behind an observation like 'that is what privilege typically says', such responses are more likely to insult than to persuade. And they are more likely to produce frustration than a renewed commitment to self-criticism. The accused, after all, is in a position akin to that of Joseph K in Kafka's *The Trial* who, when he protests to a priest that he is innocent, is told, 'But that is how the guilty speak.'

It is a wonderful thing that we have reached a point in history when sophisticated critiques of prejudice, injustice, and oppression in their many and often subtle forms abound. It is a fine thing to cultivate awareness of the many ways that we unwittingly participate in forms of speech and behavior that perpetuate prejudice. But just as we try to avoid prejudice, we must also be careful to avoid specious reasoning which risks bringing a good cause into disrepute.

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