



UNIVERSITÀ
DEGLI STUDI
DI TORINO

Theoretical philosophy: The ethics of belief

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Philosophy International Curriculum



Bolinger on racial generalizations

- Renée Jorgensen Bolinger, 'The rational impermissibility of accepting (some) racial generalizations', *Synthese*, 197:2415–2431, 2020.
- The literature on pragmatic encroachment shows that the presence of practical factors can have consequences for the level of evidence required for a belief to be rational.
- Bolinger adopts a similar approach for assumptions based on racial generalisations (and statistical generalisations in general). Since the harm that could result from acting on the basis of a wrong assumption could be considerable in such cases, such assumptions require not only a very high level of evidence, but also an appropriate type of evidence.



Bolinger on racial generalizations

- ‘Cosmos Club: The night before he is to be presented with the Presidential Medal of Freedom, John Hope Franklin hosts a celebratory dinner party at the Cosmos Club. All the other black men in the club are uniformed attendants. While walking through the club, a woman sees him, calls him over, presents her coat check ticket and orders him to bring her coat.’ (2416)
- ‘Franklin had been the Cosmos Club’s first black member, and was still one of very few. By contrast, nearly all of the club’s numerous attendants were men of African descent. So when the woman was presented with the visual experience of a black man in the club’s lobby, she endorsed an empirically well-supported hypothesis—one that took full account of the prior probabilities.’ (2416)



Bolinger on racial generalizations

- The woman in the example seems to be doing something wrong:
- The error is not epistemic (her assumption is justified), but practical (she should not have acted accordingly);
- Epistemically, the assumption is correct, but it is nonetheless unjustified due to a moral obligation.
- The woman's assumption is incorrect from an epistemic point of view.



Bolinger on racial generalizations

- What acceptance is:
 - When an agent accepts p , she uses p to frame her deliberative statespace: she dismisses the possibility that $\neg p$ from consideration, and is disposed to rely on p in her practical reasoning.
 - Acceptance is neither a purely theoretic nor purely practical attitude. It is governed by epistemic norms and sensitive to practical costs, aiming to be efficiently accurate. (2417)



Bolinger on rational generalizations

- My analysis has two separable but complimentary parts:
- (i) an account of the requirements for rational acceptance, and
- (ii) an argument that inferences like the one in *cosmos* impose disproportionate risk of certain types of error, which compound into wrongs significant enough to make the inference fail the requirements for rational acceptance. (2416-17)



Bolinger on racial generalizations

- Gatecrashers. Only 25 fares to an event are sold, but 500 people are observed in the stands. Based just on this evidence, it's .95 likely that a given event attendee, Alfred, failed to pay his fare. Tickets were not distributed and fares paid in cash, so no further evidence is available. On the standards of proof for tort liability, it need only be likely “on the balance of probabilities” that the agent incurred the liability, but it does not seem permissible to rule based on the statistical evidence alone that Alfred is liable to be fined for failure to pay his fare, despite the fact that it easily clears the probability threshold. (2418)



Bolinger on racial generalizations

- Buses. The Blue Bus co. (which operates all and only blue buses) owns 90% of the buses in town; the Green Bus Co. operates the other 10%. Jones is injured by a bus. It seems impermissible to rule that the Blue Bus co. is liable based just on the statistical evidence, despite the fact that it's .9 likely that the bus that injured Jones was owned by the Blue Bus co. By contrast, if the two companies operated equal proportions of buses, but an eyewitness whom we know to be 80% reliable testifies that the bus was blue, it seems that it would be permissible to rule that Blue Bus Co. is liable on the basis of the testimony, even though conditional on that evidence it's only .8 likely that Blue Bus Co. was at fault. (2418)



Bolinger on racial generalizations

- Characteristics of the cases:
 - The available evidence comes from a statistical generalisation about a group.
 - Such evidence, even if it carries a very high probability, seems insufficient to justify accepting a proposition concerning a particular member of that group.



Bolinger on rational generalizations

- The practical adequacy of a proposition:
- ‘To make things more precise, we can put an agent’s available actions in a context into a partial ordering, ranked by their probability-weighted value on the agent’s current evidence e . Call this S ’s e -based ranking. If we then update e by changing the probability of p to 1 (and adjusting accordingly) and generate a new ranking, we’ll get a model of what it’d be most rational for S to do if she were certain of p . If the top-ranked actions in the e -based ranking do not differ from the top-ranked action in the updated ranking, then S is practically adequate with respect to p : the difference between her current evidential situation and certainty in p makes no difference to how it is rationally best for her to act.’ (2420)



Bolinger on rational generalizations

- Characterizing evidential strength:
- ‘It pairs naturally with a normic support model, or a modal conception like safety or sensitivity, on which e is stronger evidence for p the greater the sphere of worlds in which if S has e , p is true (for safety), or in which if p is false, S doesn’t have e (for sensitivity).’ (2421)
- ‘Holding the costs fixed, S can be justified in accepting p on a body of evidence e_1 , and not on other evidence e_2 , if e_1 but not e_2 is strong enough to license S in dismissing $\neg p$ from salience, even if the probability of p conditional on e_2 is higher than conditional on e_1 .’ (2422)



Bolinger on racial generalizations

- When the costs of acting on a proposition p are 'high' because we risk to significantly harm a person, this has an effect on the practical adequacy of p by raising the level of evidence required for our acceptance of p to be justified.
- Furthermore, a high degree of evidence may not be sufficient. The evidence required may have to be strong.



Bolinger on racial generalizations

- ‘When the costs of error are high largely because a p-based mistake would harm or morally wrong another agent A, accepting p without adequate justification is both epistemically and morally impermissible. Epistemically, it involves dismissing relevant possibilities without adequate reason. Morally, in doing so S fails to give adequate weight to A’s moral claims, and recklessly imposes a risk of the error costs on A. Even if she is lucky—p turns out to be true, so the harm to A of a p-based mistake fails to eventuate—she has still done moral wrong in recklessly imposing the risk. Gatecrashers and buses have this structure.’ (2422)



Bolinger on racial generalizations

- What are the consequences for COSMOS? In the example, it does not appear that John Hope Franklin is being seriously wronged. Why, then should the behaviour (and assumption) of the woman who treats him like a waiter be wrong?



Bolinger on racial generalizations

- ‘In some cases (including gatecrashers), the severity of the harm of a single, isolated mistake suffices to explain the wrong involved in unjustified acceptance. In others, however, the wrong arises not from the one-off costs, but from the pattern of repeated risk imposition over time. The evidence used as grounds for accepting p can partially shape the pattern, disproportionately exposing an individual or group to repeated risks of the harms of that type of error. It is this that explains the failure in buses, and why even highly probabilifying generalizations based in race, gender, or other visible social identities seem intuitively to be peculiarly inadequate to justify acceptance of stereotypical propositions about group members.’ (2424)



Bolinger on racial generalizations

- ‘If some of A’s socially visible identity-tracking features (race, sex, etc.,) are a popular heuristic for inferring that p, then simply in virtue of his visible identity, A is likely to be exposed to risk of p-based mistakes in a wide variety of contexts, by a variety of agents. When these features are also stable properties, which A will exhibit for a significant portion of his life, the risk compounds. This patterned risk exposure transforms risks of harms that might have been insignificant, taken on their own, to forces that shape and restrict A’s opportunities and alternatives.’ (2424)



Bolinger on racial generalizations

- ‘While a reasoner who idiosyncratically accepts p based on statistics about the group might impose a relatively minor risk, an agent who relies on a stereotypical heuristic contributes to the collective harm imposed by the patterned risk.’ (2425)
- ‘The fact that she knows many others are already disposed to make inferences that, collectively, wrongfully harm a group, gives S strong moral reason to avoid contributing to the harm. ...We need not say that the harm attributable to S is greater, given that her action forms part of a larger collective harm; only that when S ’s action would contribute to a significant collective harm, the moral reason to refrain is stronger than it would otherwise be, and hence the moral wrong S does if she acts anyway is greater.’ (2425)



Bolinger on racial generalizations

- ‘The one-off costs are relatively insignificant: it’s an affront to Franklin’s status, a failure to recognize his achievements, perhaps it’s offensive. But part of what feels wrong about the woman’s inference is that her evidence—Franklin’s membership in the African American racial group—is a stereotypical heuristic for inferring lower social status (in this case, being staff rather than a member of the club). The woman in the Cosmos Club is just one of many agents who will take Franklin’s race as license to assume he occupies a socially subordinate role. The mistake made once, idiosyncratically, may be trivial; but made frequently it deprives the members of that race of opportunities to signal authority and high social status, which in turn limits their opportunities for advancement and constrains their options...’ (2425-6)



Bolinger on racial generalizations

- It remains permissible to accept a proposition p on the basis of a statistical generalisation if the risks in the case of error are low.
- Hobbyist: To unwind at night you read old court cases. You read the Blue Bus case, and based on the statistics, form the opinion that Blue Bus Co. was responsible for Jones' injuries. You then go to bed, and have no further dealings with the case or claimants.
- Bored: You are bored at the Cosmos club, and decide to ask the nearest staff member for a drink. You see someone (Franklin) who looks to you like an attendant. You know that all attendants wear nameplates, but you can't from this distance tell whether he has a nameplate. Knowing that if you're mistaken you'll discover your error before addressing him, you walk over. (2426)



The examples

- ‘Cosmos Club: The night before he is to be presented with the Presidential Medal of Freedom, John Hope Franklin hosts a celebratory dinner party at the Cosmos Club. All the other black men in the club are uniformed attendants. While walking through the club, a woman sees him, calls him over, presents her coat check ticket and orders him to bring her coat.’ (2416)
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