Racial Realities

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Abstract
How should we conceive of conflicts that seem intractable? Is there any hope of a resolution? We observe impasses between various groups concerning the Israeli and Palestinian conflict, the Movement for Black Lives and racial conservatives, and Indigenous voices versus settler colonial states. Some aspects of these impasses can surely be explained by an unwillingness by one or more parties to the conflict to yield any ground. Might there also be room for misunderstanding generated by radically different ways of conceiving the world? According to the different worlds thesis, people come to radically different understandings of the world because they inhabit incompatible conceptual realities. In this article, I endeavor to explore possible ways of understanding the thesis and its potential impact on certain normative practices we tend to take for granted.

1. Racial Memory and Racial History

Fights over the right conception of racial history are often passionate and marked by deeply entrenched impasses. Many in the US remember the 1960s as a turbulent period, especially with respect to racial conflict. This was, after all, the decade in which Medgar Evers, Martin Luther King Jr., and Malcolm X were assassinated, and major riots in Harlem, Watts, Newark, and Detroit were set off by violence perpetrated by white police officers against Black people. (The Brixton riots in 1981 were similarly sparked by police violence against Black people.)

Perhaps the event that took place at the Cambridge Union in 1965 between James Baldwin and William F. Buckley Jr. crystallizes this turbulence in verbal form. The two debated the motion 'The American Dream is at the expense of the American Negro', with Baldwin representing the affirmative and Buckley the opposition. Nicholas Buccola recounts the debate and the events that led up to it in his wonderful book *The Fire is Upon Us* (2020). He describes the two debaters in the following way:

> Baldwin was the grandson of slaves and had risen from the Harlem ghetto to become one of the world's most famous writers […]. Baldwin believed that the soul of the country was desperately in need of redemption, and he had devoted his voice and pen to hasten the nation's deliverance.

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> Buckley may as well have been from another planet […]. At the heart of [his] message was the belief that American society was basically good, and that it was the sacred duty of conservatives to defend it from any ideas, personalities, or movements that were deemed threats to it. (Buccola, 2020, p. 2)

Baldwin and Buckley represented the stark impasse that existed between many Black and white Americans. How could such radically different worldviews even begin to figure out how to fix what is broken, especially when one of those voices thinks the world is basically fine?

How should we conceive of conflicts that seem intractable? Is there any hope of a resolution? We observe impasses between various groups concerning the Israeli and Palestinian conflict, the Movement for Black Lives and racial conservatives, and Indigenous voices versus settler colonial states. Some aspects of these impasses can surely be explained by an unwillingness by one or more parties to the conflict to yield any ground. Might there also be room for misunderstanding generated by radically different ways of conceiving the world?

Some people deny or downplay the role race plays in explaining social ills. Disparities in wealth, employment, or incarceration are better explained by personal or cultural failings than by racism. In the UK, for instance, the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities released a report that stated the British system was no longer deliberately rigged against ethnic minorities; rather, geography, family influence, socio-economic background, culture, and religion play a more significant role in one's life chances.[1] The report's conclusion contradicts Nahella Ashraf's sentiment – a sentiment I presume is widely shared by many of the UK's Black residents – that systemic racism is inherent in Britain's police force and British society in general (Thomas and Kahn, 2022). We see here yet again an apparent clash of worlds.

The impasses I have been highlighting so far are sometimes explained by the *different worlds* thesis. According to the thesis, people come to radically different understandings of the world because they inhabit incompatible conceptual realities. This could perhaps explain the chasm between, for example, Baldwin and Buckley. The thesis is also applied to the perception of broader group-based chasms. In this article, I endeavor to

[1] *Inclusive Britain: Government Response to the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities* (2022).

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explore possible ways of understanding the thesis and its potential impact on certain normative practices we tend to take for granted.

2. Some Preliminary Issues

Before examining proposals for the different worlds thesis, it would be useful to discuss two broad ideas: the presumed connection between race and language and the nature of these worlds. Key theorists observed a connection between language and race, sometimes stating that language is the characteristic feature of race. For example, early philologists like Ernest Renan proposed the existence of linguistic races, decipherable on the basis of language (Omoniyi, 2016). W.E.B. Du Bois included shared language among the features in his definition of race (Du Bois, 2014). Bill Ashcroft remarks that language 'has always "inscribed" rather than "described" human difference' by using 'chromatic signifiers' and that 'the reality of racial experience centres […] in language' (Ashcroft, 2001, pp. 314–15). Ashcroft also cites English historian Edward Freeman as representative of late nineteenth-century thought on the link between race and language:

> If races and nations, though largely formed by the workings of an artificial law, are still real and living things, groups in which the idea of kindred is the idea around which everything has grown, how are we to define our races and nations? How are we to mark them off from one another? […] I say unhesitatingly that for practical purposes there is one test, and one only, and that that test is language. (Ashcroft, 2001, p. 316)

Thus, a presumed link between race and language is longstanding.

Ashcroft highlights philologist and historian Ernest Renan's work on the connection between race and language. Renan claims 'race' refers to two things: physical race and culture. Language plays a central role in his understanding of race, which is characterized in the following statement:

> Language is thus almost completely substituted for race in the division of humanity into groups, or rather the word 'race' changes meaning. Language, religion, laws, mores brought the race into being much more than blood did. (Ashcroft, 2001, p. 320)

The Aryan and Semitic races are two prime examples of linguistic races for Renan. According to Renan, there are five factors that

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determine a race: 'a separate language, a literature with identifiable characteristics, a religion, a history, and a civilisation' (Ashcroft, 2001, p. 320).

We should take care to resist views like Renan's because they entail troublesome ideas that ought to be rejected. First, Ashcroft claims Renan's notion of linguistic races fails to disentangle itself from biological race. Even though Renan explicitly rejected biological race, his characterizations of linguistic races appeared to rely on what Ashcroft calls the 'racialist priority of color' (Ashcroft, 2001, p. 321). In short, distinguishing linguistic races from one another presupposed biological race. Second, though Renan posits a determinative link between language and culture, he cannot say which comes first in order of explanation. Ashcroft quotes Renan: 'The spirit of each people and its language are very closely connected: the spirit creates the language, and the language in turn serves as formula and limit for the spirit' (Ashcroft, 2001, p. 321). Ashcroft's main point is that there is a vicious circularity here that undermines Renan's claim.

Though the story about language, race, and identity told by people like Renan ultimately falters, that there is a connection is surely right. As I have already noted, we can observe differences in interpretation that trend along racial lines. The question before us is why that is so. I resist stories that suggest interpretive differences can be reduced to racial identity. But this need not put us off completely from explanations that draw on race in some way.

Turning to the second issue, what is it we are discussing when speaking of 'different worlds'? The proposed distance between relevant groups can be described as epistemic, hermeneutic, metaphysical, or some combination of these. According to the first, divergent worlds are epistemically distinct. This may mean explaining the divide by way of standpoint theory. Appeals to hermeneutics could mean characterizing divergent worlds in terms of different meanings. Lastly, if the basis of the divide is metaphysical, we are encouraged to think these worlds are ontologically distinct. For now, I will leave it to each candidate view to say how it approaches the nature of worlds question.

Now that we've considered these preliminary issues, we can start to view proposals for the *different worlds thesis*.

3. The Different Worlds Thesis

What does it mean to say that various groups inhabit different worlds? This question sets our agenda. The thesis is an intriguing

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proposal for explaining the existence of deep impasses between various groups. It is fairly easy to think of someone who seemingly observes the same things but perceives the world puzzlingly differently from you as living in a different world. There are even occasions when reading or listening to someone speak gives this impression as well. Sometimes this is a hasty judgment whose function is to protect your own views and biases. But at other times, it can feel like a real explanation. What we should figure out is whether the phrase has anything more than metaphorical value to offer. Let us examine it closer to judge its viability.

Perhaps Thomas Kuhn's reflections on scientific revolutions provide the strongest form of the different worlds thesis. Kuhn describes scientific revolutions as 'those non-cumulative developmental episodes in which an older paradigm is replaced in whole or in part by an incompatible new one' (Kuhn, 1962). According to Thomas Nickels, Kuhn describes a radical change between two paradigms in which they 'cannot be compared against the same goals and methodological standards and values' and that 'scientists on different sides of a paradigm debate "live in different worlds"' (Nickles, 2017). These paradigm changes typically involve changes in meanings, goals, practices, and world perception. Changes in meaning correspond to a radical change in the perceived ontology of the world.

For Kuhn, revolutionary changes produce discontinuities between paradigms. These discontinuities make two paradigms *incommensurable*. There is plenty of debate about the concept's meaning, but I will draw on Daian Florez's characterization of it (Florez, 2024). According to Florez, the semantic version says:

> *Incommensurability*
> Theories T1 and T2 are incommensurable if and only if the terms in the language of T1 are not semantically equivalent to terms in the language of T2.

According to this definition, it is enough for translation failure to go in one direction. T2 can lack semantically equivalent terms for expressions in T1, while T1 can contain semantically equivalent terms for expressions in T2. What is left unclear is how much translation failure is required before we conclude the languages are incommensurable. Perhaps there is a threshold where the lack of semantically equivalent terms undermines communication, making it virtually impossible to reconstruct truths in that language. Alternatively, we could imagine a language organized much like a Quinean web of belief, with some concepts more central to the network and others more peripheral. On this conception, two

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languages are incommensurable if there is a lack of semantically equivalent terms for central concepts. Rather than get bogged down in the details, let's assume we all have a good idea of when incommensurability has been met.

Before we can apply Kuhn's account, we need to characterize the relata. Consider the conflicting views represented by Baldwin and Buckley. Let us suppose both act as representatives for black and white English speakers. Clearly, neither represents 100% of each respective group. We are not dealing with organisms linked by a hive mind as in some science fiction narrative. Human beings have differing opinions and perceptions. Falling under a particular racial classification does not alter that reality. Thus, we need a more fine-grained characterization.

I believe the concept *community of practice* serves our purposes. Penelope Eckert and Sally McConnell-Ginet define a community of practice as:

> an aggregate of people who come together around mutual engagement in an endeavor. Ways of doing things, ways of talking, beliefs, values, power relations—in short, practices—emerge in the course of this mutual endeavor. (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 1992, p. 97)

Eckert and McConnell-Ginet list as examples people working in a factory, a neighborhood play group, a family, and the Supreme Court. The examples highlight smaller units, but communities of practice can also be large, intensive, or diffuse and can survive significant changes in group membership. Essentially, the nature of the community's practices distinguishes one group from another. The virtue of the concept, according to Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, is that it 'takes us away from the community defined by a location or by a population. Instead, it focuses on a community defined by social engagement' (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 1992, p. 96).

Eckert and McConnell-Ginet's insights share affinities with an idea James Baldwin expresses about the relationship between language and experience. He eloquently wrote that people 'evolve a language in order to describe and thus control their circumstances, or in order not to be submerged by a reality that they cannot articulate' (Baldwin, 1979). This is consistent with the community of practice concept insofar as we restrict our focus to groups whose members share the relevant kind of social interaction. Baldwin emphasizes a shared endeavor around which linguistic practices emerge. Given these insights, the relevant relata are discursive communities of practice. This characterization allows us to apply the incommensurability

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thesis – two racialized discursive communities RD_1 and RD_2 are incommensurable if and only if the terms in the language of RD_1 are not semantically equivalent to the terms in the language of RD_2.

Donald Davidson raises powerful objections to views like Kuhn's that we should now consider. The first thing he notes is that the metaphor of different viewpoints only makes sense 'if there is a common co-ordinate system on which to plot them' (Davidson, 1984, p. 184). However, if we admit to a common system, then these points of view cannot be radically incomparable.

Secondly, Davidson argues it is not clear the change in meaning from an old paradigm to a new one that Kuhn suggests amounts to radical conceptual change. To illustrate the point, Davidson supposes he is a Minister of Scientific Language who oversees a new policy – a prohibition on using words that refer to emotions, feelings, thoughts, and intentions and instead refer to physiological states and happenings. Davidson wonders: 'How do I tell whether my advice has been heeded if the new man speaks a new language? For all I know, the shiny new phrases, though stolen from the old language in which they refer to physiological stirrings, may in his mouth play the role of the messy old mental concepts' (Davidson, 1984, p. 189). His point is that the vocabulary provides no basis for determining whether the new scheme is the same as or different from the old one. We can also apply this to different racial conceptual schemes.

Additionally, I doubt Kuhn's account can explain some of our normative practices. For one, if worlds are really incommensurable in the Kuhnian way, then how can we make sense of the normative demands we often place on one another? It is reasonable to assume that demands of justice require correctly identifying the instances of injustice that must be addressed. But if the two conflicting discursive communities significantly lack semantically equivalent terms, it makes the project of identification fraught. Presumably, the source of this difficulty is the relativism the view appears to entail. If the divergences in meaning really do signal radical differences in ontology – social ontology included – then there would be no basis for shared normative demands.

Another concern that emerges from the previous one is that the absence of a shared basis for normative demand and descriptive adequacy makes disagreement impossible. As has been pointed out countless times, the possibility of disagreement requires a shared basis of understanding at some level. Relativizing reality to a discursive community's conceptual scheme would undermine this basis.

Globalization and multiculturality also threaten the different worlds thesis. Distinct worldviews are tied to the distinctiveness of

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the groups with whom the language is associated. But in an ever-increasing multilingual and multicultural world, the viability of such distinctiveness becomes more difficult. You may think establishing a distinct discursive world depends on relatively isolated conditions in which they can be reproduced. We can draw an analogy with the racial naturalist's view about races. According to racial naturalism, races result from relative reproductive isolation – members located in a specific geographic region produce offspring with one another. It is reasonable to assume language production also occurs in these relatively isolated contexts, a process that includes the mutual construction of concepts and discursive norms that order one's perception of the world.

We find a less contentious version of the different worlds thesis in Kenyan writer and thinker Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's book *Decolonising the Mind* (1986). Thiong'o believes language serves a dual purpose: it is a means of communication as well as a carrier of culture. Thiong'o points to English as used in Britain, Sweden, and Denmark and Swahili in East and Central Africa as illustrations of his claim. English for the British, he says, 'is […] inseparably from its use as a tool of communication, a carrier of [British] culture and history', whereas it is only a means of communication for Swedes and Danes (Thiong'o, 1986, p. 13). Likewise, Swahili is a carrier of culture for parts of Kenya and Tanzania, particularly in Zanzibar, but only a means of communication for others.

Thiong'o says communication is the basis and process of evolving culture: 'In doing similar kinds of things and actions over and over again under similar circumstances, similar even in their mutability, certain patterns, moves, rhythms, habits, attitudes, experiences and knowledge emerge' (Thiong'o, 1986, p. 14). These experiences are handed over to subsequent generations as inherited bases for interactions with nature and each other. Thiong'o goes on to say these established patterns give rise to:

> a gradual accumulation of values which in time become almost self-evident truths governing their conception of what is right and wrong, good and bad, beautiful and ugly, courageous and cowardly, generous and mean in their internal and external relations. Over a time this becomes a way of life distinguishable from other ways of life. (Thiong'o, 1986, p. 14)

The repetition of speech in certain circumstances brings about a shared way of life. These values become second nature for members of this speech community, guiding judgments and perceptions of the world.

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Thiong'o also identifies three aspects of language as culture. First, culture is a product of and reflects history – 'Culture […] is a product and a reflection of human beings communicating with one another in the very struggle to create wealth and to control it' (Thiong'o, 1986, p. 15). Culture reflects history by forming images or pictures of the world of nature and nurture. Second, culture is an 'image-forming agent in the mind of a child' (Thiong'o, 1986, p. 15). We base our conception of ourselves as individuals and collectives on these images, which needn't necessarily correspond to the reality of the struggles that gave rise to them. The quality of those images impacts our capacity to creatively confront the world because they either clarify or distort 'the reality of our struggles' (Thiong'o, 1986, p. 15). Third, culture transmits or imparts these images through a specific language. Thiong'o writes, 'a specific culture is not transmitted through language in its universality but in its particularity as the language of a specific community with a specific history' (Thiong'o, 1986, p. 15). He says literature and orature are the main means of transmission. Thiong'o then characterizes the connection between language and culture in this way:

> Language carries culture, and culture carries, particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world. How people perceive themselves affects how they look at their culture, at their politics and at the social production of wealth, at their entire relationship to nature and to other beings. Language is thus inseparable from ourselves as a community of human beings with a specific form and character, a specific history, a specific relationship to the world. (Thiong'o, 1986, p. 16)

In Thiong'o, I believe we find a more realistic basis for the different worlds thesis. Although he does not strictly offer a race-based conception, Thiong'o is talking about the impact colonizing language has on the colonized, a subject not unrelated to race. In Thiong'o's view, we can see how different languages can come to diverge in conceptualization given the environments in which they are developed. Further, Thiong'o's distinction between *language as communication* and *language as culture* provides a way for us to make sense of cross-racial convergences in language while also maintaining the idea of important divergences between racialized discourses. If language carries culture and impacts the speaker's imagination the way he suggests, then there is a very real sense in which divergent

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collective interpretations of historical events can be attributed to different worlds.

However, Bill Ashcroft sees in Thiong'o a danger of conflating race with culture. Contrary to Thiong'o's idea that language carries culture, Ashcroft retorts, 'use of language is a signifier of culture, language does not contain that culture' (Ashcroft, 2001, p. 324). Ashcroft sees the potential in appropriating language for resistant ends, contrary to what he thinks is suggested in views like Thiong'o's. In fact, he sees Thiong'o's own English writing as an instance of resistance. Ashcroft appears to interpret Thiong'o as saying languages determine one's imaginative outlook irrevocably.

Additionally, Ashcroft denies a connection between 'race' and language. He understands 'race' to mean those biological groupings primarily characterized by physical attributes – especially color – and lines of descent. If we use race as a purported means of understanding particular speech, we err in appealing to something that is disconnected from reality. Further, we risk imprisoning resistance in an 'inward looking world'. Ashcroft insists post-colonial intellectuals must realize language has no race because the consequence of linking the two is the undermining of linguistic resistance: 'The ultimate consequence of the belief that language embodies race is the deafening silence of a rage that cannot be heard' (Ashcroft, 2001, p. 326).

I am not entirely convinced Ashcroft's objections are damning since it is not necessary to understand race as biological race. Social constructionist and anti-realist views might avoid the consequences Ashcroft anticipates. However, I do think we should heed his warnings about the effects of drawing too tight a connection between language and culture might provoke. If one is too insistent on this point, it leaves open the idea that addressing social injustice is futile. Albert Hirschman, for instance, details ways reactionaries have appealed to this strategy to resist calls for reform.[2]

Maybe the different worlds we are after can best be described as either an *epistemic bubble* or an *echo chamber*. As C. Thi Nguyen (2020) defines them, epistemic bubbles are social epistemic structures in which some relevant voices are excluded through omission, and echo chambers are social epistemic structures in which other relevant voices are actively discredited. Let us examine each in turn.

Nguyen claims epistemic bubbles form when certain information or voices are excluded from one's epistemic social network. For instance, we sometimes selectively expose ourselves only to like-

[2] For more, see Hirschman (1991).

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minded people or information. There are also instances in which the information we receive is filtered by authority figures or algorithmic processes. People who only watch Fox News or MSNBC, for example, are receiving a heavily curated news presentation and not comprehensive coverage. Nguyen thinks inadequate coverage is a central feature of epistemic bubbles; it is the result of omissive exclusions.

Should we understand racialized discourses in terms of epistemic bubbles? One advantage of doing so would be that it separates the presumed tight connection between race and language we saw reason to worry about earlier. Equating worlds with epistemic bubbles would allow us to capture observations about relative cohesiveness in thought without presupposing the existence of biological races. It would also avoid claiming a certain group of speakers are monolithic because they share a race. The network aspect of bubble communities localizes the group's membership in important ways.

That being said, the fact of epistemic bubbles' relative fragility makes me think this isn't the right explanation. The examples we observed in the introduction feel more deeply entrenched than what's on offer here. They don't seem like the sorts of things one could be extracted from simply by being introduced to a more comprehensive set of sources. What is left unaccounted for is the mode of interpretation people bring to the things they encounter. Essentially, our linguistic socialization leaves a heavy imprint on how our perceptual capacities work. Merely encountering a more comprehensive set of views will not necessarily alter our interpretations in positive ways.

Understanding racialized worlds in terms of echo chambers could offer a better option. Keeping with the theme of community, Nguyen clarifies the notion: 'I use the term "echo chamber" to mean an epistemic community which creates a significant disparity in trust between members and non-members' (Nguyen, 2020, p. 146). Non-members are excluded through epistemic discrediting while members' epistemic credentials are simultaneously boosted. Also, gaining membership in the group requires general agreement with the group's core set of beliefs, including beliefs that support the disparity in trust.

Admittedly, there is something to this. People who strongly identify with a particular group may indeed find themselves crediting members more highly while discrediting and distrusting non-members more. However, I do not believe racialized discourses are echo chambers. There are many who engage views from different groups in good faith and who do their best to understand a counter-view. This approach goes against the proclivities of someone caught

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up in an echo chamber. Though the disparity in trust and credit represented by this concept is a real phenomenon, it does not work as a general explanation for conflicting racialized discourses.

I speculate a proposal that views the nature of difference as metaphysical could draw inspiration from Afro-pessimist discussions of ontology. Roughly, the idea is that if you conceive of beings with different ontological statuses, you could say these beings inhabit different worlds because the dominant discourse's use of 'universal humanism' is specious; it surreptitiously claims certain humanoid beings are not human. In so far as this discourse is used, it obscures the relevant realities for these various groups. I'm not entirely sure this follows, but I raise it as a possible path to explore. I leave it to others to work out.

Although we've seen some compelling reasons to be skeptical of the different worlds thesis, I am inclined to defend it, nonetheless. But instead of centering epistemological, hermeneutical, or metaphysical considerations, I turn instead to *normative* ones. In short, racial realities amount to a network of normative relations that make different things permissible or impermissible. The idea I am going for here is about the kinds of things you can do and say to a person based on the role their perceived social identity plays in a system of power relations. These are group-level attributions that come to affect their members in various ways.

By and large, societies are racially stratified social orders. In part, racial identities heavily influence the distribution of benefits and burdens. Race is one dimension used to divide people in order to regulate access. Race is also informed by and helps inform the shape of other dimensions like gender, sexuality, class, and ability. Stratification refers to 'the unequal distribution of people across social categories that are characterized by differential access to scarce resources' (Massey, 2007, p. 1). Sociologist Douglas Massey notes that resources can be material, symbolic, or emotional.

I submit that one effect of this stratification is the production of significantly different 'worlds', zones of ethical concern that vary in scope. These zones do not strictly follow racial lines, but race can often play a significant explanatory role in a person's response to some event. Note that by *race*, I am not using it in the classificatory sense, but something like race as culture. The race/culture nexus both influences and is influenced by the kinds of practices localized communities devise in pursuit of a shared endeavor.

This is not to deny that epistemological, hermeneutical, or metaphysical considerations play a role; it is just that they do not take center stage as the main explanatory element. In my view, those

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elements are things that emerge with the development of a practice. I draw once again on Eckert and McConnell-Ginet's use of a community of practice to help conceptualize how these things come together.

Eckert and McConnell-Ginet aver that the community of practice 'is where observable action and interaction do the work of producing, reproducing, and resisting the organization of power in society, and societal discourses of gender, age, race, etc.' (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 1992, p. 98). The affirmation or denial of racial realities hinges largely on differences in power and one's relation to it. The privileges a group has, or the detriments, are part of the environment it must address. A group's predicament understandably conditions linguistic patterns that, as Baldwin attests, attempt to control or articulate one's experience. Groups with widely divergent predicaments develop discourses that can feel worlds apart.

4. Understanding

The relationship between the 'worlds' question and understanding is motivated by the former's impact on the latter. If people inhabit different worlds with different perceptual, semantic, and ethical norms, we rightly expect divergences in understanding. For example, this idea seemingly explains how two people can observe the 'same' data and come to conflicting conclusions.

Depending on how these worlds are characterized, different worlds talk could also require bold revisions of basic concepts we take for granted. For instance, what would be the basis for justice claims if these worlds are understood as incommensurable, even partially? Surely, the hope of converging on an overlapping concept between different worlds would be unlikely, if not impossible.

We've spent the last several pages attempting to clarify the notion of different worlds. Perhaps we should now take a moment to clarify how we should understand *understanding*. Scholars have offered various characterizations. Jonathan Kvanvig (2003), for instance, distinguishes between two senses: *propositional* and *objectual* understanding. Propositional understanding takes the form 'I understand that P' while objectual understanding takes the grammatical form 'I understand P.' Neil Cooper (1994) refers to *cognitive understanding* – 'the understanding of things, phenomena, events, truths, situations, states of affairs and so on' (Cooper, 1994, p. 1).

There are differences in understanding at the *discursive* level. You will readily recognize some of these immediately. If you are not an avid poetry reader, you will likely find it hard to understand what

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is happening in a poem. You may need to learn the various writing styles and conventions poets use in their work before you can understand their poetry. Kvanvig's two senses of understanding may work well at this level. You can fail to understand Lucille Clifton's poem *Brothers* in the objectual sense. This would be failing to understand why, for example, she makes some of the choices she does. You could also experience failure in propositional understanding, not knowing that the poem is a dialogue between Lucifer and God.

Presumably, there can be both objectual and propositional failures of understanding at work in the racial conflicts we observed earlier. We also allow for a multiplicity of different understandings on certain occasions. In aesthetic contexts, for example, open-ended interpretation is often welcome and appreciated. Such open-endedness is more restricted in political contexts. I suspect this is because there is an assumption of universality or commonness driving good-faith discussion.

Until now, we've been operating on the assumption that inhabiting different worlds potentially impacts one's understanding. Perhaps some of us have also assumed being associated with one world (or related set of worlds) restricts our ability to understand a different one. It is not entirely clear to me that this is true. The different worlds thesis encourages us to contemplate the differences between human beings, but we should not neglect those aspects that also tie us together.

Differences in imagination can serve as the source of an impasse. For example, former US Secretary of Commerce Wilbur Ross could not imagine why federal workers would need to line up at food banks after not receiving paychecks due to a government shutdown (Mallin, 2019). There is a palpable sense in which Ross' inability to imagine and hence understand the plight of federal workers is explained by his living in a different world. Yet, humans, in general, have imaginative capacities that are, in principle, refinable.

Ian York and I (Anderson and York, 2024) illustrate this point by discussing the story of Derek Black, a former white nationalist whose experience as a student at the New College of Florida transformed his imaginative capacities. Black's interactions with Jewish student Matthew Stevenson and with courses on race and medieval Islamic culture helped to dislodge imaginative blocks that prevented him from empathic understanding of others. There is, of course, no guarantee that encounters like these will yield transformations of the sort Black experienced, but they are possible.

However, Martinican scholar Édouard Glissant interestingly challenges the underlying assumption of universality. He says Western

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perspectives on *understanding* require transparency that ultimately demands that one 'reduce' (Glissant, 1997, p. 190). Essentially, this version of understanding assumes an implicit scale that allows for comparisons and judgments to measure others by. Glissant observes,

> Accepting differences does, of course, upset the hierarchy of this scale. I understand your difference, or in other words, without creating a hierarchy, I relate it to my norm. I admit you to existence, within my system. I create you afresh.—But perhaps we need to bring an end to the very notion of a scale. Displace all reduction. (Glissant, 1997, p. 190)

Glissant argues that the search for a unifying story about what makes us all the same inevitably results in disunity because of the impulse to assimilate an Other into one's own system. The true way to unity is the recognition of *opacities*, which he says can coexist and converge: 'There would be something great and noble about initiating such a movement, referring not to Humanity but to the exultant divergence of humanities' (Glissant, 1997, p. 190).

If Glissant is right, pursuing a universal form of understanding actually undermines social justice projects. Instead, we need to reconcile ourselves to unbridgeable chasms, come to peace with not understanding everything about a perceived Other, but not let these differences motivate power grabs that maintain relationships of dominance. Observe that admitting this would be to admit a more robust version of the different worlds thesis.

5. Conclusion

The consequences of embracing conceptual relativity would be harsh and disruptive. One consequence would be a loss of perceived connection to discursive expressions of the past. If truth is relative to a particular conceptual scheme, we need to identify past cultures' schemes to make sense of their ideas and concepts.

I think we all acknowledge that bare racial identities in the classificatory sense do not cause divergent discursive worlds. It is difficult to contemplate any naturally occurring feature that would separate human understanding according to race. This also means we should not expect to find totally distinct racial worlds. But as was stated previously, this does not mean race plays no part in an explanation of why certain impasses exist.

I have offered what I hope is a fruitful discussion about a tempting idea that needs further clarity. The challenge raised by Glissant leaves

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us without a clear resolution, but it does force us to examine the often-unacknowledged assumption of universality many social justice projects tend to adopt.

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