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Charles Mills' Epistemology and Its Importance for and Social Science and Social Theory

Abstract

In Charles Mills' essay, "White Ignorance," and his trail-blazing monograph, *The Racial Contract*, he developed a view of how Whiteness or anti-Black-Indigenous-and-Latinx racism causes individuals to hold false beliefs or lack beliefs about racial injustice in particular and the world in general. I will defend a novel exegetical claim that Mills' view is part of a more general view regarding how racial injustice can affect a subject's epistemic standing such as whether they are justified in a belief or whether their degree of confidence in the belief is rational given their evidence. Then, in light of this novel exegetical claim, I show how this interpretation of Mills' view about how racial injustice causes ignorance relates to proper evaluation of whether social theorists and social scientists count as epistemically justified in holding the views that dominate their respective scholarly literature.

Keywords: Epistemic Justification; white ignorance; social science; causal connection; racial injustice

## Main Text

In Charles Mills' trail-blazing monograph, *The Racial Contract* (1997) and influential essay, "White Ignorance," (2007) he developed a view of how anti-Black, Indigenous and Latinx racism, racial injustice or whiteness causes individuals to hold false beliefs and lack true beliefs about reality and importantly about racial injustice itself. I will present an unnoted way that Mills' epistemology contributes not only to epistemology and political philosophy but also to social science.

I present this unnoted contribution by defending a novel exegetical claim vis-à-vis the phenomenon of white ignorance. This exegetical claim is that Mills is not only committed to the view that racial injustice or white supremacy or anti-non-White racism cause ignorance, but also committed to the view that these phenomena can negatively affect the *epistemic standing* that a subject has relative to a proposition or some information.

I will show how the commitments of Mills' epistemology can inform social theory and social science. A basic idea here is that social theories and social scientific studies that take up racial injustice and race should countenance the core Millsian insight that there is a causal connection between racism and racial injustice or whiteness and what individuals believe and how epistemically justified they are in these beliefs.

The novel contribution I make here is that if the causal link that Mills ties between white supremacy or anti-non-White racism is understood to figure into the evaluation of whether subjects, say, have the appropriate level of confidence in their beliefs given their evidence, then white supremacy-informed evaluations of the degree of confidence that social-scientific researchers and social theorists should have in their beliefs will come into sharper view. In other words, I submit that if one understands Mills' causal view of white supremacy's effect on belief to importantly relate to whether someone is properly evaluated as either justified in her belief or as having the proper degree of confidence in her belief, then subtler and more fine-grained analyses of whether theorists and

empirical researchers are either justified in their beliefs or have the proper degree of confidence in their beliefs given their evidence will become available.

To show that Mills' epistemology not only contributes to social epistemology and traditional epistemology, but also importantly relates to social science and social theory, I defend a novel exegetical claim about the core insight of Mills' white ignorance view. The evidence to which I will appeal in this defense will consist in textual evidence and conversations I had with him.

To make clear that Mills' epistemology makes these contributions, I demonstrate that the phenomenon of white ignorance explains why scholars of pre-Columbian Mesoamerica such as historians, archaeologists and anthropologists incorrectly assumed that Mexica or Aztec people had mere pictographic ways of writing rather than a syllabic-phonetic writing system on par with that of other ancient civilizations such as the Roman, Greek, Egyptian, Chinese or Maya civilizations. I submit that not only did white supremacy cause the scholarship or received literature on the Mexica to involve false assumptions, but it also explains why at least many of these scholars were epistemically unjustified in these assumptions.

In section one, I will sketch Mills' views of the racial contract and white ignorance. In section two, I will present an exegetical claim that puts Mills' epistemology in sharper relief relative to how his epistemology has been represented in the literature. In the third section, I take up how racial injustice causally relates to the social science literature on the pre-Columbian Mexica or Aztec civilization to show that Mills' epistemology should figure into political theorizing and social scientific inquiries regarding race and racial injustice.

## Section I

In Mills' *The Racial Contract*, he defends three claims. The first is existential. White supremacy exists. The second is conceptual. White supremacy is properly conceived as a political system that favors Whites over non-Whites. The third is methodological. Explaining white supremacy as a

contract or agreement between Whites to exclude non-Whites sheds helpful explanatory light on this political system.

To defend these claims, Mills makes use of the notion of the Racial Contract in a descriptive, historical explanatory sense and a normative sense. In a descriptive sense, the Racial Contract refers to how Whites in point of fact established polities in the Americas on the basis of an agreement between Whites to both treat one another as equals and to treat non-Whites as unequals with the result that they exploited non-Whites in terms of coercing free labor of them and dispossessing them of their land, resources and opportunities (Omi and Winant 1994; K.-Y. Taylor 2019). Mills points to this as a way political relations between Whites and non-Whites have actually gone and still go. By Mills' lights, that power relations between the dominant racial group and non-dominant racial group go unnoted explains much of the character and inadequacies of political philosophy and political theory running through the contract theory tradition from Rousseau to Rawls.

In the Racial Contract's normative sense, it refers to the theoretical commitments to which Whites appealed to justify excluding non-Whites from equal treatment as members of the body politic and correspondingly to justify exploiting their resources and labor. The core theoretical commitment is the falsehood that non-Whites are subpersons rather than full persons. A corollary commitment is the falsehood that civilization and polities require White people qua civilized or political people to found polities. A basic idea here is that whatever societies existed in the Americas prior to the arrival of Europeans were pre-political and thus could not have constituted polities or civilization. And this normative use of the Racial Contract invokes how the polities and societies which exclude non-Whites depend on the value derived from this exclusion such as unpaid labor and dispossessed land.

Mills explains that a consequence of the Racial Contract is that Whites developed "a peculiar moral and empirical epistemology" (Mills 1997, 16). A White subject who is a party to the agreement between Whites cognitively commits to empirical and moral falsehoods. Such an empirical falsehood

is that non-Whites are “subpersons,” “savages” or “intellectually and morally inferior.” Some moral falsehoods to which White subjects commit are that a society based on the exploitation of non-Whites is just and that dispossessing Indigenous peoples of their lands is morally permissible. But beyond merely holding false moral beliefs, Whites develop a deficient moral psychology. That so many Whites fail to *perceive* Black, Indigenous and later Latinx suffering either as equally displeasing as White suffering or as morally wrong is an example of this peculiar moral epistemology. Mills calls all this an epistemology of ignorance.

Together these features of what Mills calls an epistemology of ignorance explain why invariably few of my Latin American philosophy course students, both White and non-White, have *a sense* of how many Indigenous persons died as a result of the Spanish conquest of the Americas, let alone the actual figure which ranges as high as 100 million (Las Casas 2004; Mills 1997; Todorov 1999). This is all the more striking because even though students rightly learn that the Second World War’s Jewish Holocaust involved at least the murder of 6 million Jewish persons, students in the US have no similar knowledge of a genocide that not only occurred in the Americas but also set the stage for race relations in the Americas (Mills 1997).

This epistemology of ignorance also explains why few of my philosophy of race students have a sense that 30 to 60 million Black Africans persons died as a consequence of the trans-Atlantic slave trade (Stannard 1992). And this also explains why many Americans have no grasp of the fact that many Mexican persons in the US, although vilified as foreign, have lived in Southwest US before and after the US-Mexico border shifted south of Mexican-Tejano communities in Texas and New Mexico.

I will now focus on the view of white ignorance that Mills develops in his essay of the same name. The crucial insight that Mills presents in this essay is that there is a causal connection between anti-Black, Indigenous and Latinx racism or white supremacy as a political system and a non-trivial set of subjects’ ignorance. On this view, a subject is in a white ignorant state if she holds either a false

belief or lacks a true belief. As a consequence, if a subject holds a false belief or lacks a true belief *because of* anti-Black racism or white supremacy, then this subject is in a white ignorant state vis-à-vis some information.

In “White Ignorance,” Mills’ target audience differs from his target audience in *The Racial Contract* because the target audience of “White Ignorance” consists in analytic social and non-social epistemologists. In contrast, *The Racial Contract* was aimed at political philosophers and theorists in general and social contract theorists in particular. In *The Racial Contract*, one of Mills’ goals was to convince social contract theorists that by their own lights, they should care to consider race when doing social contract theory. Mills’ goal in “White Ignorance” was similar because he aimed to show epistemologists that according to their own theoretical concerns they should care to consider race and racial injustice.

One of Mills’ primary targets is the analytic-social-epistemology tradition that was catalyzed by Alvin Goldman’s development of veritism (Goldman 1987; 1999; 2015). Veritism is an approach to epistemology that involves evaluating society’s organization or the social practices that compose it in terms of the degree to which they promote better or worse ratios of true and false belief in society’s members. On this veritistic approach, one can evaluate news organizations (Bayruns García 2020), the legal system (Goldman and Cox 1996) and other institutional features of society (E. Anderson 2012; Zollman 2011) in terms of their propensity to promote good rather than bad epistemic outcomes where good outcomes include belief in the truth and bad outcomes involve avoidance of false beliefs.

Mills importantly points out that in Alvin Goldman’s (1999) monograph on veritism, there is scant mention of race even though the book aims to evaluate how features of society relate to what individuals believe. Mills explains this paucity by pointing to the false assumption held across philosophy that justice is the norm in society and injustice is an aberrant state of affairs. This explains why social epistemologists had not taken up race and racial injustice because if some state of affairs

such as racial injustice is thought aberrant, then theoretically it does not pay off to consider how it affects the distribution of truth and error in a population. However, if one acknowledges that racial injustice is woven into the fabric of US society, then it will be much more obvious that one ought to attend to how racial injustice relates to whether subjects believe the truth and avoid error.

Mills points out that since Descartes (Alcoff 1998) attempted to identify a belief that he could not doubt, namely, the belief “I am,” epistemologists have been focused on individualistic scenarios such as hallucinations and phantom limbs rather than social scenarios to explore the idea of what counts as a rational or justified belief. For Mills, this is a consequence of the fact that the dominant-racial group, Whites, have composed most epistemologists in the West since Descartes.

The key insight that Mills develops in “White Ignorance” is that whiteness *causes* ignorance. Mills cashes ignorance out as false belief and lack of true belief. He does so because social epistemologists who engage in veritistic-like inquiries compose the audience he has in mind. Mills points out that veritism can naturally serve as a framework for analyzing whiteness or white supremacy in terms of its epistemic consequences. Veritism concerns how society relates to the promotion of true belief, false belief and lack of true belief. And as a result, Mills defines ignorance as he does.

Mills calls the phenomenon he describes white ignorance because the identity category of ‘White’ causes the ‘ignorance’ that subjects instantiate. The basic idea is straightforward enough because as long as whiteness causes, in a counterfactual way, false belief or lack of true belief, then by Mills’ lights, a subject is in a white ignorant state rather than some other kind of ignorant state that whiteness does not cause. But Mills takes pains to clarify that non-White persons can instantiate white ignorance, that not all instances of White subjects erring or lacking a true belief are instances of white ignorance and that white ignorance is not information-domain specific. In a later essay on global white ignorance, he puts the point in sharp relief when he claims that the phenomenon obtains if:

whiteness [plays] an appropriate causal role in explaining the generation of mistaken cognitions; it cannot be merely a matter of ignorance among people who are white... (Mills 2015, 218).

For Mills, the content domain that a subjects' false belief falls under or the kind of information they lack does not determine whether subjects are in a white ignorant state. Whether someone is in a white ignorant state only depends on whether their false belief or lack of true belief is caused by whiteness, anti-Black racism or racial injustice. Theorists who concentrate more on moral or political relations rather than epistemic relations have focused on instances of white ignorance in which a subject inaccurately believes something about, say, race relations or facts that concern racial injustice and white supremacy. And Mills no doubt cared to consider just these cases.

But epistemologists were Mills' primary target audience in *White Ignorance*. As a consequence, he aimed to motivate the idea that if one cares to veritistically evaluate society and the social practices that compose it, then one should care to evaluate racial injustice as a feature of society and the practices that compose it. A key point here is that whiteness will cause individuals not only to be in ignorant states regarding moral and political facts about racial injustice, but also to be in ignorant states regarding empirical facts that seemingly do not concern racial injustice.

Even though epistemologists composed Mills' target audience in "*White Ignorance*," social theorists and social scientists of course rightly take the notion of white ignorance as relevant for social theorizing and social scientific inquiries. They do so because whiteness not only causes ignorance about racial injustice and white supremacy, but it also can cause ignorance regarding empirical or mundane facts that ostensibly do not relate in an obvious way to racial injustice.



## Section II

I will now explain a novel exegetical claim vis-à-vis Mills' view of white ignorance that is not clearly represented in the philosophy literature. This exegetical claim is that Mills' view is that racial injustice, white supremacy or anti-non-White racism can negatively affect the *epistemic standing* that a subject has relative to a proposition or some information.

In epistemology there is a notion of 'doxastic attitude.' A doxastic attitude is an attitude or kind of state that a subject is in vis-à-vis a proposition or information. The term 'doxastic' derives from the ancient Greek term, 'doxa,' for 'belief.' Some of the doxastic attitudes I can have are belief, suspension of belief and disbelief regarding some information.

A basic task in epistemology is to evaluate these attitudes relative to their goal which is accurately representing reality. Regarding my belief that 'the Yankees are the best baseball team in history,' someone can evaluate me as either justified, unjustified, knowing or understanding. These are different epistemic standings that I can have relative to the content of my belief. Epistemologists differ on which factors such as evidence (Conee and Feldman 2004), causal processes (Goldman 1967; 1979), subjects' traits or virtues (Greco 2010; Pritchard, Haddock, and Millar 2010; Sosa 2017; L. Zagzebski 2009) and whether beliefs counterfactually track the truth (Nozick 1981) determine whether someone is appropriately evaluated as, say, justified, knowing or understanding.

I take epistemic standing to also include the idea that someone can be evaluated in terms of whether the degree of belief or confidence they have in a belief is appropriate given their evidence for their belief. Frank Ramsey (1926) initially presented the idea that the degree of belief that one has in their belief is proportional to the degree of value they would wager on the belief's truth. In the late 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century epistemologists, have further developed this degree-based approach to epistemic standing (Gibbard 2007; Pettigrew 2016; Titelbaum 2012). On this approach, evaluating my belief that 'the Yankees are the best baseball team in history' will involve evaluating my degree of confidence in

this proposition's truth relative to the strength of my evidence for this proposition. This degree-based approach and the more traditional-fulsome belief approach both differ from more recent forms of social epistemological evaluation because these take individuals and their evidence as the primary target of analysis.

Veritism as an approach to social epistemological evaluation, focuses on how features of society such as institutions and social practices relate to whether subjects' doxastic attitudes accurately represent reality, misrepresent reality or lack a representation of a certain bit of reality (Goldman 1987; 1999). In other words, veritism concerns how society's components affect whether subjects have a true belief, a false belief or lack a belief relative to some information. And as was discussed above, in "White Ignorance," Mills focused on how whiteness relates to these epistemic states.

Due to this focus, Mills did not take up how whiteness or asymmetrical racial-power relations relate to whether subjects are properly evaluated as in states of justified belief, knowledge or understanding relative to some information. Even though he presents his view of the causal connection between whiteness and ignorance with veritism in mind, the view itself is *a species of the more general claim* that whiteness causally relates to what a subject believes in ways that depress the likelihood that the belief is true.

In a recent article, I developed this insight with an emphasis on how racial injustice and racism undermine the epistemic standing of inferences subjects make about racial injustice and race (Bayruns García 2020). While I was developing this view, Mills pointed out to me in conversation and feedback that his view was more general than what he had strictly presented in "White Ignorance." Or put differently, Mills pointed out that, say, anti-Black racism will often result in subjects properly being evaluated as merely having a true belief rather than having a justified true belief. But here the basic relation that he highlighted is that proper evaluation of a subject's doxastic attitude depends on both how the content that the attitude is directed towards causally relates to whiteness and how the subject

herself relates to whiteness. For Mills, this casual connection can manifest itself through whiteness' effect on individuals and its effect on information itself. As a result, whiteness can affect information itself by depressing its availability to subjects.

The idea for Mills is that if epistemologists do not countenance white supremacy or racial injustice while evaluating subjects' doxastic attitudes, then they may incorrectly evaluate a subject as knowing when she merely has, say, a justified belief. In other words, if racial injustice and racism put subjects in worse epistemic standing relative to some information, then how subjects are evaluated should take into account how they relate to racial injustice and racism. He succinctly makes the point when he says:

absent 'whiteness' in [various] senses, or (for subordinated populations of color) absent the socialization into a white worldview, the attainment of veridical cognitions on the particular matter at hand would be, if not certain, *at least far more likely* (Mills 2015, 218 my emphasis).

Here Mills also claims that whiteness can elevate the likelihood, rather than strictly determine, that a subject errs on a certain topic. As a result, there will be a set of doxastic attitudes with content that if white supremacy or whiteness had not been the case, then these doxastic attitudes would more likely than not accurately represent reality. To the put point differently, some subjects will have beliefs on certain topics that are more likely inaccurate than other beliefs because of whiteness or white supremacy.

The exegesis of white ignorance that the literature enshrines does not fully capture the exegetical view of white ignorance that I present here. According to this view, whether someone is evaluated as justified or as having the appropriate level of confidence in their belief given their evidence depends on how their belief causally relates to white supremacy or racial injustice. In the

literature, philosophers have presented Mills' white ignorance view mainly as one that concerns whether someone is ignorant with regards to some content or knows some content.

Philosophers have presented white ignorance in two ways. The first way emphasizes the bad epistemic consequences of white supremacy where white ignorance consists in lack of true belief or false belief. The second way emphasizes the active or willful component of white ignorance.

Olúfemi O. Táíwò (2018) presents white ignorance in this first way that emphasizes its bad epistemic consequences. On this he says,

Charles Mills' article "White Ignorance" characterizes white ignorance as a 'social mind-set' marked by false beliefs and the absence of (important) true beliefs that most people use as a basis for thinking about or even perceiving the world... (Mills 2007, 16, 27–28; Táíwò 2018, 326).

In explaining how the styles of expression that non-dominant racial group subjects use to communicate, I (2019) also present white ignorance in a way that highlights its bad epistemic features. On this I say, "I argue that expression-style exclusion can partly explain why white ignorance obtains where white ignorance is a lack of true belief or false belief that obtains because of whites' dominant-group status" (Bayruns García 2019, 258).

In line with the second way of presenting white ignorance that highlights its active component, C. Thi Nguyen (2020) emphasizes the active or willful feature of white ignorance. He says, "Charles Mills argues that there is an *active practice* of ignorance among members of oppressive groups, such as white Americans" (Nguyen 2020, 149 my emphasis). Similarly, in Annette Martín's normative analysis of white ignorance, she flags its active or willful feature. Regarding this she says, "White ignorance is often taken to be a paradigmatic instance of ignorance that is *active*..." (Martín 2021, 5 original emphasis).

Liam Kofi Bright (2023) also appeals to white ignorance to explain why White persons often feign race-neutrality as way to avoid discussing race and thus avoid confronting feelings of guilt vis-à-vis benefitting from racial injustice. On this he says, “one can sometimes get the impression that the *wish to avoid* discussing race is a second-best alternative for a person who simply dislikes guilt and *wishes to remain* ignorant of anything that may induce it...” (Bright 2023, 205 my emphases).

Kristie Dotson (Dotson 2011; 2012) describes white ignorance along with other epistemology of ignorance phenomena as involving willfulness. Regarding this she says,

She identifies an oppressive investment in the ‘denial of self-knowledge and expression’ in the guise of ‘neutrality’ that preserves a *willful* ignorance of racial discrimination and other social ills (Dotson 2012, 28 my emphasis).

Nora Berenstain (2016) similarly presents white ignorance with an emphasis on its active component. On this score she says,

Consider Mills’s (2007) notion of *white ignorance*, an *actively* upheld form of ignorance masquerading as knowledge that is mandated by white supremacy. The structure and ideology of white supremacy encourage its beneficiaries to meet a set of standards of cognition that effectively create a tacit agreement to misinterpret the world (Berenstain 2016, 586 second emphasis mine).

In offering her influential account of willful hermeneutical injustice, Gaile Pohlhaus, Jr. (2012) appeals to white ignorance’s willful feature to explain it. With respect to this, she says,

Willful hermeneutical ignorance falls within what Charles Mills has called, ‘an epistemology of ignorance, a particular pattern of localized and global cognitive dysfunctions ... producing the ironic outcome that whites will in general be unable to understand the world they themselves have made’ (Mills 1997, 18). Although a number of theorists have described instances and variants of willful ignorance (see Mills 1997; 1998; Sullivan and Tuana 2006; 2007), attention to the relationship between situatedness and interdependence contributes to this literature an account of how such systematic ignorances can be *actively* maintained (Pohlhaus, Jr 2012, 722 my emphasis).

These philosophers have presented white ignorance in ways that, although accurate, do not capture the feature of white ignorance that I highlight. The exegetical view that I present differs from these ways of presenting white ignorance because these presentations do not represent how white supremacy can negatively affect whether a subject is doxastically justified in her belief or whether she has the proper degree of confidence in her belief.

In part, these philosophers represent white ignorance in this way because Mills himself did not emphasize this feature of his view. He did not highlight this part of white ignorance because, as mentioned above, in “White Ignorance” his primary target was veritism as a kind of social epistemology. In this article, Mills deftly painted a picture of how traditional-individual-focused epistemology and analytic-social epistemology in general and veritism in particular fail to take up one of the main features of US, and even world, social organization that explains what people believe, namely white supremacy. So, Mills’ focus on the customs, habits and actions that compose white supremacy made sense because he aimed to show social epistemologists white supremacy’s epistemic

import. And it also explains why so many philosophers represent white ignorance in a way that highlights the epistemic consequences of the willful actions that compose white supremacy.

Even though philosophers rightly followed Mills in his emphasis on the active components of white ignorance, Mills' view of it involves commitment to the notion that asymmetrical power relations between dominant and non-dominant groups have important epistemic consequences not only in terms of how justified one is in her belief, but also whether someone is evaluated as having the proper confidence in her belief given her evidence.

Mills licenses the exegetical claim I make here regarding confidence level or proper credence in a belief because he invokes the notion of how white supremacy affects the likelihood that one believes accurately given one's evidence. By invoking this notion of likelihood, he ties a causal link between white supremacy's effect on individuals' bases for forming beliefs and the probability of their beliefs' truth. Bases of belief can involve, on the one hand, subjects' evidence (Conee and Feldman 2004; McCain 2018), or, on the other hand, belief-forming processes or methods such as the processes involved in producing visual beliefs or news gathering and disseminating methods that we depend on for forming beliefs about current events (Goldberg 2010; Goldman 1979) or virtues understood as either character traits or dispositions to accurately believe (Greco 2010; Sosa 2017; L. T. Zagzebski 1996).

That Mills ties this causal link between white supremacy and the likelihood that beliefs are accurate can figure into judging subjects' epistemic standing in at least the following ways. One way this can figure into judging one's epistemic standing is that white supremacy can be understood to affect the reliability of the processes that subjects depend on to form beliefs. Alvin Goldman (1979) pointed to some of these processes such as memory and perceptual capacities in presenting his reliabilist theory of justification. On this construal, White supremacy can diminish subjects' capacity to reliably recall certain facts over others. For example, infamously, White subjects tend to inaccurately

recall that Black persons have perpetrated crimes irrespective of whether they did in point of fact commit such crimes (“DNA Exonerations in the United States (1989 – 2020)” 2020; Frumkin and Stone 2020; Jones and Kaplan 2003; Kahn and Davies 2011; Koomen and Dijker 1997; Osborne and Davies 2013; Lackey 2023). White supremacy can also negatively affect the reliability of the social processes that subjects depend on to form beliefs about the world (Bayruns García 2020; Goldberg 2010).

Epistemologists who have developed the degree-or-credence-based approach to evaluating subjects’ epistemic standing have in large measure presented analyses of the link between a subject’s evidence and the probability that her belief is true (Pettigrew 2016; Schoenfield 2015; Titelbaum 2012). According to the exegetical view that I present, white supremacy can cause subjects to have too much or too little confidence in their belief’s truth given the quality of their evidence. On this picture, white supremacy not only can cause eyewitnesses of crime to overestimate their confidence in their belief that a Black suspect actually committed a crime, but also can result in White subjects’ confidence in their beliefs about the history and nature of racial injustice being higher or lower than what their evidence makes rational.

To sum up this section, I have motivated the exegetical claim that Mills’ view of white ignorance involves commitment to the notion that whiteness can negatively affect the epistemic standing that a subject has relative to some information or proposition. I assume that the negative effect includes that a subject is improperly evaluated as merely having a justified belief rather than knowledge relative to some information, that a subject is improperly evaluated as merely having a true belief rather than a justified true belief and that a subject is evaluated as having the appropriate confidence in their belief even though their evidence does not rationally warrant such a degree of confidence. I have motivated this exegetical claim to bring into focus a feature of Mills’ overall epistemology that is unnoted in the epistemology literature.



### Section III

I will now show how Mills' epistemology should figure into social theorizing and empirical social scientific inquiries regarding race and racial injustice. There are two basic ways that white ignorance can affect political theorists and social scientists.

The first way that white ignorance can affect social theorists and social scientists obtains if whiteness causes individuals to reject facts relevant to developing theories and empirical inquiries where these theories over time feature white-supremacy-caused information gaps which persist over generations. Consequently, individuals engaged in these pursuits could misperceive reality that involves Black, Indigenous and Latinx folks because of White supremacy or racial injustice.

The vast majority of scholars have long assumed that the Mexica or Aztec people had no phonetic writing system that involved a syllabary that represented spoken language in the way that, say, the Maya or English do (Todorov 1999) even though early 16<sup>th</sup> century observers such as Fray Bartolome de las Casas (1909) and a few other 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century scholars (Brinton 1887; Whorf, Carroll, and Whorf 1963) recognized a syllabic-phonetic writing system represented in Mexica inscriptions and texts. A syllabary is a set of characters or symbolic representations of syllables used in a language. Until recently, most Mexica scholars maintained the view that any features of Mexica writing that seemed to represent the phonetic features of the Mexica language, Nahuatl, were merely a result of Spanish scribes' influence on Mexica scribes (Nicholson 1973). But Mexica scholars are now beginning to recognize that what were thought mere pictographs that represented Mexica historical events or Mexica people in a non-phonetic way are actually phonetic symbols that represent the Nahuatl language (Lacadena 2008; Zender 2008). So, this assumption that the Mexica did not have a phonetic-syllabic writing system is false. I submit that a plausible hypothesis of why this assumption was held for so long and widely is the effect that anti-Indigenous racism and white supremacy have on the scholars who held this assumption. Whiteness could have *caused* this through its effect on

individuals' psychology (L. Anderson 2017; Bayruns García 2020; Dotson 2011; Kahan et al. 2007; Stanley 2015; Thibodeau and Aronson 1992) such that they were unlikely to accept that the Mexica had a complex system of writing on par with Western systems of writing.

One of the first to deny that the Mexica had a writing system was 16<sup>th</sup> century philosopher Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda (1547). He claimed that the features of Mexica society that seemed to imply sophistication on par with European civilization merely *seemed* to imply this rather than *actually* indicate such a level of sophistication (Sepúlveda 1547, 497). Sepúlveda claimed this in his debate, the Valladolid Debate, with Fray Bartolomé de las Casas regarding whether the Spaniards' vicious and genocidal treatment of the Mexica was just (Gracia and Millán 2004; Las Casas 1992; Nuccetelli 2020). Despite many of the detailed and accurate reports of the Mexica's cultural feats such as their system of writing that Sepúlveda received, he denied that these feats were anything like similar features of Spanish or Christian European civilization. I submit that a plausible explanation of why Sepúlveda avoided believing the truth about Mexica culture and thus Mexica writing is that if he had accepted this truth, then he would have had to believe that Christian Europeans were committing immoral acts against civilized people who were as valuable as the Spaniards themselves. Holding this belief is either in tension with or incompatible with Sepúlveda continuing to believe that he and other Spaniards were good and moral Christians. To accept this belief would have resulted in Sepúlveda undergoing cognitive dissonance and as a consequence he rejected it despite the strong evidence he had for it. This is one way that white supremacy, anti-Indigenous racism or racial injustice can affect a subject's psychology such that he errs vis-à-vis the fact that the Mexica had a system of writing. Here I point to Sepúlveda as the first of a long history of theorists and scholars who erred because of white supremacy and thus contributed to a lacuna in the body of scholarly literature on the question of whether the Mexica had a phonetic-syllabic writing system.

According to some, a subject's identity can affect what content she will accept (Bayruns García 2020; Kahan et al. 2007; Stanley 2015; Thibodeau and Aronson 1992). Most of the prominent scholars of Mesoamerica have been White. So, it is at least plausible that white supremacy in the Americas has affected the beliefs that scholars of Mesoamerica have held about the Mexica. Many of the portrayals of the Mexica by scholars of Mesoamerica have been caricature-like. Mexica scholars have portrayed the Mexica as blood-thirsty and lacking the accoutrements of so-called modern civilization (Klein 2016; Vento 1995).

A Euro-American Mexica scholar who harbored such beliefs about the Mexica would be unlikely to accept that either the Mexica had a system of writing roughly on par with the European Latin derived system of writing or that the Mexica had a system of writing much more similar to European writing system than the received view has reflected. That this information conflicts with a widely held view in the Mexica scholarly literature and the belief that the barbarous character of Mexica society justifies the West's destruction of their society explain why this scholar would not have likely accepted the truth about Mexica writing had they encountered it or considered it. It explains why he would likely not accept the truth because he would then have to accept that he as a member of Euro-American society has benefited from the destruction of Mexica society in particular and Indigenous societies in general. Accepting this would likely feel bad to believe. Human beings tend to avoid holding beliefs that feel bad believe (Bayruns García 2020; Bendaña and Mandelbaum In press; Mandelbaum 2019; Porot and Mandelbaum 2020) and as a consequence Mexica scholars of European descent will tend to reject beliefs with this content. Here whiteness affects a scholar's psychology such that he is disposed to reject beliefs with such content.

But whiteness could have caused scholars to err vis-à-vis Mexica writing not through an effect on individuals' psychologies but rather through an effect on the assumptions and commitments that scholars accept because these assumptions and commitments figure centrally in the existing literature

in this area of inquiry (E. Anderson 2012). This is the second way that white ignorance can affect theorists and social scientists.

Charles Sanders Peirce remarked that one cannot ask all questions at once (Peirce and Buchler 1955). To ask any question, one must assume a non-trivial amount of information and thus not ask other questions. In the case of the Mexica writing system, generations of Mesoamerican scholars uncritically received the assumption that the Mexica had a pictographic rather than phonetic-syllabic system of writing. I submit that a plausible hypothesis of why this assumption composed the body of literature that scholars of this period take on is that whiteness caused White persons to mainly compose the scholars who are at the most prestigious universities who work on Mexica culture and as a consequence these persons endorsed these bodies of literature in an authoritative way such that new generations of scholars must take them as at least important.

The basic mechanism at work here is that the assumptions that run through a scholarly literature can either have false content or lack certain content because of white supremacy's influence on a body of literature's progenitors or historically antecedent contributors. Even if white supremacy does not have a strong influence on the psychology of a body of scholarly literature's current contributors, white supremacy affects contemporary or dominant views of the literature through its influence on what its current members have inherited by way of views that scholars currently take for granted or assumptions that shape the discourse on a topic.

Take democratic theory. An assumption that informs much of political philosophy and political science is that the US is properly evaluated as a democracy (Christiano 2004; Cohen 2009; Dworkin 1996). If even a small number of the claims that Charles Mills makes in *The Racial Contract* are true, then the US has not been a democracy because both de jure and de facto white supremacy are incompatible with democracy. Here I assume that a democracy involves that its members have roughly equal influence on the course self-government takes. Black and Indigenous persons have had

anything but rough equal influence on US society and its self-governance. I submit that in much the same way that scholars of Mexica culture falsely assumed that Mexica writing was pictographic, many political philosophers and political scientists have and even currently assume that the US has been or is a democracy. If this is correct, then whiteness may have played a causal role in why this false assumption is uncritically received by democratic theorists in particular and political theorists in general.

So far, I have explained two ways that white ignorance can affect social theory and social science. Now I will explain how the exegesis that I propose of Mills' core claim in "White Ignorance" is relevant for social theory and social science.

One goal that epistemologists have is to provide subjects with guidance on when they can properly think of themselves and others as having beliefs that count as justified or knowledge. According to the exegesis of Mills' white ignorance that I propose, whiteness can cause subjects' epistemic standing to be depressed regarding some information. By Mills' lights, the causal connection between whiteness and a subject's belief can be more or less robust such that the likelihood that a subject errs can vary. So, one way that social theorists and social scientists can use this datum to evaluate the commitments in their theories and empirical studies is to consider how these commitments may be causally connected to whiteness. That is, theorists can use 'causal connection to whiteness' as a criterion to judge whether they are justified or know a commitment that composes a theory.

Epistemologists distinguish between true beliefs that are justified and those that are not (Ayer 1998; Chisholm 1989). According to one school of thought, someone is justified in her belief if the process that causes the belief reliably yields true beliefs (Goldman 1979). The idea here is that the processes and methods that lead to beliefs, such as human perception or using a calculator, can more or less reliably lead to beliefs that are true. Avoiding beliefs that are clearly causally connected to

whiteness could be a process or method that reliably enough yields true beliefs such that someone is justified when she forms these beliefs. As a result, social theorists and social scientists could use ‘avoidance of beliefs clearly connected to whiteness’ as a process or method when evaluating assumptions that feature in canonical literature, that motivate theory choice and that empirical studies depend on.

Of course, where some persons see a clear causal connection between some theoretical commitment and whiteness others will not. But this point does not diminish the fact that some may use this process or method to avoid instantiating white ignorance. And this just highlights our ineliminable dependence on others pointing out truths and falsehoods to us so that we accurately represent the world (Goldberg 2010; 2018), especially when it comes to injustice (Medina 2013). Indeed, even if a community of, say, social scientists investigating one topic uses ‘causal connection to whiteness’ as a criterion in evaluating their theories’ commitments, some members of the community may properly apply this criterion and others may not. This may be a consequence of the various backgrounds and identities of the researchers who compose this community (Alcoff 2000; Harding 1992; Kitcher 1990; Longino 1990b).

The novel exegesis that I present not only puts into view a method for researchers to follow such as ‘avoid beliefs that are clearly connected to whiteness,’ but it also, as I mention above, puts into relief that credence-based evaluation of belief in the content that bodies of social theory and social science feature. Suppose that Mesoamerican scholars of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century had a .90 degree of confidence in their belief that the Mexica did not have phonetic-syllabic writing. But if they had taken on board the kind of credence-based evaluation that the exegesis I presents suggests, then they would have likely lowered their degree of confidence to a lower credence such as .50. They would have likely lowered their credence to .50 or less because they would have accepted that white supremacy depresses the probability that their evidence for this belief is true much more than they antecedently thought.

Here their evidence for this belief is the body of scholarly literature on Mesoamerican culture and history. If this picture is roughly correct, then this exegesis of Mills that I present puts into view a way of assessing belief in the commitments that compose bodies of scholarship that is absent from the various ways that white ignorance is presented in the philosophy literature.

A basic takeaway here is that social theorists and social scientists should evaluate their theoretical beliefs and commitments with an eye towards how whiteness may have caused these beliefs and commitments. I submit that a frequent result of this evaluation would be that social theorists and social scientists would be less confident in the beliefs and commitments they form and especially the commitments they have received from prior generations through the received bodies of social theory and social science literature. And I assume that social theorists and social scientists will find that the confidence they should have in some beliefs and commitments that compose their theories and empirical studies is so low that these beliefs and commitments should not figure in these theories and studies. A consequence of this is that many longstanding theories and studies would be jettisoned. The example of the historically dominant false view of Mexica pictographs is a case of this from social science.

My suggestion here is in one respect not new because feminist epistemologists (Alcoff 2000; Code 1991; Collins 1990; Harding 1995; 2017; Hartsock 1987) and feminist philosophers of science (Jordan-Young 2010; Lloyd 2005; Longino 1990a; Nelson 1990) have long suggested that moral and political values affect the conclusions and findings in theoretical and scientific inquiries. This is something Mills notes in “White Ignorance,” but as he points out, race, racial injustice or whiteness have been taken up by theorists in smaller measure than gender, sexism and misogyny in terms of how they affect what people believe.

Mills points out that W.E.B. Du Bois developed the idea of second sight or what other have called double consciousness according to which Black folks tend to understand US society better than

Whites because Black folks must simultaneously and regularly consider the world from their point of view and from Whites' point of view to survive de jure and de facto white supremacy (Alcoff 2015; Du Bois 1903; Gooding-Williams 2009; Mills 2007; P. C. Taylor 2013). Many in the critical philosophy of race and epistemic injustice literature have developed Du Bois and feminist epistemologists' notion of how power relations relate to epistemic phenomena such as knowledge and justification (Alcoff 2000; 2006; Bailey 2007; Bayrún García 2019; 2020; Collins 1990; Davis 2016; 2018; Dotson 2011; 2012; 2013; Fricker 2007; Medina 2013; Pohlhaus 2011; Tuana and Sullivan 2006; Woomer 2019). By Mills' own lights, the idea of white ignorance is in a sense not completely novel because it is a development of this Du Boisian idea.

However, there is one sense in which Mills' suggestion and my exegetical interpretation of his suggestion differ from and are novel relative to the ideas put forward by feminist epistemologists, feminist philosophers of science and critical philosophers of race. They differ and are novel because according to this suggestion and my exegetical claim there is a causal connection between white supremacy and anti-Black-Indigenous-and-Latinx racism and the *epistemic standing* of individuals' beliefs no matter the content. Although, critical philosophers of race have rightly focused on how white ignorance occludes facts about white supremacy or racial injustice because this occlusion promotes racial injustice (Sullivan and Tuana 2007).

Mills' claim, in the *Racial Contract* and "White Ignorance," that a feature of white supremacy and thus white ignorance is that often White people will lack the capacity to understand the world they themselves created might seem incompatible with the claim I make that by Mills' lights white supremacy can negatively affect the epistemic standing of subjects' no matter the content. These claims might seem incompatible because here Mills claims that white ignorance concerns specific content, namely content about white supremacy or asymmetrical power relations between White and non-Whites. But in "White Ignorance" Mills makes clear that subjects can instantiate white ignorance



even when the content does not concern white supremacy or asymmetrical power relations. The basic idea here is that white supremacy can affect the chains of inference or the paths of discovery that science takes in ways that result in ignorance that does not have white supremacy or racial injustice as its content. On this he says,

...it needs to be realized that once indirect causation and diminishing degrees of influence are admitted, it will sometimes be very difficult to adjudicate when specific kinds of non-knowing are appropriately categorizable as white ignorance or not. Recourse to counterfactuals of greater or lesser distance from the actual situation may be necessary (“what they should and would have known if . . .”), whose evaluation may be too complex to be resolvable. Suppose, for example, that a particular true scientific generalization about human beings, P, would be easily discoverable in a society were it not for widespread white racism, and that with additional research in the appropriate areas, P could be shown to have further implications, Q, and beyond that, R. Or, suppose that the practical application of P in medicine would have had as a spin-off empirical findings p1, p2, p3. Should these related principles and factual findings all be included as examples of white ignorance as well? How far onward up the chain? And so forth. So it will be easy to think up all kinds of tricky cases where it will be hard to make the determination. But the existence of such problematic cases at the borders does not undermine the import of more central cases (Mills 2007, 21).

That white supremacy prevented so many Black persons from entering the field of medicine and medical research is an example of white supremacy almost certainly resulting in omissions of medical research facts. Take the case of Vivien Thomas (1985). He discovered a novel and field-changing surgical procedure for babies and young-adults that suffer from tetralogy of Fallot or otherwise known as blue baby syndrome. He was neither allowed to attend medical school nor allowed to engage in research in the same way as his White male colleagues because of Jim Crow segregation laws and customs. If it were not for Jim Crow in the US, not only would Thomas very likely have contributed this innovative procedure earlier to the medical field, but also he would have likely made other contributions to science's understanding of human anatomy. As a consequence, the body of medical academic literature featured omissions because of white supremacy.

The relevance of this claim regarding white ignorance's content for the Mexica case is that when researchers and theorists evaluate the commitments of bodies of scholarly literature and the beliefs that are based on them, they should not solely look at commitments and beliefs that have content that concern white supremacy. Instead, researchers and theorists should consider the etiologies or causal histories of these commitments and beliefs to determine whether white supremacy is connected to them in a way relevant for epistemic appraisal.

Two upshots of this suggestion for social theory and social science are that they should diversify their disciplines and when they develop theories or studies that relate to Black, Indigenous or Latinx persons they should consult Black, Indigenous and Latinx persons (Harding 1992; 1995; 2015).

They should diversify their disciplines because this will include persons who are more likely to understand white supremacy and thus notice commitments and assumptions that are caused by whiteness. Here I invoke views like Sandra Harding's strong objectivity view that hold that theoretical and empirical inquiries about non-dominant-group members should begin by consulting them if they

want to elevate the probability that these inquiries result in true findings and conclusions (Harding 1992; 1995; 2015). By diversifying the relevant fields, individuals with this understanding will already be involved from the start of these inquiries. And for the same reason social theorists and social scientists should consult Black, Indigenous and Latinx persons if they are absent from their investigatory teams.

### Conclusion

I have presented novel exegesis of Charles Mills' core epistemological insight that there is a causal connection between white supremacy or anti-Black-Indigenous-and-Latinx racism and whether people hold true beliefs or lack true beliefs. I have motivated the view that this insight involved the notion that white supremacy or anti-Black-Indigenous-and-Latinx racism is causally connected not only to whether people believe the truth, but also to individuals' epistemic standing vis-à-vis some information or proposition. With this exegetical claim in hand, I showed that white supremacy can affect scholars in the social sciences and social theory. To this end, I focused on white supremacy's effect on scholars of the Mexica and their corresponding literature to explain why Mexica scholarship incorrectly represented Mexica writing as merely pictographic rather than a system which represented the phonemes and syllables of the Nahuatl language. In doing so, I have shown that Charles Mills' epistemology matters vis-à-vis evaluating the accuracy and epistemic justification of the claims that compose the social sciences and social theory.

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