The Heart of Racism

Some conceptions of racism are belief-based in the sense that they take the holding of racist beliefs to be necessary and perhaps sufficient for an individual to be a racist. Garcia opposes this view, arguing that racism is best understood as a matter of attitudes of hatred, disregard, or in some cases lack of proper regard for members of a certain races because of their race. After explaining this “volitional” conception of racism in the first section of his article, Garcia proceeds to explore various implications and advantages of this view, and to consider some cases that might appear to be problematic for his conception.

Recommended reading: virtue ethics, chap. 1, sec. 2E.

The phenomenon of racism having plagued us for many centuries now, it is somewhat surprising to learn that the concept is so young. The second edition of The Oxford English Dictionary (1989) dates the earliest appearances of the term “racism” only to the 1930s. During that decade, as the shadow of Nazism lengthened across Europe, social thinkers coined the term to describe the ideas and theories of racial biology and anthropology to which the Nazi movement’s intellectual defenders appealed in justifying its political program... These origins are reflected in the definition that the O.E.D. still offers: “The theory that distinctive human characteristics and abilities are determined by race.” Textbook definitions also echo this origin: “Racism—a doctrine that one race is superior” (Schaefer, 1990 p. 27). Recently, however, some have argued that these definitions no longer capture what people mean when they talk of racism in the moral and political discourse that has become the term’s primary context. Some on the political left argue that definitions reducing racism to people’s belief do not do justice to racism as a sociopolitical reality. Robert Miles records the transition in the thought of Amalvaner Sivanandan, director of Britain’s Institute of Race Relations, who abandoned his earlier account of racism (1973) as “an explicit and systematic ideology of racial superiority” because later (1983) he came to think that “racism is about power not prejudice.” Eventually (1985), he saw racism as “structures and institutions with power to discriminate” (1985). (Quoted at Miles, 1989: p. 54.) From the right, the philosopher Antony Flew has suggested that to identify racism with “negative beliefs” about “actual or alleged matters of fact” is a “sinister and potentially dangerous thing”—it “is to demand, irrespective of any evidence which might be turned up to the contrary, that everyone must renounce certain disapproved propositions.” Flew worries that this poses a serious threat to intellectual freedom, and proposes a behavioral understanding of “racism” as “meaning the advantaging or disadvantaging of individuals for no better reason than that they happen to be members of this racial group rather than that.”

I agree with these critics that in contemporary moral and political discourse and thought, what we have in mind when we talk of racism is no longer simply a matter of beliefs. However, I think their proposed reconceptions are themselves inadequate. In this paper, I present an account of racism that, I

think, better reflects contemporary usage of the term, especially its primary employment as both descriptive and evaluative, and I sketch some of this view’s implications for the morality of race-sensitive discrimination in private and public life. I will also briefly point out some of this account’s advantages over various other ways of thinking about racism that we have already mentioned—racism as a doctrine, as a socioeconomic system of oppression, or as a form of action. One notable feature of my argument is that it begins to bring to bear on this topic in social philosophy points made in recent criticisms of modernist moral theory offered by those who call for increased emphasis on the virtues. (This voice has hitherto largely been silent in controversies within practical social philosophy.)

AVOLITIONAL CONCEPTION
OF RACISM

Kwame Anthony Appiah rightly complains that, although people frequently voice their abhorrence of racism, “rarely does anyone stop to say what it is, or what is wrong with it” (Appiah, 1990:3). This way of stating the program of inquiry we need is promising, because, although racism is not essentially “a moral doctrine,” pace Appiah, it is always a moral evil (Appiah, 1990: 13). No account of what racism is can be adequate unless it at the same time makes clear what is wrong with it. How should we conceive racism, then, if we follow Appiah’s advice “to take our ordinary ways of thinking about race and racism and point up some of their presuppositions”? (Appiah, 1990: 4). My proposal is that we conceive of racism as fundamentally a vicious kind of racially based disregard for the welfare of certain people. In its central and most vicious form, it is a hatred, ill-will, directed against a person or persons on account of their assigned race. In a derivative form, one is a racist when one either does not care at all or does not care enough (i.e., as much as morality requires) or does not care in the right ways about people assigned to a certain racial group, where this disregard is based on racial classification. Racism, then, is something that essentially involves not our beliefs and their rationality or irrationality, but our wants, intentions, likes, and dislikes and their distance from the moral virtues. Such a view helps explain racism’s conceptual ties to various forms of hatred and contempt. (Note that ‘contempt’ derives from ‘to contemn’—not to care (about someone’s needs and rights)).

It might be objected that there can be no such thing as racism because, as many now affirm, “there are no races.” This objection fails. First, that ‘race’ is partially a social construction does not entail that there are no races. One might even maintain, though I would not, that race-terms, like ‘person,’ ‘race,’ ‘choice,’ ‘welfare,’ etc., and, more controversially, such terms as ‘reason for action,’ ‘immoral,’ ‘morally obligatory,’ etc. may be terms that, while neither included within nor translatable into, the language of physics, nevertheless arise in such a way and at such a fundamental level of social or anthropological discourse that they should be counted as real, at least, for purposes of political and ethical theory. Second, as many racial anti-realists concede, even if it were true that race is unreal, what we call racism could still be real (Appiah, 1992: p. 45). What my account of racism requires is not that there be races, but that people make distinctions in their hearts, whether consciously or not on the basis of their (or others’) racial classifications. That implies nothing about the truth of those classifications.

Lawrence Blum raises a puzzling question about this. We can properly classify a person S as a racist even if we do not believe in races. But what if S herself does not believe in them? Suppose S is a White person who hates Black people, but picks them out by African origin, attachment to African cultures, residence or rearing in certain U.S. neighborhoods, and so on. Should we call S racist if she does not hate Black people as such (i.e., on the basis of her assigning them to a Black race), but hates all people she thinks have been corrupted by their internalizing undesirable cultural elements from Harlem or Watts, or from Nairobi, or the Bunyoro? I think the case underdescribed. Surely, a person can disapprove of a culture or a family of cultures without being racist. However, cultural criticism can be a mask for a
deeper (even unconscious) dislike that is defined by racial classifications. If the person transfers her disapproval of the group’s culture to contempt or disregard for those designated as the group’s members, then she is already doing something morally vicious. When she assigns all the groups disliked to the same racial classification, then we are entitled to suspect racism, because we have good grounds to suspect that her disavowals of underlying racial classifications are false. If S hates the cultures of various Black groups for having a certain feature, but does not extend that disapproval to other cultures with similar features, then that strongly indicates racism.

Even if she is more consistent, there may still be racism, but of a different sort. Adrian Piper suggests that, in the phenomenon she calls ‘higher order discrimination,’ a person may claim to dislike members of a group because she thinks they have a certain feature, but really disapprove of the feature because she associates it with the despised group. This ‘higher order discrimination’ would, of course, still count as racist in my account, because the subject’s distaste for that cultural element results from and is morally infected by race-based disregard.

We should also consider an additional possibility. A person may falsely attribute an undesirable feature to people she assigns to a racial group because of her disregard for those in the group. This will often take the forms of exaggeration, seeing another in the worst light, and withholding from someone the benefit of the doubt. So, an anti-Semite may interpret a Jew’s reasonable frugality as greed; a White racist may see insouciance in a Black person’s legitimate resistance to unfair expectations of her, and so on.

Thinking of racism as thus rooted in the heart fits common sense and ordinary usage in a number of ways. It is instructive that contemptuous White racists have sometimes called certain of their enemies ‘Nigger-lovers.’ When we seek to uncover the implied contrast-term for this epithet, it surely suggests that enemies of those who ‘love’ Black people, as manifested in their efforts to combat segregation, and so forth, are those who hate Black people or who have little or no human feelings toward us at all. This is surely born out by the behavior and rhetoric of paradigmatic White racists. . . .

On my account, racism retains its strong ties to intolerance. This tie is uncontroversial. Marable, for example, writes of “racism, and other types of intolerance, such as anti-Semitism . . . [and] homophobia . . .” (Marable, 1992: 3, 10). Intolerant behavior is to be expected if racism is hatred. How, after all, can one tolerate those whom one wants to injure, and why ought one to trouble oneself to tolerate those whom one disregards?

Such an account of racism as I propose can both retain and explain the link between the two “senses” of racism found in some dictionaries: (i) belief in superiority of R1s to R2s, and (ii) inter-racial “antagonism.” I suggest that we think of these as two elements within most common forms of racism. In real racists, I think, (ii) is normally a ground of (i) (though sometimes the reverse is true), and (i) is usually a rationalization of (ii). What is more important is that (i) may not be logically necessary for racism. (In some people, it may nonetheless be a psychological necessity.) However, even when (ii) is a result of (i), it is (ii) and not (i), that makes a person a racist. (Logically, not causally.)

My view helps explain why racism is always immoral . . . Its immorality stems from its being opposed to the virtues of benevolence and justice. Racism is a form of morally insufficient (i.e., vicious) concern or respect for some others. It infects actions in which one (a) tries to injure people assigned to a racial group because of their XXXX, or (b) objectionably fails to take care not to injure them (where the agent accepts harm to R1s because she disregards the interests and needs of R1s because they are R1s). We can also allow that an action is racist in a derivative and weaker sense when it is less directly connected to racist disregard, for example, when someone (c) does something that (regardless of its intended, probable, or actual effects) stems in significant part from a belief or apprehension about other people, that one has (in significant part) because of one’s disaffection toward them because of (what one thinks to be their) race. Racism, thus, will often offend against justice, not just against benevolence, because one sort of injury to another is withholding from her the respect she is owed and the deference and trust that properly express that respect. Certain
forms of paternalism, while benevolent in some of their goals, may be vicious in the means employed. The paternalist may deliberately choose to deprive another of some goods, such as those of (licit) freedom and (limited) self-determination in order to obtain other goods for her; here, as elsewhere, the good end need not justify the unjust means. Extreme paternalism constitutes an instrumentally malevolent benevolence: one harms A to help her. I return to this below in my discussion of ‘Kiplingsque’ racism.

If, as I maintain, racism is essentially a form of racially focused ill-will or disregard (including disrespect), then that explains why ‘Racism’ is inescapably a morally loaded term. . . .

My account of racism suggests a new understanding of racist behavior and of its immorality. This view allows for the existence of both individual racism and institutional racism. Moreover, it makes clear the connection between the two, and enables us better to understand racism’s nature and limits. Miles challenges those who insist on talking only of ‘racisms’ in the plural to ‘specify what the many different racisms have in common’ (Miles, 1989: p. 65). This may go too far. Some philosophers have offered respected accounts of common terms that seem not to require that every time A is an F and B is an F, then A and B must have some feature in common (other than that of being-an-F, if that is a feature). Nominalism and Wittgenstein’s ‘family resemblance’ view are two examples. However, if we are not dealing with two unrelated concepts the English terms for which merely happen to have the same spelling and pronunciation (like the ‘bank’ of a river and the ‘bank’ that offers loans), then we should be able to explain how the one notion develops out of the other.

Some think that institutions, etc. are racist when they are structures of racial domination, and that individual beliefs, etc. are racist when they express, support, or justify racial superiority. Both, of course, involve denying or violating the equal dignity and worth of all human beings independent of race. This sort of approach contains some insight. However, it leaves unclear how the two levels or types of racism are related, if they are related at all. Thus, such views leave us rather in the dark about what it is in virtue of which each is a form of racism. Some say that institutional racism is what is of central importance; individual racism, then, matters only inasmuch as it perpetuates institutional racism. I think that claim reverses the order of moral importance, and I shall maintain that the individual level has more explanatory importance.

At the individual level, it is in desires, wishes, intentions, and the like that racism fundamentally lies, not in actions or beliefs. Actions and beliefs are racist in virtue of their coming from racism in the desires, wishes, and intentions of individuals, not in virtue of their leading to these or other undesirable effects. Racism is, for this reason, an interesting case study in what we might call ‘infection’ (or ‘input-centered’ or ‘backward-looking’) models of wrongdoing, in contrast to the more familiar consequentialist and other result-driven approaches. Infection models of wrongdoing—according to which an action is wrong because of the moral disvalue of what goes into it rather than the nonmoral value of what comes out of it—seem the best approach within virtues-based ethics. In such ethical systems, actions are immoral insofar as they are greedy, arrogant, uncaring, lustful, contemptuous, or otherwise corrupted in their motivational sources. Finally, desires, wishes, and intentions are racist when they either are, or in certain ways reflect, attitudes that withhold from people, on the basis of their being assigned to a particular race, levels or forms of good-will, caring, and well-wishing that moral virtue demands. At its core, then, racism consists in vicious attitudes toward people based on their assigned race. From there, it extends to corrupt the people, individual actions, institutional behavior, and systemic operations it infects. Some, however, seem not to think of racism in this way, as something that, like cruelty or stupidity, can escalate from its primary occurrence in individual people to infect collective thought and decision-making of organizations and, from there, to contaminate the behavior of institutions as well. So to think of it is to see the term as not merely descriptive and evaluative, but also as having some explanatory force.

How is institutional racism connected to racism within the individual? Let us contrast two pictures. On the first, institutional racism is of prime moral and explanatory importance. Individual racism, then,
matters (and, perhaps, occurs) only insofar as it contributes to the institutional racism which subjugates a racial group. On the second, opposed view, racism within individual persons is of prime moral and explanatory import, and institutional racism occurs and matters because racist attitudes (desires, aims, hopes, fears, plans) infect the reasoning, decision-making, and action of individuals not only in their private behavior, but also when they make and execute the policies of those institutions in which they operate. I take the second view. Institutional racism, in the central sense of the term, occurs when institutional behavior stems from (a) or (b) above or, in an extended sense, when it stems from (c). Obvious examples would be the infamous Jim Crow laws that originated in the former Confederacy after Reconstruction. Personal racism exists when and insofar as a person is racist in her desires, plans, aims, etc., most notably when this racism informs her conduct. In the same way, institutional racism exists when and insofar as an institution is racist in the aims, plans, etc., that people give it, especially when their racism informs its behavior. Institutional racism begins when racism extends from the hearts of individual people to become institutionalized. What matters is that racist attitudes contaminate the operation of the institution; it is irrelevant what its original point may have been, what its designers meant it to do. If it does not operate from those motives (at time T1), then it does not embody institutional racism (at T1). On this view, some phenomena sometimes described as institutionally racist will turn out not to be properly so describable, but others not normally considered to be institutionally racist will fit the description.

Not only is individual racism of greater explanatory import, I think it also more important morally. Those of us who see morality primarily as a matter of suitably responding to other people and to the opportunities they present for us to pursue value will understand racism as an offense against the virtues of benevolence and justice in that it is an undue restriction on the respect and goodwill owed people. (Ourselves as well as others; racism, we must remember, can take the form of self-hate.) Indeed, as follows from what I have elsewhere argued, it is hard to render coherent the view that racist hate is bad mainly for its bad effects. The sense in which an action’s effects are bad is that they are undesirable. But that it is to say that these effects are evil things to want and thus things the desire for which is evil, vicious. Thus, any claim that racial disadvantage is a bad thing presupposes a more basic claim that race-hatred is vicious. What is more basic morally is also morally more important in at least one sense of that term. Of course, we should bear in mind that morality is not the same as politics. What is morally most important may not be the problem whose rectification is of greatest political urgency.

**IMPLICATIONS AND ADVANTAGES**

There are some noteworthy implications and advantages of the proposed way of conceiving of racism.

First, it suggests that prejudice, in its strict sense of ‘pre-judgment,’ is not essential to racism, and that some racial prejudice may not be racist, strictly speaking. Racism is not, on this view, primarily a cognitive matter, and so it is not in its essence a matter of how or when one makes one’s judgments. Of course, we can still properly call prejudiced-based beliefs racist in that they **characteristically** either are rooted in prior racial disregard, which they rationalize, or they foster such disregard. Whether having such a belief is immoral in a given case will depend in large part on whether it is a rationalization for racial disaffection. It may depend on why the individual is so quick to think the worst of people assigned to the other racial group. Of course, even when the order is reversed and the prejudice does not whitewash a prior and independent racial disaffection, but causes a subsequent one, the person will still be racist because of that disaffection, even if she is not racist in holding that belief, that is, even if she does not hold it for what we might call ‘racist reasons.’ My guess is that, in most people who have been racists for some expanse of time, the belief and the disregard will reinforce each other.

A person may hold prejudices about people assigned to a race without herself being racist and
without it being racist of her to hold those prejudices. The beliefs themselves can be called ‘racist’ in an extended sense because they are characteristically racist. However, just as one may make a wise move without acting wisely (as when one makes a sound investment for stupid reasons), so one may hold a racist belief without holding it for racist reasons. One holds such a belief for racist reasons when it is duly connected to racial disregard; when it is held in order to rationalize that disregard or when contempt inclines one to attribute undesirable features to people assigned to a racial group. One whose racist beliefs have no such connection to any racial disregard in her heart does not hold them in a racist way and if she has no such disregard, she is not herself a racist, irrespective of her prejudices.

Second, when racism is so conceived, the person with racist feelings, desires, hopes, fears, and dispositions is racist even if she never acts on those attitudes in such a way as to harm people designated as members of the hated race. (This is not true when racism is conceived as consisting in a system of social oppression.) It is important to know that racism can exist in (and even pervade) societies in which there is no systematic oppression, if only because the attempts to oppress fail. Even those who think racism important primarily because of its effects should find this possibility of inactive racism worrisome for, so long as this latent racism persists, there is constant threat of oppressive behavior.

Third, on this view, race-based preference (favoritism) need not be racist. Preferential treatment in affirmative action, while race-based, is not normally based on any racial disregard. This is a crucial difference between James Meredith’s complaint against the University of Mississippi and Allan Bakke’s complaint against the University of California at Davis Medical School (see Appiah, 1990: p. 15). Appiah says that what he calls “Extrinsic racism has usually been the basis [1] for treating people worse than we otherwise might, [2] for giving them less than their humanity entitles them to.” (Appiah, 1992:18). What is important to note here is that (1) and (2) are not at all morally equivalent. Giving someone less than her humanity entitles her to is morally wrong. To give someone less than we could give her, and even to give her less than we would if she (or we, or things) were different is to treat her “worse [in the sense of ‘less well’] than we otherwise might.” However, the latter is not normally morally objectionable. Of course, we may not deny people even gratuitous favors out of hatred or contempt, whether or not race-based, but that does not entail that we may not licitly choose to bestow favors instead on those to whom we feel more warmly. That I feel closer to A than I do to B does not mean that I feel hatred or callousness toward B. I may give A more than A has a claim to get from me and more than I give B, while nevertheless giving B everything to which she is entitled (and even more). Thus, race-based favoritism does not have to involve (2) and need not violate morality.

Appiah recognizes this fact, saying that “intrinsic racism,” because of its ties to solidarity, fraternity, and even “family feeling,” is often merely “the basis for acts of supererogation, the treatment of others better than we otherwise might, better than moral duty demands of us” (Appiah, 1990: 11). However, he warns ominously, “This is a contingent fact. There is no logical impossibility in the idea of racialists whose moral beliefs lead them to feelings of hatred for other races while leaving them no room for love for members of their own” (Appiah, 1990: 12). But why should the fact that this remains a logical possibility incline us to condemn racial preference? When the possibility is actualized, and someone feels, not special regard for those who share assignment to her own racial group (along with adequate affection for people assigned to other groups), but hatred for those allocated to other groups (whether or not there is affection for people allocated to her own), then we have illicit antipathy not licit favoritism. When this ugly possibility is not actualized, however, then we need some independent argument against favoritism. Appiah invokes Kant for this purpose (Appiah, 1992: 18; 1990: 14, 15). However, the invocation is insufficient. There is no obvious inconsistency in willing that a moderate form of race preference, like other moderate forms of kinship preference, should be a universal law of nature, as Kant’s own principal test of universalization requires.

Discrimination on the basis of race, then, need not be immoral. It is discrimination against people
because of their racial assignment that cannot but be immoral. Christopher Jencks says "we need formal discrimination in favor of blacks to offset the effects of persistent informal discrimination against them." Suppose Jencks' claim about our need for discrimination is true. Can racial favoritism ever be justified? It will help to remind ourselves that discriminating in favor of RIs need not entail discriminating against R2s. The latter consists in acting either (i) with intention of harming R2s, or (ii) with hard-hearted racist indifference to the action's foreseeable ill effects on R2s, or (iii) from racist beliefs held because of racist disaffection. Similarly, racial self-segregation need not be immoral. It may be especially suspect when White people do it, because we have good historical reason to be suspicious that what is presented as merely greater-than-morally-required concern for fellow White people really involves less-than-morally-required concern for Black people. It may also be ill-advised even when it is Black people who do it. However, in neither case must it be immoral. In neither case must it be racist.

According to this conception of racism, de jure racial segregation violates political morality primarily because (and, therefore, when) it expresses a majority's (or minority's) racial indifference, contempt, or ill-will. It is therein vicious, offending against the virtues of both benevolence and justice. However, it need not have such origin, a fact illustrated by recent suggestions to establish separate academies to deal with the educational challenges confronting young Black males, and by efforts to control the racial demography of public housing projects in order to avoid problems that have sometimes arisen when such projects become virtually all-Black or virtually all-White. Whatever the social merit of such proposals, in cases like these, even if the segregation in the end proves immoral, this is not intrinsic. There must be some special additional factor present that makes it immoral. De facto racial segregation (mere separation or disproportional representation) need not be morally problematic at all when it happens to result from decently and responsibly motivated individual or social actions. However, it will be immoral if its bad effects on, say, RIs are accepted out of racist hardheartedness, that is, out of racist indifference to the harm done RIs. This will sometimes, but not always, be the case when harms are disproportionately distributed across the various racial groupings to which people are assigned.

Fourth, on this view of racism, racist discrimination need not always be conscious. The real reason why person P1 does not rent person P2 a room may be that P1 views P2 as a member of a racial group R2, to whose members P1 has an aversion. That may be what it is about P2 that turns P1 off, even if P1 convinces herself it was for some other reason that she did not rent. As racist discrimination need not always be conscious, so it need not always be intended to harm. Some of what is called 'environmental racism,' especially the location of waste dumps so as disproportionately to burden Black people, is normally not intended to harm anyone at all. Nevertheless, it is racist if, for example, the dumpers regard it as less important if it is 'only,' say, Black people who suffer. However, it will usually be the case that intentional discrimination based on racist attitudes will be more objectionable morally, and harder to justify, than is unintentional, unconscious racist discrimination. Racial discrimination is not always racist discrimination. The latter is always immoral, because racism is inherently vicious and it corrupts any differentiation that it infects. The former—racial discrimination—is not inherently immoral. Its moral status will depend on the usual factors—intent, knowledge, motive, and so on—to which we turn to determine what is vicious.

This understanding of racism also offers a new perspective on the controversy over efforts to restrict racist "hate speech." Unlike racially offensive speech, which is defined by its (actual or probable) effects, racist hate speech is defined by its origins, i.e., by whether it expresses (and is thus an act of) racially directed hate. So we cannot classify a remark as racist hate speech simply on the basis of what was said, we need to look to why the speaker said it. Speech laden with racial slurs and epithets is presumptively hateful, of course, but merely voicing an opinion that members of R1 are inferior (in some germane way) will count as racist (in any of the term's chief senses, at least) only if, for example, it expresses an opinion held from the operation of some predisposition to believe bad things about R1s, which predisposition itself stems in part from racial disregard.
This understanding of racist hate speech should allay the fears of those who think that racial oversensitivity and the fear of offending the oversensitive will stifle the discussion of delicate and important matters beneath a blanket of what is called ‘political correctness.’ Racist hate speech is defined by its motive forces and, given a fair presumption of innocence, it will be difficult to give convincing evidence of ugly motive behind controversial opinions whose statement is free of racial insults.

SOME DIFFICULTIES

It may seem that my view fails to meet the test of accommodating clear cases of racism from history. Consider some members of the southern White aristocracy in the antebellum or Jim Crow periods of American history—people who would never permit racial epithets to escape their lips, and who were solicitous and even protective of those they considered ‘their Negroes’ (especially Black servants and their kin), but who not only acquiesced in, but actively and strongly supported the social system of racial separatism, hierarchy, and oppression. These people strongly opposed Black equality in the social, economic, and political realms, but they appear to have been free of any vehement racial hatred. It appears that we should call such people racists. The question is: Does the account offered here allow them to be so classified?

This presents a nice difficulty, I think, and one it will be illuminating to grapple with. There is, plainly, a kind of hatred that consists in opposition to a person’s (or group’s) welfare. Hatred is the opposite of love and, as to love someone is to wish her well (i.e., to want and will that she enjoy life and its benefits), so one kind of hatred for her is to wish her ill (i.e., to want and will that she not enjoy them). It is important to remember, however, that not all hatred is wishing another ill for its own sake. When I take revenge, for example, I act from hate, but I also want to do my enemy ill for a purpose (to get even). So too when I act from envy. (I want to deprive the other of goods in order to keep her from being better off than I, or from being better off than I wish her to be.) I have sometimes talked here about racial ‘animosity’ (‘animosity,’ ‘aversion,’ ‘hostility,’ etc.), but I do not mean that the attitude in question has to be especially negative or passionate. Nor need it be notably ill-mannered or crude in its expression. What is essential is that it consists in either opposition to the well-being of people classified as members of the targeted racial group or in a racially based callousness to the needs and interests of such people.

This, I think, gives us what we need in order to see part of what makes our patricians racists, for all their well-bred dispassion and good manners. They stand against the advancement of Black people (as a group, even if they make an exception for ‘their Negroes’). They are avers to it as such, not merely doing things that have the side effect of setting back the interests of Black people. Rather, they mean to retard those interests, to keep Black people “in their place” relative to White people. They may adopt this stance of active, conscious, and deliberate hostility to Black welfare either simply to benefit themselves at the expense of Black people or out of the contemptuous belief that, because they are Black, they merit no better. In any event, these aristocrats and their behavior can properly be classified as racist.

Recall, too, that even if the central case of racism is racial hatred (malevolence), the racial disaffection that constitutes racism also extends to racial callousness, heartlessness, coldness, or uncaring. (We might group these as the vice of nonbenevolence). These too are racism, for it is surely vicious morally to be so disposed toward people classified as belonging to a certain racial group that one does not care whether they prosper or suffer, and is thus indifferent to the way in which the side effects of one’s action disadvantage them. Indeed, I think that, as described, our genteel, oppressive members of the gentry go beyond this to manifest a kind of practical hostility: they consciously and actively act to suppress Black people. However, even those who do not go that far are still racist. (Dr. King famously reminded us that to the extent that the good are silent in the face of evil, they are not (being) good). Morally, much will depend on what these agents mean to do. Do they seek to deprive
Black people of various positions and opportunities precisely because they wish Black people not to have these things because the things are good? If so, this is a still deeper type of race malice.

It may not be clear how the understanding of racism offered here accommodates the common-sense view that the attitudes, rhetoric, behavior, and representatives of the mindset we might characterize as the ‘white man’s burden’ view count as racist. One who holds such a Kiplingesque view (let’s call her K) thinks non-Whites ignorant, backward, undisciplined, and generally in need of a tough dose of European ‘civilizing’ in important aspects of their lives. This training in civilization may sometimes be harsh, but it is supposed to be for the good of the ‘primitive’ people. Moreover, it is important, for our purposes, to remember that K may think that, for all their ignorance, lack of discipline, and other intellectual and moral failings, individuals within the purportedly primitive people may in certain respects, and even on the whole, be moral superiors to certain of their European ‘civilizers.’ Thus, Kipling’s notorious coda to “Gunga Din.”

The matter is a complex one, of course, but I think that, at least in extreme instances, such an approach can be seen to fit the model of racism whose adoption I have urged. What is needed is to attend to and apply our earlier remarks about breaches of respect and the vice of injustice. An important part of respect is recognizing the other as a human like oneself, including treating her like one. There can be extremes of condescension so inordinate they constitute degradation. In such cases, a subject goes beyond more familiar forms of paternalism to demean the other, treating her as utterly irresponsible. Plainly, those who take it upon themselves to conscript mature, responsible, healthy, socialized (and innocent) adults into a regimen of education designed to strip them of all authority over their own lives and make them into ‘civilized’ folk condescend in just this way. This abusive paternalism borders on contempt and it can violate the rights of the subjugated people by denying them the respect and deference to which their status entitles them. By willfully depriving the oppressed people of the goods of freedom, even as part of an ultimately well-meaning project of ‘improving’ them, the colonizers act with the kind of instrumentally malevolent benevolence we discussed above. The colonizers stunt and maim in order to help, and therein plainly will certain evils to the victims they think of as beneficiaries. Thus, their conduct counts as a kind of malevolence insofar as we take the term literally to mean willing evils.

Of course, the Kiplingesque agent will not think of herself as depriving responsible, socialized people of their rights over their lives; she does not see them that way and thinks them too immature to have such rights. However, we need to ask why she regards Third World peoples as she does. Here, I suspect, the answer is likely to be that her view of them is influenced, quite possibly without her being conscious of it, by her interest in maintaining the social and economic advantages of having her group wield control over its subjects. If so, her beliefs are relevantly motivated and affected by (instrumental) ill-will, her desire to gain by harming others. When this is so, then her beliefs are racist not just in the weak sense that their content is the sort that characteristically is tied to racial disaffection, but in the stronger and morally more important sense that her own acceptance of these beliefs is partially motivated by racial disaffection. She is being racist in thinking as she does. I conclude that the account of racism offered here can allow that, and help explain why, many people who hold the ‘white man’s burden’ mentality are racist, indeed, why they may be racist in several different (but connected) ways.

Having said all this about some who are what I have called Kiplingesque racists and about some ‘well-meaning’ southern aristocrats, I must admit that my account suggests that some people in these situations, some involved in racially oppressive social systems, will not themselves be racist in their attitudes, in their behavior, or even in their beliefs (at least, in the stronger sense of being racist in holding her beliefs). I do not shrink from this result, and think it should temper our reliance on the concept of collective responsibility. There are real cases where people share in both wrongdoing and blameworthiness, but collective responsibility for racism is philosophically problematic (in ways I cannot here pursue) and, I think, it is neither so common nor so important morally as some maintain (see May, 1992).
SOME CASES

John Cottingham asks us to imagine that “walking down the street, I come across two beggars, both equally in need of assistance, and I have only a single banknote, so that I cannot assist both.” If, moreover, “one of the mendicants is white and the other black, may not a black passerby legitimately choose to give his banknote to the latter for no other reason than he’s one of my race?” (Cottingham, 1986: pp. 359, 362). He also asks us to imagine ourselves in a position heroically to rescue only one of two people trapped in a burning building. If they are of different races, may I legitimately direct my supererogatory efforts to saving the one who is of my own race? 16

The view of racism suggested here can help us see how to think about such cases. It indicates, at least, that its being done from nonmalicious racial partiality need not tend to render an action wrong. For a Black person, or a White one, to give to the Black mendicant out of racial preference seems to me objectionable, so long as the gift is not likely to mean the difference between life and death. Giving preferentially to the White mendicant is more suspicious, but there is no more vicious (‘wrong-making,’ as some say) tendency inherent in this preference than there is in the other. (I see little or none in the other.) However, if ‘Because he’s Black [like me or like the ones I prefer]’ states a morally acceptable answer to the question why someone gave to the Black beggar when she acts from the pro-Black preference, then do we not have to say that ‘Because he’s Black’ (or ‘Because he isn’t White [as I am and as are the ones I prefer]’ is a legitimate answer to the question why one did not give to the Black beggar when she acts from a different preference? And mustn’t we avoid being committed to this, and admit that the latter answer is clearly racist and illegitimate? Well, no; we do not have to admit that. To explain a failure to help someone by saying ‘Because he’s Black’ sounds ugly because, given the history of anti-Black attitudes and behavior in this society, it sounds as if the agent were acting in order to deprive Black people of certain goods. This is likely racist. In our case, however, this answer is merely a misleading way of saying that this person lost out, not on his rights, but on special favors, and not because of ill-will toward Black people but because of extra good will toward some other group. Once the explanation ‘Because he’s Black’ is itself explained, I think, some of our initial suspicion of racism evaporates. (Of course, we might still deem the conduct undesirable and insensitive.)

What of the rescues from the burning building? Even here, I suspect, appeals to race are not as such immoral. They may, however, be inappropriate to the gravity of what is at stake. Surely, it would be objectionable to make the two trapped people play a game, or pick a number, to decide who gets saved. For similar reasons, it would be improper to subject them to a questionnaire and then save the one whose answers were “correct” in matching one’s own trivial preferences. No one should lose her life even in part because her favorite color, or football team, or musical performer is different from mine. That is not because there is anything wrong with my having such preferences or, normally, with acting from them. It is because it mocks the seriousness of what is at stake and deems the persons involved to bring such frivolous matters into these deliberations. By the same token, it may be that strictly racial preference, though innocent in itself, remains too trifling a basis for choice to be made the crux in so weighty a matter. Exactly what seems objectionable about these procedures is hard to specify, but surely it centers on the contrast between the comparative insignificance of the decisive factor (race) and the gravity of what is to be decided (life and death). It makes it more difficult to attend to the importance and solemnity of the end when we must deal with means we have properly trained ourselves to take none too seriously. Race, of course, is a more serious matter in our society than are sports or color preferences, primarily because of its historical over-emphasis in programs of oppression and their rationalization. In itself, and more properly, it forms no deep part of one’s identity, I think; but, like rooting for the sports teams of one’s neighborhood or hometown or school, it may be associated psychologically with interpersonal connections of a more serious nature.

Nonetheless, while perhaps racial classification as such cannot bear the moral weight of life and
death choices, the notions of race and of shared race may be masking work done by more serious features and affinities: e.g., heightened compassion for those with a history of shared or comparable suffering, a sense of kinship, shared community (not of race but) of social/political connection, and so on. In any case, within a properly virtues-based ethical theory, the important question is not (i) what has B done that legitimates A’s abandoning her? but (ii) in what way is A vicious toward B (cruel? unjust? callous?) if A prefers to help C even when that precludes her also helping B? It is not at all clear that or how attending to affinities connected with the admittedly crude notion of race must always suffice to render A’s choice vicious.

Consider the related problem of disfavoritism. Suppose Persons D and E both have more regard for people assigned to every race than morality requires of them. D plays favorites, however, loving (people she considers to be) members of RI more than she loves those of any other racial group. E plays disfavoritism (as we might say), specially reserving (people she considers to be) members of RI for less concern than she has for others. Is what E does/feels racism? Is it morally permissible?

It seems to me that what E does is not racism, because her so-called “disfavoritism” is only a special case of favoritism. She picks out all people she considers to be members of RI for preferential good treatment. (I.e., better than that she accords RIs.) This is likely to be more dangerous socially than are standard cases of favoritism, because it threatens more easily to degenerate into insufficient regard for RIs (or even into antipathy toward them). It is thus a dangerous business, but it lacks the moral ugliness of true racism.

Perhaps it would be a better world without any such racial favoritism. The more important human interconnections, after all, are those founded on joint projects, shared understandings, and common commitments. In short, they are ones that help more fully to humanize us, that bind us one to another in binding us to what is greater than ourselves. All that is a separate matter, however, and one that has no direct bearing on our question of whether acting from such favoritism is permissible.

CONCLUSION

These reflections suggest that an improved understanding of racism and its immorality calls for a comprehensive rethinking of racial discrimination, of the preferential treatment programs sometimes disparaged as ‘reverse discrimination,’ and of institutional conduct as well. They also indicate the direction such a rethinking should take, and its dependence on the virtues and other concepts from moral psychology. That may require a significant change in the way social philosophers have recently treated these and related topics.

NOTES

1. The same dictionary dates the cognate ‘racist’ as both adjective and noun, to the same period, but places the first appearances of ‘racism’ and ‘racist’ three decades earlier.


4. I shall use such terms as ‘RI’ and ‘R2’ to refer to racial groups, and such expressions as ‘RIs’ and ‘R2s’ to refer to people assigned to such groups. This usage holds potential for some confusion, since the plural term ‘RIs’ is not the plural of the singular term ‘RI’, but I think the context will always disambiguate such instances of this usage.


7. Note that action from maxims that pass Kant’s universalizability test is thereby permissible, not necessarily obligatory.


9. I say ‘foreseeable’ effects rather than ‘foresight’ because S’s racist contempt may be the reason she does not bother to find out, and thus does not foresee some of the bad effects of her behavior.


11. For a helpful discussion of the controversy surrounding efforts to identify and regulate hate speech, and of the different grounds offered for these restrictions, see Simoë, 1994.
12. Philip Kitcher directed my attention to this topic.
13. “Though I've belted you and thayed you, By the livin' Gawd that made you, You're a better man than I am, Gunga Din.” Rudyard Kipling, “Gunga Din,” in Kipling: A Selection of His Stories and Poems (Garden City: Doubleday, n.d.).
14. It is in the form of Kiplingesque, “white man's burden”-racism that racism most nearly approaches the structure of sexism. Sexism is, of course, a form of social bias to which many assume racism is structurally similar, and those who introduced the notion of sexism as a concept of social explanation explicitly modeled it on (their understanding of) racism. In general, however, I think the similarity is not great. Sexism appears normally to be a form of condescension, wherein males deprive women of authority and power in order to protect them from the consequences of their supposed immaturity and weakness. This sort of disrespect can violate the virtue of justice in just the ways I have been describing. However, noticing that racism in certain peripheral forms can resemble what sexism seems to be in its most central forms helps reveal a significant dissimilarity between these two social vices. (For a sophisticated comparative account of racism and sexism, see Thomas, 1980.)
16. I follow him in assuming that the prospective agent stands in no special personal relationship to either of the trapped people (e.g., son) and occupies no role that specially calls for impartiality (e.g., paid village fire-fighter).
17. Robert Audi raised this problem with me in conversation.
18. I am grateful to many people who discussed these matters with me. Henry Richardson, Martha Minow, David Wilkins, David Wong, Anthony Appiah, Susan Wolf, Dennis Thompson, Glenn Lowy, and Judith Lichtenberg offered thoughtful comments on earlier drafts of some of this material. Discussions with Russel Hitinger, Ken Taylor, and others also profited me greatly. I am especially indebted to Lawrence Blum for repeated acts of encouragement and assistance, including reading and discussing my manuscripts and letting me read from his unpublished work, and I thank him and an audience at Rutgers' 1994 conference on philosophy and race, for making suggestions and raising forceful objections.

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REFERENCES

READING QUESTIONS

1. Garcia claims that his volitional conception of racism can explain its immorality. What explanation does his view offer?
2. What is the difference between personal racism and institutional racism? Which of the two types does Garcia think is basic and why?
3. What is Garcia's position on race-based preferences including various affirmative action policies?
4. Garcia claims that his volitional conception of racism offers a new perspective on hate speech. How so?
5. In the section entitled "Some Difficulties," Garcia considers historical cases of racism that might present a problem for his volitional conception. What are those cases, why might they present a problem for Garcia's volitional conception, and how does he respond to the various apparently problematic cases?
6. In the section entitled "Some Cases," Garcia considers the case of someone in a position to rescue either a white or a black person from a burning building. What is Garcia's view about saving someone of one's own race (assuming rescuer is either white or black)?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What would Garcia likely say about someone who simply believes that members of a certain race (other than his or her own) are inferior because of belonging to the race in question, but does not have hostile feeling toward members of that race? Do you think his likely response is plausible?
2. Is it possible for someone to hate members of a racial group because of their race without having racist beliefs about those individuals?
3. Can someone harbor racist attitudes and thus be a racist without being aware that the attitudes are racist?