racism and related issues

See also: CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE; CIVIL RIGHTS AND CIVIC DUTIES; DISCRIMINATION; ELITE, CONCEPT OF; EQUALITY; EXPLOITATION; FAIRNESS; HOLOCAUST; HYPOCRISY; IMPARTIALITY; INTOLERANCE; JUSTICE, DISTRIBUTIVE; KING; LIBERALISM; MERIT AND DESERVING; OPPRESSION; PARTIALITY; POLICE ETHICS; POWER; RACISM, CONCEPTS OF; SLAVERY; TOLERANCE.

Bibliography


Bernard R. Boxill

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‘Racism’ was a name coined by their critics for the theories of racial superiority that came to prominence in early-nineteenth-century Europe (Miles). Today, the word is used more broadly to apply to racially unfair and discriminatory beliefs, actions, desires, projects, persons, groups, social INSTITUTIONS, and practices. When the African American intellectual and activist W. E. B. DuBois (1868–1963) declaimed near its start that the twentieth century’s problem was “the problem of the color line,” it was racism that gave that line its importance. Racism may also be the reason behind its very drawing.

What Is Racism?

Is there some one thing in which racism consists? Or are there only different kinds or forms of racism—racisms but no racism? Many social thinkers today stress the different forms racism takes, urging a negative answer to the first question and a positive one to the second. However, their position is problematic. If there are different kinds of racism, then what is the thing itself of which they are kinds? What is it that makes each of them a kind of racism? (For discussion, see Goldberg.) Answering these questions need not rest on any strong metaphysical essentialism, and philosophy should help answer them if it is to help us understand, make, and assess accusations of racism.

Social theorists have offered divergent accounts of racism as a belief (D’Souza) or an ideology of racial superiority (Appiah), a social system of racial OPPRESSION (Marable; Ture and Hamilton), racially discriminatory behavior (Flew), racial hate (or contempt or disregard) or other noncognitive mental attitudes (Schmid; Garcia 1997), and a racialized type of sexual or existential psychopathology (Young-
Many identify racism with a belief in racial superiority. However, such belief appears to be neither necessary nor sufficient for racism. It is not necessary because the race-haters who don’t rationalize their hatred with ranking beliefs are nevertheless racists. It is not sufficient because individuals may, like Mark Twain’s Huckleberry Finn, come to espouse characteristically racist views through no moral or intellectual fault of their own. Appiah persuasively holds that such innocent, “propositional racists” are not truly racists at all. In addition, this approach has difficulty explaining in what sort of inferiority a racist must believe. Usually, it is belief in intellectual or moral inferiority that is treated as definitive of racism. However, these kinds of inferiority, if real, might be thought to help justify race-based deprivation of benefits, emotional repudiation, moral distaste, and perhaps even social discrimination. Such justifications suggest that when holding these beliefs is wrong and racist, it is because these beliefs rationalize antecedently racist indifference toward, contempt for, hatred of, or victimization of those assigned to a certain racial group.

Some maintain that identifying racism with such beliefs has moral implications. Assuming that what someone believes is not under his or her control in such fashion as to warrant moral condemnation, D’Souza insists that, because racism is simply a belief, it may be condemned only as false or ill-supported, never as immoral. Working from the same assumption, Flew reasons that, because racism is surely a moral offense, it cannot be a matter of belief. The shared assumption behind these opposed arguments, however, is suspect. We can morally condemn someone’s belief in something, just as we can condemn that person’s action, because that belief results from morally vicious elements in the agent’s will.

Identifying racism with a system of social oppression threatens to exonerate powerless, marginalized, ineffectual, or frustrated racists. Racism also faces the challenge of explaining just how individuals and their conduct, attitudes, etc., must be connected to the system if they are to count as racist. It is implausible to say these individuals are racist only if they arise from or exist within such a system. Such a statement means that whether I am racist depends less on what I do, say, and feel than on what others do and say. However, if no social system is necessary or sufficient for racism, then racism cannot consist in such a system.

The behavioral conception of racism is unclear at crucial points. The form of behavior usually identified as racist is discrimination, but this identification leaves it unclear whether discrimination must impact another person to be racist. Usually the behavior meant is external; so, making racial discriminations in one’s mind does not count. However, it is not obvious why mental discriminations should be irrelevant, since some ways of regarding people appear to be racist even if never put into effective action. Moreover, any such account faces difficulty in specifying what distinguishes racist actions from others: Their effects? Their motivation? Their connection to social systems? Whichever it is, these behavioral accounts of racism threaten to self-destruct because the key to racism lodges not in actions themselves but in the inputs, outputs, or contexts that make those actions racist.

The attitudinal approach to understanding racism faces problems in accounting for racism in action and belief, institutional racism, covert racism, unconscious racism, and paternalistic racism. Cautious versions of this approach treat the central case of racism as contempt, indifference, or hostility, but allow that these noncognitive mental attitudes can infect and corrupt an individual’s beliefs and external conduct as well as the design and operation of social institutions. It is interesting that this approach supports a promising view of the moral realm, antithetical to act consequentialism, in which actions are made wrong less by their effects than by the vicious desires, hopes, and choices that constitute their motivational inputs (Garcia 1997).

Some theorists, struck by the ways in which anti-black animosity, in the West especially, has been sexualized, see certain sexual psychopathologies as key to racism. Whatever illumination is shed by concentrating on this connection between race and sex, however, no particular psychological etiology can plausibly be held to be necessary for racism because, again, a vicious race-hater without it would still be a racist. Moreover, if these psychopathological accounts of racism are interpreted deterministically, they threaten to exculpate what we think should be morally condemned.

All these approaches to conceptualizing racism run into problems raised by the phenomenon phi-
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Philosophers call ‘Moral Luck.’ Insofar as we take racism to be a morally unacceptable phenomenon, we think that whether someone or something is racist should be largely independent of chance. We want to hold people (and, sometimes, institutions) responsible, not see racism as a matter of fortune. Thus, it counts against a social system account of racism if the system holds that whether something is racist depends on luck in how things go. Does the system happen to work in such a way that, irrespective of anyone’s plans, it specially disadvantages those of a racial group? (See Figueroa and Mills.) Indeed, some versions of this view are committed to holding, implausibly, that even well-intentioned and well-planned anti-racist efforts, such as preferential treatment programs or self-help groups for racially oppressed people, are racist if they should prove countereffective—for example, by increasing interracial tensions, as some critics of racial preference programs allege. The same objection afflicts other effects-driven accounts, such as conceptions of racism as the exercise of social power. Opportunity-luck poses the greatest problem for doxastic conceptions of racism, since what a person believes will largely be a function of the social environment in which that person is raised. For that reason, more sophisticated versions of that approach insist that racism requires holding certain beliefs irrationally, ideologically, self-deceptively, or in some other morally objectionable way. It is constitutive luck that poses special difficulties for mental attitude theories. However, understanding racism as essentially vicious may help here, since vices are most plausibly seen as attitudes and dispositions that are acquired in part through voluntary and morally assessable behavior.

What Is Wrong (Especially, Morally Wrong) with Racism?

Different understandings of what racism is influence different views of what is objectionable in it. Doxastic approaches tend to indict racism especially for being irrational. But in what way need it be irrational? Sometimes, after all, racism can be seen as an understandable (if vicious) mechanism for advancing one group or protecting its interests (Goldberg). So, racism need not be entirely without practical rationality. Is racism economically inefficient? Perhaps it often is. But economic inefficiency cannot exhaust the moral issue, for there would be something objectionable about racism even if it efficiently used or distributed resources. Is racism socially harmful? Surely, it has been. However, if society were its main victim, then the slave or the victim of lynching would have no more complaint than others. Against this, we usually think that racism is unjust. Yet, if it is unjust, how so? Many approaches treat racism as a violation of justice, as a (Rawlsian) social virtue. A neglected and attractive view is that racism-offends against justice as a (perhaps Aristotelian) personal virtue.

What Is Racism?

Racism has been imputed to things of so many different types and for such different reasons as to suggest that there are different types of racism or even that the term is used in different senses. Thus, we find racism in people and their beliefs as well as in their behavior, both individual (e.g., voting) and collective (e.g., the lynch mob), in the design and operation of legal institutions (e.g., slavery and apartheid), and in widespread but informal practices of private life (e.g., residential, marital, and hiring patterns). The reality of both individual and institutional racism seems undeniable, but a good account of racism needs to explain their connection.

More controversially, some claim that racism lies chiefly in the social effects of individual or joint behavior considered in abstraction from that conduct’s rationale or purposes; that the principal types of racism are unconscious or covert; that ignoring race is often racist; and that even many anti-racist liberals are racist in their conduct.

Others have asserted that programs of preferential treatment are racist, that forms of same-race favoritism, racial solidarity, or self-segregation among groups recently victimized are themselves forms of racism (Appiah; Kennedy).

From the political left also come denials that recent victims of racism can themselves be racist on the grounds they lack sufficient power, contrary to Sartre’s (1905–1980) famous affirmation of “anti-racist racism.” Some on the political right deny that race-based discrimination is racist when statistics show correlation between race and legitimately relevant features. If the powerless cannot be racist, then racism must entail the exercise of power. If statistical inference precludes racism, then racism must be per-
vasively irrational. If ignoring race can be racist, then racism need not consist in illegitimately attending to race. In this way, each of these and other charges and denials of racism requires defense of such claims about racism’s nature and thus ultimately depends on a philosophically articulated and defensible account of that nature.

Racism and Race

If we deny that there really are races, must we deny the existence of racism? An affirmative answer, while tempting, is problematic. Racism can exist and be destructive even if race is only illusion and the racial classifications that racists (and the rest of us) make are all false. (Appiah notes that, as my life may have been ruined because my mother was regarded as a witch, though in reality there are no witches, so it can have been disadvantaged because people classify me as belonging to the black race, even if in fact all racial classification is mistaken.) Whether races are real will in part depend on whether race is best seen as a biological category or whether some meaning can be given to the murky claim that races are “socially constructed.” If there are no races, it follows that some judgments and presuppositions crucial to racists are false.

Racial anti-realism would also, however, undermine forms of so-called racial identity (really, self-image) and authenticity. For if no one really is, say, racially black, then an African American who ignores or tries to hide her lineage will not be denying her innermost identity (as some have maintained); and when she proudly comes to think of herself simply as a member of the black race, she will not so much be “raising her consciousness” as mystifying it (Kennedy).

More difficult is determining the causal relationship between race and racism. Does race as a category stem from racism or give rise to it? Logically, racism depends on racial classification. However, it may be that racial classification took the shape and gained the importance it did because of the needs of personal or institutionalized racism (Gordon).

Is Everyone Racist? Is Racism Unavoidable?

Some regard racism in American society as “permanent,” and others maintain that everyone is racist in ways they deem almost unavoidable (Bell; Schmid; Corlett). This doctrine is a despairing one. Whether racism is a social system, an ideology, a belief, a set of motivational attitudes, a form of institutional or individual behavior, a field of discourse, or some additional possibility, there is reason to hope that it can be extinguished. Nor should we accept that racism, a moral evil, is merely an innocent form of that generalization that is a necessary part of human thinking.

We need to face the probability that putting an end to racist discrimination in Western society (and elsewhere) will not suffice to eliminate the continued suffering that centuries of racism among the powerful have wrought throughout the modern world. The poverty, miseducation, demoralization, corruption, hatred, bitterness, despair, and other setbacks that some racially oppressed people have suffered may survive racism’s end and breed their own problems. For that reason, it is important to resist the temptation to use the term ‘racism’ as a kind of linguistic ‘black box’ to denominate whatever it is that accounts for the continued plight of victims of past racism. To succumb to that temptation offers the false impression that these deep social problems have some single cause and that we understand what it is and where it is found. Thus, facile accusations of racism can retard both social understanding and social progress.

See also: Action; Collective Responsibility; Consequentialism; Correctional Ethics; Corruption; Discrimination; Elite, Concept of; Equality; Groups, Moral Status of; Hate; Inequality; Institutions; Justice [various entries]; Moral Luck; Oppression; Paternalism; Police Ethics; Practical Reason[ing]; Racism and Related Issues; Rationality vs. Reasonableness; Resentment; Responsibility; Slavery; Toleration.

Bibliography


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J. L. A. Garcia

Rand, Ayn (1905–1982)

The American novelist and philosopher Ayn Rand was born Alissa Zinovievna Rosenbaum in St. Petersburg, Russia. The precocious eldest daughter of secular-minded middle-class Jewish parents, she received a formal gymnasium and college education. Growing to maturity during Russia’s Silver Age, the period of cultural upheaval that preceded the Bolshevik Revolution, she eventually constructed an original philosophic system that she called Objectivism, combining epistemological realism, ethical egoism, and libertarian politics with a commitment to laissez-faire capitalism. In so doing, she explicitly rejected Russia’s religious mysticism and communist materialism alike. Yet, she resembled many of her Russian predecessors in her lifelong opposition to the academic establishment and in her integration of literary art and social criticism with systematic philosophy. And, like them, Rand repudiated the traditional antinomies of Western thought, including mind-body, fact-value, morality-prudence, theory-practice, and reason-emotion.

During her adolescence, Rand was encouraged by the revolt against Tsar Nicholas II (1868–1918) and by the establishment of the Kerensky government, which she hoped would move toward republican rule. With the advent of the Soviets, however, her family suffered great hardship, and her father’s pharmacy was nationalized. Adamantly rejecting the view that the individual should be sacrificed for the common good, Rand drew inspiration from the heroic individualism portrayed by Western novelists and dramatists such as Victor Hugo (1802–1885) and Edmond Rostand (1868–1918). Having decided at an early age to become a writer, she would seek to express a similarly romantic spirit in her own fiction and drama.

In her gymnasium studies, Rand excelled at mathematics and logic. At the University of Petrograd (formerly St. Petersburg), however, she settled on history and philosophy as her areas of concentration. She entered the three-year social science college in the fall of 1921. During this period, Rand was impressed by the work of Fyodor Dostoyevsky (1821–1881) and Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900). She appreciated Dostoyevsky’s literary method of drawing characters as embodiments of principles. And though she rejected Nietzsche’s emotionalist-subjectivist “Dionysian” streak, she was deeply affected by his celebration of the “noble soul” and his attacks on altruist morality. Among her college teachers was N. O. Lossky (1870–1965), a distinguished neo-Hegelian thinker who worked within the Russian dialectical tradition of analyzing philosophic and social issues as interrelated aspects of a larger context. In many respects, Rand employs this same dialectical mode of inquiry.

Rand graduated from the University of Leningrad (formerly Petrograd) in 1924, barely escaping the Communist purges, which sent hundreds of “non-proletarian” students to Siberian labor camps and hundreds of “bourgeois” intellectuals into exile. Fascinated by the burgeoning film industry, especially by American movies, she enrolled in the State Insti-