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Racism in the Head, Racism in the World

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We are inclined to think that disputes about words are unimportant. We give up arguing with people when we see that our disagreements turn ("merely," we say) on terminology. It's hard to maintain this view, though, when the word in question is "racism."

Different perceptions among blacks and whites in our society about what racism is, and where it is, constitute an important source of racial tension. For many white Americans today the word "racism" is a red flag. They don't see themselves as harboring animosity toward black people; they believe they hold to an ideal of equality, and of equal opportunity. So they feel insulted to be called racists, baffled by charges that we live in a racist society. A white supremacist would not be so wounded.

But those who say our society is racist are not speaking rhetorically or hyperbolically. The claim that racism is dead or insignificant—in the face of major socioeconomic disparities between blacks and whites, in the face of the state of our inner cities and the crisis of the young black male—produces anger or incomprehension among many black Americans.

In general, white people today use the word "racism" to refer to the explicit, conscious belief in racial superiority (typically white over black, but also sometimes black over white). For the most part, black people mean something different by racism: they mean a set of practices and institutions that results in injustice to, and inequality for, black people. Racism, on this view, is not a matter of what's in people's heads but of what happens in the world.

The white picture of the racist is the old-time southern white supremacist, who proclaimed his beliefs proudly. Your typical late twentieth-century American is, at some important level, an egalitarian who rejects the supremacist creed. In her mind, then, she is not a racist.

That a person is not a racist in this sense makes a difference. Contrary to the pronouncements of some, things are worse when people explicitly believe and proclaim supremacist doctrines, and a special moral culpability attaches to holding such beliefs. But not to be a racist "in the head" is insufficient to prevent injustice and suffering that divides along racial lines.

The alternative view is that the evil we call racism is not fundamentally a matter of what's in people's heads, not a matter of their private, individual intentions, but rather a function of public institutions and practices that create or perpetuate racial division and inequality. Who cares if your intentions are good if they reinforce or permit racial discrimination and deprivation?

Racism as overt or out-and-out racism reflects a powerful strain in our attitudes toward moral responsibility. On this view, you are responsible only for what you intend; thus, if consciously you harbor no ill will toward people of another race or background, you are in that respect innocent. For those who would be deemed the oppressors, such a view is abetted by what psychologists call "cognitive dissonance—essentially, the desire to reduce psychological discomfort. It is comfortable for white people to believe racism is dead just as long as they harbor no conscious feelings of antipathy or superiority to blacks. And, conversely, it is less painful for blacks, seeing what they see, to think otherwise.

In what follows I sketch five kinds of attitudes and practices short of out-and-out racism to which critics are calling attention when they use the word "racism" in the broad way that so irritates many white Americans.

Less-Than-Conscious Racism

Over the last thirty or forty years it has become publicly unacceptable, in most circles, to express racist views openly. (Even this assertion requires qualification. In a recent pair of focus groups conducted for People for the American Way, young whites talked openly about their negative views of blacks. The explicit avowal of racist views is more common than one might suppose, and may be on the rise.) When a view becomes publicly inexpressible, it often becomes privately inexpressible as well: what we won't say to others, we may cease to think to ourselves. It doesn't follow, however, that such beliefs vanish altogether.

How do they manifest themselves? It's common for people to find—even without any awareness on their part—the behavior of a person of another race more threatening or obnoxious or stupid (or whatever) than they would the behavior of a member of their own group. And just as their threshold of intolerance may be lower for negative behavior, they may have higher standards for members of other groups than for their own when it comes to positive traits. Thus the claim that women and minorities have to be "twice as good" as white males to get the same credit. A related phenomenon is what

psychologists call "aversive racism." In an experiment by Samuel Gaertner, subjects received a phone call, seemingly a wrong number, from a person who said that his car had broken down, that he had just used his last dime and that he needed someone to call a tow truck for him. Young white liberals—who presumably saw themselves as racially well intentioned—were almost six times more likely to hang up on callers when the voice on the phone "sounded black" than when the person "sounded white."

There is considerable evidence that murderers who kill white people are more likely to get the death penalty than those who kill black people, a disparity that implies the belief on the part of juries that white life is more valuable than black life. In general, you don't have to listen very carefully to hear the prejudices to which people give expression, often quite unawares, in talking about people who belong to other ethnic, racial, and religious groups.

Stereotyping

One way such views spill out is in ethnic or racial stereotypes. The stereotyper doesn't believe (or wouldn't say, anyway) that all blacks are less intelligent, more violent, lazier (choose one or more), or that all Jews are pushy or greedy, only that some, or most of those with whom she or he comes in contact, are. Or perhaps, to use an example of Adrian Piper's, they believe not that most black teenagers in running shoes are muggers but that most muggers are black teenagers in running shoes. In either case, they make an inference about the person coming down the street toward them from a generalization they accept about members of the group to which the person belongs. And that involves picking out some feature or features of the individual (in this case blackness and youth) as most significant or noteworthy.

Two things can be said in defense of the white woman who crosses the street when she sees a group of black teenagers coming toward her. First, she might well do the same if the teenagers were white. In that case, her behavior does not constitute racial discrimination (although it might be attributable to "ageism" for instance, or to some other bias). Second, she need not be thinking "These guys are black teenagers, therefore they are probably muggers." More likely she reasons, "These guys are black teenagers, therefore the probability that they are muggers is greater than if they were _____ (fill in the blank: men in three piece suits, gray-haired ladies, school-children)—and great enough to warrant taking the small and relatively inoffensive precaution of crossing the street.

Now the probability of black teenagers being muggers surely is greater than the probability of gray-haired ladies being muggers. The crucial question is: How much *more* probable does it have to be to justify the evasive behavior?

Obviously, questions of this kind have no simple answers. To evaluate behavior based on racial or other group generalization, several matters are relevant. Among them are: (1) The particular behavior in question, and its costs to those stereotyped. Crossing the street is a minimal slight—if it's even noticed—and may be mitigated by a display of ulterior motivation, like inspecting the rosebushes on the other side. (2) This point is connected with another: Is the behavior in question a merely private action, like the individual crossing the street, or is it the activity of a public official or institution? In that case, the threshold will be much higher, if indeed the behavior is permitted at all. A very damaging action done in an official capacity, like preventive detention, will be hardest of all to justify. (3) The costs or risks of not acting in the manner in question. Although the probability that the teenagers are muggers may be low, the risk if they are is great. (4) The available alternatives to the action or policy in question.

Stereotyping is morally problematic because in some forms it seems inevitable, yet at the same time faulty. We can't make our way in the world without relying on rules of thumb, generalizations that enable us to size up people and situations by correlating their characteristics with predictions about what we can expect to happen. But such generalizations are always flawed, because they attribute particular qualities to some people who don't possess them. To generalize is to overgeneralize.

Yet whatever its complexities, it is clear that the most common forms of racial and ethnic stereotyping are indefensible. It's not, after all, that most Jews are greedy or that most blacks are violent, so that stereotyping merely goes a little too far by failing to recognize exceptions. Such broad, vulgar stereotyping offends by its "reckless willingness to believe"—the willingness to believe, for example, that (as a white college student in the People for the American Way study put it) THEY "have a chip on their shoulders," are "rowdy," "bring it [discrimination] on themselves."

Accommodating Other People's Racism

People sometimes justify discrimination not in terms of their own beliefs but in terms of other people's. A shopkeeper refuses to hire a black sales clerk not because he himself is prejudiced, but because his customers are, and he fears a decline in sales. A corporation refuses to sponsor a program featuring an interracial love affair, not, its representatives say, because they disapprove, but because their viewers do. Suppose for the sake of argument that the shopkeeper and the corporate executives speak the truth: they are not prejudiced, but their clients are. Whether or not we call the shopkeeper himself a racist, there can be no doubt that he perpetuates racism by reinforcing the harmful beliefs of his customers, and by discriminating against black people in his hiring practices. And were he to refuse to accommodate these beliefs, he might help to change other people's attitudes, and so the world.

"Secondary" Racism

Borrowing a term from Mary Anne Warren, we can define "secondary racism" as discrimination based not on race itself but according to race-correlated factors that unfairly affect racial minorities. (The term is misleading if it suggests that such practices are of secondary importance.) Accommodating other people's racism is one kind of secondary racism, but there are many other subtler and apparently more innocent forms as well. So, for example, the practices of hiring through personal connections, or of "last hired, first fired," need not be based on racist beliefs, but they nevertheless affect women and minorities disproportionately and irrespective of merit. The quite natural tendency to favor "one's own kind," which need not involve hostility toward "other kinds," is also a form of secondary discrimination.

Standardized tests may contain biases against some groups that are unintended by and opaque to their creators. For example, if, as social scientist Christopher Jencks argues, black children are more likely to recognize words when they are pronounced with a black accent, a test administered by a white person will underestimate the children's abilities. Crucial to this form of discrimination, which is at least part of what is meant by "institutional racism," is that the requirements or tests are on their face race- (or gender-) neutral; that they nevertheless have a "disparate impact" on members of certain groups; and that the elements in question are by hypothesis irrelevant to the performance of the task at hand.

The Disadvantages of Being Disadvantaged

This last category has no common name, although it is perhaps the broadest and most intractable form by which racial inequalities are perpetuated. Whereas secondary racism involves discriminating (however inadvertently) on the basis of factors irrelevant to merit, this form employs criteria that are appropriate and relevant.

Most people would agree that we ought to admit people to jobs or schools on the basis of ability and talent, past or potential performance. Yet even if we could purge our screening devices of irrelevant biases, fewer blacks would gain entry than their numbers in the general population would suggest. They will on the whole be less competitive, given past discrimination and deprivation, than their more privileged white counterparts. Appropriate metaphors here are the vicious cycle, the downward spiral, the chicken and the egg.

Even if "racism-in-the-head" disappeared, then "racism in-the-world" would not. One reason is the continued existence of facially race-neutral practices, like seniority systems and the old-boy network, that discriminate unfairly against minorities and women. The other reason is that people who as a historical consequence of overt racism, endure substandard prenatal care, nutrition, housing, health services, and education, people who live in drug- and

crime-infested neighborhoods, will on the whole fare less well than those who do not.

Conclusion

"Racism" is inescapably a morally loaded term. To call a person a racist is to impugn his character by suggesting deliberate, malign discrimination, and it is therefore natural that those who think their hearts (perhaps, in keeping with the foregoing metaphor, we should say their heads) are pure should take offense at the accusation.

Even if we were to agree that all racism is "in the head," however, overtly racist attitudes and beliefs do not exhaust its contents. Less-than-conscious attitudes and beliefs still play an important part in our mindsets. And even if individually such attitudes seem insignificant, collectively they add up to pervasive habits of behavior that can wreak injustice on groups of people.

At the same time, an individual whose attitudes and beliefs are not overtly racist, are not even covertly racist, can inhabit a racist society or participate in racist *institutions*. A society or an institution is racist if it discriminates on grounds of race, either "primarily" or "secondarily," or if it perpetuates inequalities produced by primary or secondary racism. Sometimes the society or the institution is so corrupt that a morally decent person arguably ought not to have anything to do with it. More often, however, we hold individuals to less stringent standards. We want to know whether they simply go along with the objectionable practices, or if in the course of their involvement they do something to make the system less discriminatory. What can they do? How much ought they to do? That's another story.

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References

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