

1 : THE NATURE OF RACISM

If we have a definition of racism, it is surely easy to explain what antiracism is: it must simply be opposition to whatever we have defined racism to be. But there are both narrower and wider conceptions of antiracism than that. Many years ago my wife, who has devoted her whole career—once our children were old enough for her to have a career—to fighting racism, was invited to be one of several speakers at a meeting of left-wing activists about the 1971 Immigration Act. After she had spoken, one of the other speakers spoke at length in favor of abortion. My wife felt impelled to dissociate herself from this. “I thought this meeting was about the Immigration Act,” she said, “but I do not wish, by being on the same platform, to be taken as agreeing with the last speaker about abortion, which I think is a very wicked thing.” The entire audience joined in vociferous hissing and booing. These political activists subscribed to a very narrow conception of antiracism. They shared a number of objectives, all bundled together into a single package: political success for the Labour Party, suppression of racial discrimination, abortion, gay rights, full employment, and, no doubt, nationalization of the means of production. An antiracist was for them anyone who accepted the entire package; anyone who rejected any item in it was an enemy, and, if not actually a racist, certainly not a bona fide antiracist. I have read in print a reference to “the Society for the Protection of Unborn Children and other Fascist organisations.” In the United States acceptance of a similar package is required in order to qualify as a liberal.

My own reaction is to think that those attending this meeting did not understand what being an antiracist involves. It is not just that working for any aim demands cooperation with all who support that aim, however much you disagree with them on other matters. It is that the eradication of racism demands a respect for others whatever their differences from oneself. It cannot be achieved simply by not treating racial differences as a ground for denying such respect, though perhaps denying it on other grounds, such as differences of religion, of moral views, or even of culture. Unless you cultivate a respect for other people despite any of the ways in which they differ from you, you have not grasped the spirit that ought to animate the desire to overcome racial prejudice and its manifestations. This, of course, is a wide definition of antiracism; more exactly, a generalization of it. Wide, that is, in its conception of what antiracism should involve: it would rule out from deserving the name of antiracist (as many would

FROM:

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not) the narrow conception held by the audience at the meeting my wife addressed.

Racism, in the strict sense of the word, consists of prejudice against one or more racial groups that manifests itself in hostile behavior toward all members of those groups (or, sometimes, toward all but a very few rich or powerful ones). The term "racial group" is defined by social attitudes, not by biology or even by appearance: by the attitudes of those belonging to the group as well as of those not belonging to it. What makes it a racial group is that descent is a criterion for belonging to it. You will be regarded as a member of that group if, and only if, at least one of your parents belonged to it; usually only one parent is sufficient. As a definition—an inductive definition—this is obviously deficient: its application will depend on identification of some people as members of the group by some criterion other than descent. For present purposes, it does not matter how this is done. It may be by geographical origin or by religion or by appearance. It does not matter whether members of the group thus identified really share some common descent or not, although they will be believed to do so: what is essential is that membership of the group is taken to be transmissible by descent, usually through a single parent. A film called *Sapphire* helped to propagate racist attitudes in Britain in the early days of immigration from the Caribbean. A police inspector stalked through the film, asking witnesses, concerning a murder victim, "Did you know she was colored?" They might well not have done, seeing that her skin color was indistinguishable from theirs. Hers was a color not visible to the eye; "colored" here was a purely racial epithet.

The word "prejudice," as used in defining racism, can cover almost any hostile attitude felt toward the members of a racial group. It may be a reluctance to meet or converse with any member of the group, or the desire that no member of it should enter one's house, or live in one's street, or join the same club, trade union, or work force, or even enter the country: perhaps no more than a disgust at the thought of any member of the group marrying one's sister or daughter. "Members of the group" is too cumbersome an expression to keep repeating: let us substitute for it "the Others." The prejudice may take the form of a more virulent hatred that may manifest itself in one or another attempt to do harm to the Others, by burning their houses, or by physical attack, even murder. It may be based on a belief in the inferiority of the Others, intellectual or moral, or simply on the attitude that they do not count as human beings toward whom ordinary virtues need be exercised.

Is it right to define racism as a "prejudice" against some racial group? Is it not part of the meaning of the word that a prejudice is irrational? Must hostility toward or contempt for a racial group be irrational? Or can it be based on rational grounds, such as the astonishingly ill-informed David Hume believed himself to have, in regard to all nonwhite groups, for thinking those groups to be inferior? The answer depends on two things. What does it mean to think of

one group of people as inferior to another? And what sort of behavior is such a belief held to justify? No one can rationally think that the great majority of members of any racial group are intellectually or artistically inferior to the great majority of members of some other group. It is obvious that within any racial group there is a great range of intelligence and of artistic talents. A belief in the inferiority of a whole racial group in either respect can be sustained with some show of rationality only if it is held that the group will never produce anyone of the highest achievements: that, say, there will never be a great orator, writer, artist, musician, or scientist from that group—say, from Africa and the black population of the New World, or, again, from the Indian subcontinent. It would need a remarkable ignorance to put forward such a proposition; but then, some people, though rational, are remarkably ignorant. Can a rational belief be based on ignorance? Not if the ignorant individual palpably knows too little to form a judgment on the matter. An ignorant but rational person can be no more than agnostic about questions that require a moderate degree of knowledge to answer.

In any case, to what behavior toward members of a racial group might a belief in its intellectual inferiority rationally lead? Not to behavior of the kind that usually characterizes racists. It would be a poor reason for not wanting someone of a certain racial group to enter one's house or buy the house next door that one did not expect any great scientist or artist to stem from that group. No great amount of either intelligence or artistic talent is needed for ordinary day-to-day dealings between human beings. One could not justify withholding common courtesy, just treatment, or compassion from someone by a plea that that person lacked high intelligence and great talent, even if one was oneself a genius or prodigy. Still less could it be justified by his belonging to a racial group among whose members one expected no high degree of intellectual or artistic achievement. Plainly, no belief detrimental to any racial group as a whole, even if it could be rationally, if misguidedly, arrived at, could rationally lead to racist behavior toward all members of that group; if it did not, it would not qualify as racism under the foregoing definition. Rather, any rational person holding such a belief, if he were not a racist, and knew how irrational others often are, takes care to avoid propagating his belief. It is true that racist actions might be a rational consequence of paranoid beliefs such as that most members of some racial group carry infectious diseases or, as Enoch Powell said, are planning to get the whip hand over others; but this is no defense of the rationality of racism. We may safely characterize racism as something irrational.

It is characteristic of racism that it very readily fuses with other kinds of hostility and can often disguise itself as such another form. Since difference of race (in the social sense) frequently accompanies difference of culture, racial prejudice easily coalesces with cultural prejudice. In the early days of Britain's adaptation to the result of immigration from the Indian subcontinent, it was frequent to hear complaints against the wearing of saris or shalwars: "Once they're here,

they ought to dress like us," English people would declare. If you said, "If you and your husband went to India, you would not wear a sari and your husband would not wear a dhoti," they could not see the point. Racism also combines with religious antagonism. Germans of the present day explain their greater antipathy toward Turkish "guest workers" than to those from other European countries by saying that they have a different religion; and obviously a similar thought contributed to the prewar anti-Semitism that blossomed into the most stupendous crime of the crime-besattered century.

Racial prejudice also forms an amalgam with economic anxieties. It is of great importance not to dismiss such an amalgam as "merely economic." In the introduction to this book, Tamas Pataki writes: "In these discussions, as in so many areas of social science, conceptual confusion is endemic. For example, it is common to find racism undistinguished from other aspects of race relations, as when conflicts between racially identified groups that are motivated largely by competition for employment or territory are misdescribed as racial conflicts."

I am afraid that it is the author of these remarks who has manifested conceptual confusion. Indirect discrimination may occur when some rule unintentionally disadvantages members of some racial group; plainly, when this has happened by accident, it is due to thoughtlessness rather than racism. But this is not an example of *conflict* or of competition between groups. There is no aspect of race relations—as the term is normally and properly used—that does not have racism at its root: "race relations" is not normally applied to relations between groups between which there is no friction or competition, such as French speakers and German speakers in Switzerland. In a similar way, competition for employment between men, as a group, and women, as a group, must have sexism at its root, if "sexism" is taken to cover any belief that one or other of the two sexes ought to be favored in some particular type of employment: if no such belief is present, how can anyone conceive of competition between the sexes? A celebrated strike by bus drivers and conductors in Bristol in the 1960s took place in opposition to the employment of "colored" conductors by the bus company. "This is not a color bar," the strikers proclaimed. What on earth did they mean by saying that their demand was not for a color bar, when just that was what it obviously was? They were evidently free from the supposed conceptual confusion between racial conflicts and those conflicts between racially identified groups that are motivated by competition for employment. The strikers did not object to the proximity of "colored" people: they wanted to deny them the opportunity to compete for scarce jobs.

A distinction of principle cannot be maintained. The desire that jobs of any kind should be reserved for people of one's own racial group, or even that those people should have the priority in obtaining them, must obviously rest on the idea that the Others deserve less, and have less right, to be employed than people of Our Own Kind. Without this racist idea, there is competition for jobs only

between individuals, not between racial groups. The same goes for complaints that They are obtaining housing or beds in hospitals that should be going to Us. There is no conceptual confusion in labeling such complaints, and all drives toward racial discrimination, as products of racism. Whether or not some action is racist is not affected by what it is intended to deprive the Others of—a house in some area, a job in some firm, entry to the country, or even their lives. What makes it racist is that it is directed against members of some racial group in virtue of their being members of that group.

A counterexample has been suggested to me by Tamas Pataki, concerning an episode of which I have no other knowledge. It seems that in the mid-nineteenth century Australian workers objected to an influx of Chinese laborers to the newly discovered goldfields because they were willing to work for lower wages; they were resented because they accepted lower wages, the argument runs, not because they were Chinese. What, if so, makes the affair an "aspect of race relations" rather than simply a labor dispute? If we suppose that the race of the newcomers was really quite irrelevant, so that they would not have been resented if they had been willing to work only for the same wages as the Australian miners, it would not, at least at the outset, have had anything to do with race relations. It would not ever have had anything to do with race relations if it had never affected the attitudes of white Australians toward Chinese or of Chinese toward white Australians. If it had nothing to do with race relations, it would not be a counterexample to my assertion that there is no aspect of race relations that does not have racism at its root. But is that likely? Is it not far more likely that the Australian miners would have stigmatized the newcomers as Chinese as well as workers undercutting their wages? Would not other white Australians have used the dispute as bolstering the case for keeping Chinese out of the country? If so, the affair would merely illustrate how readily racism combines with other grounds of hostility between different groups of people.

Racism, strictly so called, is evidently more irrational, and hence morally viler, than hostilities toward groups identified in some other ways, such as religion, political belief, or even language. It is frequently entangled with hostility that has some other base; but even less can be said in its defense. One may rationally disagree with particular political beliefs and think that to act on them would be disastrous. One may rationally dislike a particular religion and think it socially divisive or individually corrupting. One may even have a rational distaste for a particular language, or rationally believe that linguistic unity is needful for the cohesiveness of society. But race is sometimes a pure social construct, and at most is a matter of physical characteristics that can have no bearing on anyone's abilities or moral character. Racist attitudes are almost always backed by wildly erroneous beliefs about the Others as a group. Above all, the hostility is cruelly based on something the Others have no power to change. Insofar as the Others are brought to suspect that it may have some foundation, which, tragically, they

sometimes are, it goes to the heart of their identity: they, and all those from whom they come, are irreparably inferior.

One cannot change what is taken to be one's race. One can change one's religion or political beliefs; one can learn to speak another language. To that degree, racial prejudice, hostility, or contempt is more unjust than any other kind. But these other forms are closely akin to it: they deny to others the respect that is their due. One may indeed rationally disapprove of some particular religion: only arrogance and lack of charity will cause one to ignore how precious it is to its believers and how integral it is to their identity. For that reason, while temperate criticism of a particular religious belief, or even of an entire religion, is always legitimate, no one ought ever to insult, ridicule, or caricature any religion; to do so manifests a cruel disrespect for the most intimate feelings of others. Equally, only arrogance and lack of charity can cause anyone to be oblivious to the injustice of demanding, under threat of punishment, that anyone should do what his conscience forbids him to do. This latter injustice is manifested by the persecution of people for their political as well as for their religious beliefs. People may believe it their duty to propagate opinions of either kind. The obligation not to force people to violate their consciences is one ground for maintaining freedom of expression—a freedom which must always be limited by a prohibition of what provokes hatred or contempt for people of particular ethnic, religious, or linguistic groups. A person's language is also integral to his identity, even if it does not possess so strong an emotional charge as his religion: attempts to deny people the right to use their own language are assaults on their individuality very similar to racial discrimination or displays of racial prejudice.

Why are people racially prejudiced? Obviously in great part because they have been so indoctrinated by parents or the society around them; but what makes them receptive to such indoctrination? Human beings tend to have a strong desire to have some group toward which they can feel and show contempt and whose members they can subject to mistreatment, so far as these are socially acceptable. Before the civil rights movement changed what white Americans regarded as legitimate, even proper, to say and do, racist attitudes toward those now known as African Americans were usual among the great majority of white people in the United States, though indeed more virulent among some than others. Now, the open expression of such attitudes is extremely rare, although it is apparent that they are still held by very many; the general culture is no longer racist, but many subcultures still are. Where has the hostility gone? In some part into prejudice toward the use of the Spanish language; but the group that is most widely derided and pushed around is that of smokers of tobacco. Opposition to tobacco smoking is in itself perfectly rational; but the vehemence, among middle-class Americans, of their hatred of smokers, and the manner in which smokers are treated, illustrate the strength of the psychological need to be able to despise another group and treat its members with disregard and contempt. Of

course, the transference of such attitudes from black people to smokers is a great improvement. Still, the irrational emotional violence most white middle-class Americans manifest toward tobacco smokers—far more now than toward users of cocaine or heroin—helps us to understand the attraction of racism within a society unashamed of it.

It could be argued that the psychological need to despise some group of people and treat its members with contempt is deep, even if the specific choice of a racial group as the target is not: such a need, it might be said, unconsciously motivates many, and its satisfaction will come from directing hatred or contempt against any group that is a socially acceptable target for such emotions. I do not think we have enough evidence to say whether this contention is true or false; it certainly does not always happen that, when some variety of racism fades, the antipathy of the former racists is switched to some new sector of the population. No doubt we should beware that this will occur; we cannot be sure that it will. But even if the need that underlies the expression of hostility is deep, the choice of a *racial* group as its object is not.

All hostilities toward other groups, however based, lead frequently to horrendous cruelties; racial hostility inspires greater cruelties than any other variety. All hatred or contempt for other groups, religious, linguistic, or cultural, is therefore dangerous; racial hatred and contempt are the most dangerous of all. Recent events in Bosnia and Rwanda, the Nazi massacres of the Jews and of the Gypsies, and the earlier Turkish massacre of the Armenians, teach us that subterranean enmities may erupt into savageries and murders which the greater part of a whole people participate in or applaud. We need to understand what triggers outbreaks of such barbarity; more urgently, we need an international rapid reaction force to intervene as soon as they occur. Racist feelings, being quite irrational, are difficult to dislodge by argument or persuasion. They are also often very passionate. These characteristics lead commentators to describe them as very deep. There may be rare individuals among the perpetrators of the most terrible racial crimes in whose psyches racist feelings go very deep. But among the great majority of racists these feelings, though irrational, dangerous, and often passionate, are very superficial. The psychological need to have some group to despise and push around may go deep; the identification of some racial group as the target of the contempt or hostility does not. People adopt racist attitudes when they find themselves in a social milieu in which it is acceptable or encouraged to display such attitudes, and in which maintaining them is advantageous. Notoriously, white immigrants to South Africa under apartheid, for example, Irish people, quite rapidly developed rampantly racist attitudes and beliefs. They may have had no such attitudes or beliefs before they left their native lands; and they certainly did not acquire them as the result of learning any genuine facts they had not known before. They simply imbibed them from the white people among whom they had come to live. Conversely, white expatriates working in

West African countries with no substantial settler population, especially after independence, exhibit no trace of racial prejudice. They will repudiate as despicable and preposterous any suggestion that they harbor any such feelings, and will deny that they have ever done so. Their reactions are genuine and sincere. It is not at all that even the faintest racist feelings lurk within them, unconfessed because it would be catastrophically unwise to voice them: they really have no such feelings, and honestly believe that they have never had any. That belief may be false; it is quite possible that before they left their own countries they shared some low level of racial prejudice which now they have wiped from their memories. The reason for their quite truthful lack of even the mildest racist ideas is that they live in an environment in which it would be utterly unacceptable and unprofitable to manifest them. Human beings have a great propensity to believe what it will be favorable to them to believe.

If racism has taken hold of a section of a national population, or of all of it, leaders of the nation who want to eradicate it will make little progress by moral exhortation or rational argument. They will gain little by seeking deep psychological causes of racial prejudice; we already know as much about that as we need to know for practical purposes. What the leaders need to do is to create a society in which there is only disadvantage to be had by expressing or acting on racist views or feelings. That, of course, is not an easy recommendation to follow. But, if it can be accomplished, racism will melt away like morning mist, save perhaps from the minds of a handful of dangerous psychopaths.

2 : THREE SITES FOR RACISM SOCIAL STRUCTURES, VALUINGS, AND VICE

This essay philosophically examines some recent and important understandings of racism. The distinguished historian George Frederickson (2002) conceives of racism as constituted by certain forms of conduct between social groups. Recent treatments within cultural studies, represented here by critical and creative surveys that Mike Cole (1997) and Peter Sedgwick (1999) offer of that literature, see it as consisting in social structures of hierarchy or disadvantage. The social theorist Albert Memmi (2000) maintains that racism resides in various value judgments unfavorable to a group. I present reasons to reject each of these views, reasons which, I maintain, lend support to an understanding of racism as essentially affective, desiderative, and volitional in its core. I briefly explicate this view and defend it against two objections. I conclude by revisiting Frederickson's account to discuss the progression implicit in the sequence of accounts I treat and the lessons it teaches about what matters morally, and I offer a suggestion about ways to reform social inquiry.

I. RACISM AS INTERGROUP BEHAVIOR

Near the end of his definitive review of racism's varied history, Frederickson (2002: 170) offers the understanding of racism to which, he thinks, his study has led: "Racism exists when one ethnic group or historical collectivity dominates,

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