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## Against 'Racisms': An Invidious Concept Under Fire

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**Abstract**

In the contemporary Western world, it is impossible to go a single day without hearing about "racism." Yet beyond thinking of it as something at once ubiquitous and especially, maybe even uniquely, awful, no one seems to know what "racism" is. In this paper, I subject the concept of "racism" to interrogation. I show, first, that in spite of what the singularity of the term may lead us to believe, there is no unitary phenomenon to which "racism" refers. In fact, there are at least four logically distinct and, in some respects, inconsistent conceptions of "racism." The latter has been defined in terms of: (1) Racial Hatred (RH); (2) Racial Discrimination (RD); (3) Innate Inferiority (II); and (4) Institutional Racism (IR). Secondly, each of these conceptions is problematic on their own terms and, thirdly, none accommodates the popular sense that "racism" is both pervasive and particularly horrible. Finally, I recommend that "racism" is a word that we are better off retiring.

**Keywords:** racism, racial hatred, racial discrimination, innate inferiority, institutional racism.

## Introduction

In St. John's Gospel, the evangelist writes that such was the bulk of Jesus' deeds that all of the books in the world couldn't contain accounts of them.<sup>1</sup> The same could be said about the number of definitions of "racism" with which contemporary Westerners must reckon. "Racism" is used in a bewildering variety of contexts, applied alike to thoughts, words, and deeds; to individual persons, communities, and even social institutions. The most benevolent of human beings no less than the most ruthless of ethnic cleansers have been accused of "racism." Still, despite—or, perhaps, because of—the relentless frequency with which charges of "racism" are hurled about, there is nothing even remotely approximating a consensus on what "racism" *is*. To judge from the tireless preoccupation of the *Zeitgeist's* movers and shakers—academics, artists, media personalities, and politicians—we can only infer that "racism" is ubiquitous, even if not necessarily overt. In addition to this, everyone seems to agree that "racism" is not only evil, but maybe even *uniquely* evil: the very *accusation* of "racism" is enough to guarantee a humiliating social death for the accused. Indeed, not infrequently, even convicted murderers aren't stigmatized as harshly as are accused "racists."<sup>2</sup>

Yet at least we know what murder is. In contrast, it is precisely because of the indiscriminateness with which we apply the term "racism" that suspicions arise that we don't know what "racism" is just because *there's nothing there to know*: if *everyone* and *everything* is "racist," then *no one* and *nothing* is "racist."

In this paper, I divest "racism" of its standard role of plaintiff and assign to it that of defendant. My objective is to substantiate two theses.

First, in spite of what the singularity of the term "racism" suggests, there are actually *four* logically distinct conceptions or models of "racism": (1) Racism as *Racial Hatred* (RH); (2) Racism as *Racial Discrimination* (RD); (3) Racism as *Doctrine of Innate Inferiority* (II); and (4) Racism as *Institutional Racism* (IR).

Secondly, each of these models of "racism" fails to accommodate the popular, but vague, notion that "racism" is something at once ubiquitous and particularly (maybe uniquely) evil.

## "Racism" as "Racial Hatred" (RH)

### *Exposition*

Black authors Stan Faryna, Joseph G. Conti, and Brad Stetson endorse "racial humanism," a vision of race and humanity that they attribute to Martin Luther King, Jr. "Racial humanism" is deliberately intended as an antidote to the view that "racism" is a uniquely white phenomenon, what Conti and Stetson call "institutional" or "structural racism." The view that "only whites can be racist" is a species of

"collectivist and deterministic thinking" that stands "in stark contrast" to the view, central to "racial humanism," "that anyone who hates on the basis of race is a racist."

Take the instances of Reginald Denny, "the [white] truck driver beaten nearly to death during the 1992 Los Angeles riots [by black rioters]," and Colin Ferguson, the black gunman who murdered several whites and Asians on a New York commuter train. Conti and Stetson insist that Denny and the families of Ferguson's victims "know full well that African Americans – like all human beings – can be racists."<sup>3</sup>

Racism is an "evil," but it is "an individual shortcoming" to which "everyone – whatever their ethnicity or class" is susceptible,"<sup>4</sup> for anyone can *hate* "on the basis of race."<sup>5</sup>

### *Critique*

At first glance, the RH model of "racism" is both simple and uncontroversial. Yet appearances can be deceptive. RH is not without its problems.

First, if racial hatred is immoral, then is this because *hatred*, irrespective of its object, is immoral? If so, then this claim is in desperate need of an argument, for the proposition that hatred is *always* immoral is most definitely *not* axiomatic. Still, even if it *was* self-evident, or even if a compelling argument for its truth was in the coming, RH would still have its work cut out for it. The problem is that if racial hatred is immoral because *hatred* is immoral, then, morally, *the object* of hatred is irrelevant. *Racial* hatred is neither more nor less noxious than hatred of serial murderers, rapists, Christians, and the left-handed. That it is the members of other races that happen to be hated is morally inconsequential.

But suppose RH claims not that racial hatred is wrong because hatred is always wrong, but that racial hatred is wrong because race is a *morally irrelevant* consideration and it is always wrong to hate on the basis of *morally irrelevant* considerations. Racial hatred is wrong, then, for the same reason that hatred of acne-inflicted people is wrong. To this line, three replies are in order.

For starters, when it is claimed that some feature or other (like race) is of no moral relevance, it is far from clear what this is supposed to mean. The implication seems to be that there is a sort of one-size-fits-all index of moral relevance, and by this measure, race *always* lacks moral relevance. This, however, is not only questionable; given that race is among a constellation of contingencies that shape and reflect both personal identity and culture, it seems likely that, to no slight extent, what's morally relevant is determined by the particularities of one's historical-cultural context.

Yet even on the assumption that there *is* a universal or absolute criterion of moral relevance, there remains a *prima facie* case for *rejecting* the notion that race is not

morally relevant. Consider: if race is as morally irrelevant as is a pimple, then it is just as irrational for human beings to regard their race as a defining feature of their identity as it is irrational to regard a pimple as a defining feature of identity. But people *do* view race as at least *a* defining aspect of their identity. Racial talk, unlike talk of acne, isn't just morally charged (though it is this); it is (far too often) morally *explosive*.

Of course, the point here isn't that race *is* morally relevant. The point is that proponents of RH (and anyone else, for that matter) have no warrant for *assuming* that it's *not*. If the claim is that while we do treat race *as if* it is morally relevant, we are mistaken in doing so—it is “*racist*” to do so—then it should be clear that this is a viciously question-begging definition of “racism,” for whether we are mistaken in regarding race as possessing moral relevance is the point that's in dispute.

There is, though, a third problem with RH, a problem that arises from the assumption that race is morally neutral. If it is the *moral irrelevance* of race that makes race-based hatred immoral, then the fact that *race* happens to be the morally irrelevant characteristic in question is neither here nor there. “Racism” is relegated to the moral periphery, being no better or worse than hatred based upon any other morally irrelevant feature or set of features.

There remain still other difficulties with identifying “racism” with racial hatred. Whether proponents of RH claim that it is always wrong to hate or always wrong to hate on the basis of morally irrelevant features, they must come to terms with the fact that hatred is an ambiguous concept. Considered as a condition of the heart, it's something that only God can know. Human beings must judge on the basis of actions, actions that both reveal and form character. Yet hatred, like any other sentiment, is intrinsically indeterminate vis-à-vis actions. As Michael Oakeshott states, “an agent's choice or disposition to respond to his situation in, for example, a motive of charitableness, of fear, or of avarice [or of hatred] is not itself the choice of a response,” for a person “may kill in a sentiment of compassion or of hatred; he may mean to keep a promise in a motive of greed, of gratitude, or of resentment; he may concern himself with another's wants out of fear, kindness, pity, or contempt.”<sup>6</sup> Hatred doesn't necessarily lead to cruelty of the sort of which Reginald Denny's attackers and Colin Ferguson were guilty, or cruelty of any sort at all, and cruelty can follow just as readily from indifference and even love as it can follow from hatred.

What this implies is that, by the lights of RH, a person who hates, a “racist,” *need not* act cruelly, while a person who acts cruelly but who doesn't hate is not a “racist.”

The RH model of “racism,” I conclude, is inadequate. Its dependence upon questionable assumptions fails to distinguish “racism” as the ubiquitous, especially awful phenomenon that contemporary convention would have us believe that it is. In fact, it fails to distinguish “racism” as any kind of phenomenon at all.

## **"Racism" as "Racial Discrimination"**

### *Exposition*

"Racism" is also widely equated with "racial discrimination." For example, in his attempt to refute "ethical egoism" – the theory that morality requires that agents always act so as to advance their own self-interests – James Rachels compares it to "racism." Both "moral doctrines" consist in "dividing people into groups," and both refuse to treat "the interests" of these groups equally. "Racism," Rachels asserts, like "anti-Semitism," "nationalism," and, of course, "ethical egoism," has "the practical result...that members of the preferred" group "are to be treated better than the others."<sup>7</sup> Rachels says that such views are indefensible, for they are incapable of surmounting the "general principle" that we're justified in "treating people differently only if we can show that there is some factual difference between them that is relevant to justifying the difference in treatment."<sup>8</sup>

To bring this principle into focus, Rachels invokes the example of a law school admissions' procedure. The decision to select one applicant over another for admission into law school is "justified" as long as it can be shown that, say, the person selected "graduated from college with honors and scored well on the admissions test, while" the person rejected "dropped out of college and never took the test." Suppose, though, that both applicants are comparably qualified but there is a place for only one of them. In such a situation, the decision to choose one over the other will be "arbitrary" and, thus, immoral.

Because there are no morally relevant differences between persons that could rationally justify its demand that individuals ascribe greater weight to their own interests than that which they attach to the interests of others, "ethical egoism," according to Rachels, is "unacceptably arbitrary." Similarly, "racism" is "unacceptably arbitrary"<sup>9</sup> insofar as it requires, in the absence of morally relevant distinctions between races, intra-racial partiality.

### *Critique*

Before proceeding, it should be noted that the RD conception of "racism" is logically independent of the RH model. According to the latter, as we have seen, hatred of the members of other races is both necessary and sufficient for "racism." But, according to the RD model, hatred is neither necessary nor sufficient: hatred *can* lead to racial discrimination, it is true, but so too can any other sentiment, including the sentiment of *love*. In fact, love for, or at least partiality *toward*, the members of one's *own* race has not infrequently accounted for "racial discrimination."

But RD has its own share of problems. If partiality toward one's own interests and the interests of the members of one's race is immoral because it is "unacceptably arbitrary," then why isn't partiality toward the interests of one's spouse or children over the interests of the spouses and children of others not "unacceptably arbitrary?" If there are no "factual differences" that could possibly justify preferential treatment in the former cases, then it is hard to conceive of "factual differences" that could justify preferential treatment in the latter cases. However, scarcely anyone thinks that a man has the same obligations to another man's wife and children as he has to his own. But if he doesn't act wrongly in showing partiality toward his own family, then how can it be that he acts wrongly in showing partiality toward his own self, his nation, and his race? Conversely, if morality *precludes* partiality toward oneself, one's nation, and one's race, then why does it not preclude partiality toward one's family?

Secondly, proponents of RD need to specify if racial discrimination amounts to "racism" when race is used as *the sole* or just *the primary* criterion in making judgments. Either way, as Rachels makes clear, racial discrimination is evil because race is a morally irrelevant characteristic. However, as was noted above, what counts as "morally irrelevant" cannot be determined in advance of circumstances. Race *may* be morally *relevant*, depending on context. Hence, inasmuch as RD rules this possibility out from the outset and equates racial discrimination with "racism," it supplies us with an account of "racism" that is no less question-begging than the RH model.

Moreover, whether it is the use of race as the sole or primary criterion that is objectionable, what's objectionable is the employment of *any* (allegedly) morally irrelevant characteristic in a decision-making procedure. If this, though, is the case, then racial discrimination *per se* is neither distinctively nor, much less, uniquely evil. That the morally irrelevant characteristic in question *happens* to be race is beside the point.

Yet suppose that the claim here is that "racism" occurs when race is employed as the sole criterion in judgment-making. If this is so, then not only is "racism" not ubiquitous; it is quite possibly *nonexistent*, for in our daily interactions, neither race nor any other criterion functions independently of other contextual considerations. Race is an abstraction, but even our theoretical understandings of it are invariably accompanied by a complex of notions—cultural patterns, biological traits, etc.—that are conceptually distinct from "color." When it comes to the concrete decision-making of everyday life, race is all the more tethered to a plethora of other characteristics like age, gender, dress attire, patterns of speech, and so forth. In short, race encompasses more than *color*. To put it starkly, no one ever perceives *just* color.

If defenders of RD mean to say that it is immoral, "racist," to use race as the *primary* criterion in decision-making, the burden is on them, then, to explain why it is permissible to use race as *a* criterion at all, for if what makes the use of race evil is that

it is morally irrelevant, then the use of race is immoral whether it functions primarily or *minimally* in decision-making. But there exists a variety of unobjectionable social practices in which race *is*, at the very least, a factor. For example, no one criticizes, say, a Chinese restaurant owner for hiring his co-ethnics in order to lend an air of “authenticity” to his enterprise. Neither has there ever been any handwringing over the FBI’s time-honored practice of employing race as an index in profiling serial killers. Similarly, there is little outcry over the fact that, irrespective of race, the vast majority of human beings *living in interracial societies* routinely permit racial considerations to inform their practices of dating, marrying, adoption, etc.

There is, though, one *controversial* practice in which race figures predominantly but to which, interestingly, no small supply of *defenders* of the RD model—like James Rachels, for instance—have actually lent support: “affirmative action.” The latter is a primarily race-based preferential treatment policy that renders it illegal for employers and college admissions offices to *not discriminate in favor* of blacks and other non-whites over whites (and sometimes Asians).

Now, if it is morally legitimate to not only allow for racial discrimination but to *coerce* select groups to engage in racial discrimination for the purposes of ostensibly benefitting people of color—if, in other words, it is a moral imperative to use race as a primary criterion in discriminating against whites—then either the proponents of RD have just contradicted their own account of “racism” or, what is just as problematic, they have introduced an as-of-yet unheard of distinction between “racism” that is bad and “racism” that is *good*: “racism” is bad when race is used to discriminate against people of color but good when used to discriminate in favor of people of color—or against whites.

In conclusion, the RD model of “racism” must be rejected. Not only is it question-begging, but however it is read, it fails to show either that “racism” is ubiquitous or that it is uniquely evil. Moreover, RD implies that “racism” may even be a moral requirement!

## **“Racism” as Doctrine of “Innate Inferiority” (II)**

### *Exposition*

An older definition of “racism,” and one that persists to the present, is offered by Dinesh D’Souza in *The End of Racism*. The author concedes that the plurality of contexts within which it has been used has rendered the term “racism” a complicated one, yet he nevertheless holds that, at its core, “racism” means now what it has meant for the last two centuries. It denotes “an ideology of intellectual or moral superiority based upon the biological characteristics of race,” and it “typically entails a willingness to discriminate based upon a perceived hierarchy of superior and inferior races.”<sup>10</sup> So, a



"racist" is one who believes in the innate inferiority of the members of races other than his own and *may* discriminate against them on that basis.

### *Critique*

The first observation to make here is that II presupposes neither hatred nor, *necessarily*, racially discriminatory conduct on the part of its proponents. It is neither a sentiment, like hatred, nor an action, like discrimination. It is, principally, an idea or belief.

The first problem, however, in identifying an (allegedly) evil, perhaps a *uniquely* evil, phenomenon like "racism" with a belief is that beliefs, embodying as they do judgments regarding reality, may be *true* or *false*—not moral or immoral. It's impossible to imagine circumstances under which a true belief could be immoral. Yet it's also not easy to envision how a false belief could be thought to be immoral on account of its falsity. Was Ptolemy immoral for believing that the sun revolved around the Earth? Is a loving wife immoral for having believed that her adulterous husband was faithful to her?

There's no sense to be gotten from speaking of a true belief as immoral, but neither is it much more sensible to speak of a false belief as being immoral just because of its falsity. Yet it is *not* the falsity of a belief per se that renders it immoral, objectors will insist. What convicts a false belief of immorality is the evil purpose or purposes in the service of which it has been or can be enlisted. This objection, however, proves both too much and too little.

On the one hand, II need not be appropriated for the sake of serving any wicked goals and, in fact, it may even inspire *benevolent* action on the part of those who subscribe to it. At any rate, belief in the innate inferiority of other races in no way precludes benevolent treatment of their members. For that matter, belief in II in no way precludes belief in *the inherent equality* of *all* human beings in the eyes of God, say, or insofar as "natural rights" or "human rights" are concerned. Take Thomas Jefferson, for instance. Though a slave master, Jefferson was also a vehement opponent of slavery. While admitting to entertaining "doubts" regarding "the grade of understanding allotted to" blacks "by nature," he was quick to point out that "whatever their degree of talent it is no measure of their rights." As he said: "Because Sir Isaac Newton was superior to others in understanding, he was not therefore lord of the person or property of others."<sup>11</sup>

Belief in the innate intellectual and/or moral inferiority of others human beings, whether they be the members of one's own race or those of another, is compatible, both in thought and in practice, with a belief in their equal worth or dignity and a commitment to their equal treatment. As D'Souza says, II has been held "by many of

*the most enlightened, courageous, and humane figures in America and the West," figures like David Hume, Immanuel Kant, and Georg Hegel.*<sup>12</sup>

This should be unsurprising, for belief in the innate inferiority of *animals*, and even *plants*—i.e. "the environment"—need not, and often is not, accompanied by cruelty toward these non-human life forms. Sometimes, as is the case with many Jews and Christians who view themselves as divinely appointed stewards of God's creation, it is precisely the belief in the human being's innate *superiority* over all other living things that results in the former making tremendous efforts to extend care and benevolence toward the latter.

On the other hand, subscription to II proves too much, for if its reasoning is taken to its extreme logical term, we'd have to conclude that it can be immoral to hold even beliefs that many of us assume are *true*. After all, as a matter of historical fact, there is no question that beliefs in liberty, equality, virtue, piety, and justice *have* led to evil. So, if it is the evil actions that are performed, or that could be performed, on the basis of a belief that make that belief, or the holding of that belief, evil, then both false and true beliefs are evil, for evil has been done in the name of ideas that are both false and true. This, of course, also implies the absurd conclusion that, since the proponents of every moral ideal have done evil for its sake, subscription to morally righteous (and presumably true) beliefs is just as evil as subscription to morally rotten (and false) beliefs. Thus, belief in II is no more and no less immoral than any and every other belief!

A final consideration to bear in mind is the sheer fact that, if "racism" is simply belief in II, then not only is there no sense in which it can be declared especially evil, or even evil at all; it must be very rare to boot, for few if any people any longer endorse it.

The II model of "racism," we must conclude, fares no better than the RH and RD models in accommodating the popular, but, thus far, groundless notion, that "racism" is something at once ubiquitous and especially evil.

### **"Racism" as "Institutional Racism"**

#### *Exposition*

"Institutional racism" involves no individual hatred, discrimination, or belief in innate inferiority on the part of whites. Richard Wasserstrom writes that "institutional racism" is both "unintentional" and "more subtle" than both "overt or covert racial discrimination by state action, which is now banished, and racial prejudice, which still lingers, but only in the hearts of persons...." It consists of "institutions and practices [that] very often, if not always, reflect in important and serious ways a variety of dominant values in the operation of what is apparently a neutral legal mechanism," as

well as latent ideas on which we regularly depend that, when taken in conjunction with each other, guarantee "the maintenance and reinforcement of a system in which whites dominate over non-whites."<sup>13</sup>

Iris Marion Young goes further in claiming that the ideal of "assimilation," presupposing, as it does, the ideal of a "color-blind" society, serves to reinforce long-standing patterns of oppression. Even though "the ideal of a common humanity in which all can participate without regard to race, gender, religion, or sexuality poses as neutral and universal," it "allows privileged groups to ignore their own group specificity" and facilitates the "disadvantage" at which "oppressed groups" find themselves.<sup>14</sup> The ideals of "formal equality" and "assimilation" obscure group differences that need to be made explicit if "the dominant culture" is to recognize itself "for the first time as specific: as Anglo, European, Christian, masculine, straight," and patterns that "structure privilege and oppression" are to cease.<sup>15</sup>

In short, "institutional racism" is the most invidious form of "racism," for insofar as it is constitutive of the fundamental institutions and assumptions of American life, procedures and laws that appear to be race-neutral but which in reality embody "Eurocentric" and "masculine" prejudices that "privilege" white males while perpetuating the oppression of all other groups, it is like the air we breathe: ubiquitous and thus, invisible.

### *Critique*

The IR model of "racism" excludes all considerations concerning the particularities of flesh and blood persons. It is as abstract a theory of "racism" available to us. And, it is *deliberately* so. The abstractness of IR serves as a virtue by investing it with an air of plausibility that it otherwise wouldn't possess. Its strength, however, is also its vice, for by neglecting the concrete relativities and contingencies of the individual human interactions of everyday life, IR seeks to immunize itself against refutation. Nevertheless, the inadequacies of IR can be disclosed easily enough.

Before proceeding further, the viciously circular reasoning of IR must first be made explicit. Its proponents note gross statistical disparities between blacks as a group and whites as a group. From this fact, they infer a cause: "racism." But the only way the proponents of IR can get to this conclusion is by way of the premise that "racism," and *only* "racism," can cause statistical disparities of the sort that exist between blacks and whites. The problem here, though, is that the proponents of IR *cannot* rely upon this premise without begging the question, for this premise is nothing other than *the conclusion* that they need to prove.

And the assumption that only "racism" could give rise to interracial statistical inequalities does indeed need argument, for not only is it not axiomatic, it is dubious.

Black American scholar Thomas Sowell has been a student of racial and ethnic differences for decades. He informs us that “international studies have repeatedly shown gross intergroup disparities to be commonplace all over the world, whether in alcohol consumption, fertility rates, educational performance, or innumerable other variables.” Sowell remarks that “a reasonably comprehensive listing of such disparities would be at least as large as a dictionary”<sup>16</sup> – and there is nothing nefarious about any of them. American men, for instance, are struck by lightning six times as often as are American women, and during the 1960’s in Malaysia, degrees in higher education were overwhelmingly concentrated in the hands of the Chinese minority. To underscore just how “absurd” is the claim that statistical disparities between groups, whether racial or otherwise, must be the function of a wicked phenomenon (like “racism”), Sowell observes that as far back as 1985, twice as many Asian Americans as whites scored over 700 on the mathematical section of the Scholastic Aptitude Test.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, he notes that there is a “gross disparity in ‘representation’ between blacks and whites in professional basketball,” and a “gross ‘overrepresentation’ of blacks among the highest-paid players in baseball” – and yet neither of these patterns is considered proof of “discrimination” against whites. Consistency, however, demands that the defenders of IR view it as such, for the very same “procedure” that leads to these results “is being taken in deadly seriousness” when it is blacks who are at a disadvantage relative to whites. When the latter obtains, “racism” becomes the only factor that explains the “under representation” of blacks in various facets of life.<sup>18</sup>

Thirdly, IR relies upon data concerning monolithic abstractions, racial categories that swallow up the many *intra*-racial differences that bring into focus a picture of race relations in America that is not only profoundly different from that painted by IR; the former picture *undercuts* the latter.

When relevantly similar subsets of blacks and whites are compared we discover that whatever disparities existed between “blacks” and “whites” either diminish dramatically or vanish altogether. For example, as far back as 1969, and two years *before* “affirmative action,” Sowell notes that “blacks and whites whose homes included newspapers, magazines, and library cards, and who had also gone on to obtain the same number of years of schooling” had the same average income. Beginning in the early 1970’s, “young black husband-wife families outside the South have had incomes virtually identical to those of young white husband-wife families outside of the South,” and in some years have actually earned a bit more than their white counterparts.<sup>19</sup> As of the early to mid-1980’s, “where husbands and wives are both college-educated, and both working, black families of this description earn slightly *more* than white families of this description--nationwide and without regard to age.”<sup>20</sup>

A final consideration against IR is that it is modally confused: *persons* or *individuals* are moral or immoral, "racist" or not; *institutions*, however, are efficient or inefficient, productive or unproductive. Whatever other definitions or conceptions of "institution" may be available, it is certain that proponents of IR view an "institution" as an impersonal or trans-personal entity that, as such, transcends the intentions of the persons who compose it. Hence, "institutional racism" is nothing but a synonym for, as one champion of the IR model memorably put it, "racism without racists."<sup>21</sup> It is no more sensible to speak of "racist" institutions than it is sensible to speak of "racist" knives or "just" houses, "tasty" planets or "bumpy" sounds.

Since IR's defenders know that it is impossible to sustain the popular thought that "racism" is both ubiquitous and especially or uniquely evil as long as "racism" is equated with racial hatred, the racially discriminatory conduct of individuals, and/or a belief in the doctrine of innate inferiority, they assume that by identifying "racism" as an attribute of *institutions* they could meet this challenge. The assumption, though, is ill-conceived: IR could establish that "racism" is a *ubiquitous* phenomenon only at the cost of *denying* that it is a *moral* one.

The theory of "institutional racism," like the other accounts of "racism" at which we have looked, fails to account for the popular idea that "racism" is pervasive and particularly evil.

### Some Objections and Counter-Objections

To judge from the frequency with which the topic of "racism" recurs in our daily lives – a frequency that would lead a visitor from another planet to conclude that there is *no* topic of greater importance – it is clear that we treat as axiomatic not only the existence of "racism," but its character as a phenomenon that is at once pervasive and especially, even uniquely, evil. Considering that I have challenged this assumption, some further comments are in order.

First, to reiterate, my point here is not to deny the intelligibility of talking about "racism." What I deny is the intelligibility of how we usually *do in fact* talk about it. "Racism" may very well signify some aspect or other of human experience. But *what* exactly that experience is remains to be seen. As I've been at pains to show, as things stand, "racism" has been used in such a staggering variety of contexts that the term's been largely divested of all usefulness – and, hence, all meaning.

Secondly, even if we opt for one of the aforementioned conceptions of "racism," the latter simply cannot sustain the meaning of "racism" as something pervasive and uniquely evil that conventional usage affixes to the term.

Thirdly, that there is on the part of some individuals racial animus – animosity in which racial considerations play at least a not insignificant role – is indisputable. Yet

this hardly warrants transforming this one disposition—a disposition that exists amidst a bundle of others and that can manifest itself in a virtually limitless spectrum of ways—or not manifest itself at all—into some *doctrine*, a hegemonic “ism,” as it were, of epic awfulness. If racial animus is an ingredient in our understanding of an event, why not just make a note of *that*? Why go on about some devilish being we insist upon calling “racism,” particularly when doing so, as I’ve argued, only promises to frustrate our pursuit of the very thing—understanding—for which we search? Of course, even if we *do* drop “racism” in favor of, say, “racial animus,” we should remember that the latter is essentially a conceptual or epistemological tool, a descriptive, not a normative, term: its advantage over “racism” lay in its greater precision. This isn’t to suggest that racial animus isn’t bad, much less that it is devoid of moral import. Yet if we insist on associating with “racial animus” the same connotations that we associated with “racism,” we will merely replicate the difficulties with the latter that I identified in this essay: What counts as racial *animus*, and what counts as *racial* animus? Is it always wrong to experience race-based animosity and, if so, why so? And so on.

Finally, there are, sadly, some who would seek to stop this line of inquiry dead in its tracks by charging those who pursue it with—what else?—“racism.” Besides being viciously question-begging—it is precisely the meaning of “racism” that’s under discussion—the indictment would serve only to exacerbate further the confusion engulfing the term while vindicating the twofold suspicion that the charge of “racism” is vapid and that because of its vapidness, it is, by design, a grand conversation-stopper.

## Conclusion

The commonplace assumption that “racism” is a phenomenon as ubiquitous as it is terrible both arises from and is reinforced by opinion-shapers from various precincts of our culture, from academia to politics to the media. I have argued here that this assumption has no connection with reality. While the singularity of the term “racism” implies a unitary referent, the truth of the matter is that there are four logically distinct, independent conceptions of “racism”—“Racial Hatred” (RH); “Racial Discrimination” (RD); “Innate Inferiority” (II); and “Institutional Racism” (IR). Yet none of these models is capable of sustaining the popular conception of “racism.”

## Endnotes

1. Jn. 21: 25. *The New Revised Standard Version: Catholic Edition* (Nashville: The New Revised Standard Version, 1993), 116.
2. This is not mere hyperbole. Duane "Dogg the Bounty Hunter" Chapman is a convicted murderer who became a reality TV celebrity. When, however, he was heard on a recording using a racially-charged epithet regarding blacks, Chapman spared no tears as he threw himself at the mercy of the media. From one talk show to the next, Chapman appeared with his black pastor as he pleaded with the public to forgive him his transgression – not the transgression of murder, mind you, but that of using this mother of all racial slurs – and accept that he is *not* a "racist." Beyond this, one need only consider such recent examples as those of chef celebrity Paula Deen, veteran talk radio host Don Imus, and LA Clippers owner Don Sterling to see just how swiftly even the most immensely successful of careers have been brought to a screeching halt because the accused had been suspected of harboring "racist" thoughts.
3. Conti, Joseph G., Faryna, Stan, and Brad Stetson, eds. *Black and Right: The Bold New Voice of Black Conservatives in America* (Westport: Praeger, 1997), 66.
4. *Ibid.*, 67.
5. *Ibid.*, 66.
6. Oakeshott, Michael. *On Human Conduct* (London: Oxford University Press, 1975), 72.
7. Rachels, James, "Ethical Egoism," in eds. Fieser, James and Louis Pojman. *Introduction to Philosophy: Classical and Contemporary Readings*. 4<sup>th</sup> edition (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 2008), 556.
8. *Ibid.*, 556-557.
9. *Ibid.*, 556.
10. D'Souza, Dinesh. *The End of Racism: Principles for A Multiracial Society* (New York: Simon & Schuster Inc., 1995), 27.
11. Quoted in Sowell, Thomas. *Black Rednecks and White Liberals* (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2005), 167.
12. D'Souza, Dinesh. *The End of Racism: Principles for A Multiracial Society* (New York: Simon & Schuster Inc., 1995), 28 (emphasis added).
13. Wasserstrom, Richard, "On Racism and Sexism: Realities and Ideals," in ed. Arthur, John. *Morality and Moral Controversies: Readings in Moral, Social, and Political Philosophy*. 7<sup>th</sup> edition (Upper Saddle River: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2005), 563.

14. Young, Iris Marion, "Social Movements and the Politics of Difference," in ed. Arthur, John. *Morality and Moral Controversies: Readings in Moral, Social, and Political Philosophy*. 7<sup>th</sup> edition (Upper Saddle Rivers: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2005), 572.
15. Ibid., 573.
16. Sowell, Thomas. *The Vision of the Anointed: Self-Congratulation as a Basis for Social Policy* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), 35
17. Ibid., 35-36.
18. Ibid., 36.
19. Sowell, Thomas. *Civil Rights: Rhetoric or Reality* (New York: Harper Collins, 1984), 80-81.
20. Ibid., 81 (emphasis original).
21. Bonilla-Silva, Eduard. *Racism Without Racists* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006).



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