

Ethics of Racism

Sunday Layi OLADIPUPO Ph. D

Department of Philosophy, Adekunle Ajasin University,
Akungba Akoko, Ondo State, Nigeria

Bólúwatifé Sulaimon OYÈKÚNLÉ

Department of Counselling Psychology & Educational Foundations,
Tai Solarin University of Education, Ijebu Ode, Ogun State, Nigeria

Abstract

Humanity is shrouded with different class of bias. This in scholarship is codified as racism. Racism as an ideology has received various interpretations from diverse perspectives ranges from colour, ethnics, religion, gender and what have you. It serves as climax of discrimination of one against others in any form of disguise. Beyond its sociological and psychological inclination, this discourse, using the critical tool of philosophy attempts a philosophical disquiet of racism from an ethical perspective. This is done within the context of some ethical theories form where it is concluded that, it is rationally and ethically right to claim that racism is all about degrading humanity. This claim is not unconnected with the fact that only a few agrees to racism, all because they use it as a means to an end, not minding its consequences on fellow humans. Thus, racism is conceive as a moral burden that devalue human dignity.

Introduction

When the term ‘racism’ is mentioned, the next thing that comes to mind is the ‘black-white disparity’, but suffice to say, many ethnic and racial groups in the world including American Indians, Asians and so on, have faced racism historically. Racism features as denial of social, civil, economic, political, and educational opportunities, as a result of one’s race or racial background. Till date, racism still exist in our society as exhibited among several ethnic and racial groups in the areas of employment, housing, education, justice, and the likes. On the contrary, too many people won’t agree to be racist, as they claim to be ‘colorblind’ on matters of race. One thing worthy of note is the fact that racism is a fundamental and inevitable part of our social and cultural history, and as such, we tend to be ‘racially conscious’. Being ‘racially conscious’ implies how we tend to perceive ourselves and people around us (even though we refuse admitting it). This can be inferred from our daily choice of words on how we describe ourselves and people around us - ‘I am a black and educated man; Dangote is the richest black man in the world; White men are good at movie making; Jack is a tall white man in his twenties’. In these descriptions, we see how conspicuous the racial differences are well spelt, as a result, some persons tends to favor and appreciate individuals of the same race with them over people of other races. Given the relevance of race to our society and the circumstances

surrounding it, it becomes imperative to evaluate racism from various lenses. Thus, this work shall take as its main thrust the burden of evaluating racism from an ethical viewpoint. In doing this, it is expedient that such is commenced with a rich, brief and explicit conceptualization of the term ‘racism’ for more understanding.

Conceptualizing Racism

Over the years, there have been political and theoretical debates as regards conceptualizing the term ‘racism’ as an analytical or social concept. At the same time, the analysis of the term has featured in several disciplines such as sociology, political science, philosophy, economics, anthropology, cultural studies, and so on. The key question that suffices is ‘what is racism?’.

The earliest use of the term can be traced back to the 1902 edition of the Oxford English Dictionary, which was used in describing the U.S policy towards Native Americans.¹ The term ‘racism’ was used interchangeably with the word ‘racialism’ in the first half of the 20th Century, as such, many scholars from different disciplines have given various definitions. Racism can be defined simply as any policy, belief, attitude, action or inaction, which subordinates individuals or groups based on their race.² Michael Banton, a British social scientist, defines racism as “... the doctrine that a man’s behavior is determined by stable inherited characters deriving from separate racial stocks having distinctive attributes and usually considered to stand to one another in relations of superiority and inferiority.”³ Ruth Benedict in her famous book entitled *Race and Racism* defines racism as “... the dogma that one ethnic group is condemned by nature to congenital superiority.”⁴ In view of the above definitions, it is evident that these scholars failed to expose the historical formation of racism as an institution and an ideology. Owing to this, Paula Rothenberg gives a more robust definition of racism with reflection from the historical and social perspective. She opined that:

*Racism involves the subordination of people of color by white people. While individual persons of color may well discriminate against a white person or another person of color because of their race, this does not qualify as racism according to our definition because that person of color cannot depend upon all the institutions of society to enforce or extend his or her personal dislike. Nor can he or she call upon the force of history to reflect and enforce that prejudice. ... History provides us with a long record of white people holding and using power and privilege over people of color to subordinate them, not the reverse.*⁵

In simple and clear terms, racism can be said to be discrimination against someone, or some set of people based on their race(s). Racism is exhibited through actions, attitudes, beliefs and

¹ Howard, G. (2016, August 21). The Easiest Way to Get Rid of Racism? Just Redefine it. The New York Times Magazine. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/21/magazine/the-easiest-way-to-get-rid-of-racism-just-redefine-it.html> on 12-08-2020.

² Rowan, W. Race and Racism Retrieved from <https://www.pcc.edu/illumination/wp-content/uploads/sites/54/2018/05/race-and-racism-curriculum.pdf> on 12-08-2020.

³ Banton, M. (1967). *Race Relations*, London: Tavistock Publications, p. 8.

⁴ Benedict, R. (1983). *Race and Racism* (New edition). London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

⁵ Paula S. R. (1988). *Defining Racism and Sexism: An Integrated Study*. New York: St Martin’s Press.

policies, and it is in several forms which includes but not limited to individual racism and institutional racism.

Individual racism, as the name depicts, is specific about the individual person. This form of racism denotes the individual's racist beliefs, assumption and behaviours. According to Henry F. & Tator C., they defined individual racism as "a form of racial discrimination that stems from conscious and unconscious, personal prejudice".⁶ Implicatively, one may become a racist and exhibit the trait in his actions and beliefs, as racial discrimination can come to be through one's conscious and unconscious prejudice. Going further, Brigham J.C. made us to understand that individual racism can be expressed both openly and secretly.⁷

Institutional racism "refers to the systematic racial bias inferred into policies or laws as well as its practice (e.g. enforcement and judicial systems)".⁸ It involves the differential effects of policies, practices, and laws on members of certain racial groups over other group(s). Institutional racism can be said to develop from intentional racism, for instance:

*...limiting immigration on the basis of assumptions about the inferiority of other groups), motivations to provide resources to one's own group (e.g., attempts to limit another group's voting power), or as a by-product of policies with one explicit goal but with unintended systematic race-based policies, which typically are associated with ideologies developed to justify them.*⁹

Going down the lane of history, the Caucasian Americans exhibited institutional racism by developing racial ideologies that helped to justify the laws that enabled them to attain two important types of economic exploitation: slavery and the seizure of lands from native tribes.¹⁰ According to Rowan Wolf, 'housing market' is a good example of how institutional racism works. He held that:

*The creation of the suburbs in the United States was driven by public policy and taxpayer money. The GI Bill through the VHA opened the opportunity to purchase a home to millions of veterans after World War II. However, of all the home loans made in those boom years, less than 2% went to non-whites. Meanwhile, the federal government set up lending standards and created "red lining." "Red" districts had low insurability **because** people of color lived in those areas. White communities were seen as "good risks," and hence lenders did not offer mortgages in red lined districts. These practices excluded people who were not white from the home ownership market.*¹¹

⁶ Henry, F. & Tator, C. (2006). *The Color of Democracy: Racism in Canadian Society*, (3rd edition). Toronto, ONT: Thomson Nelson Canada, p. 329.

⁷ Brigham, J. C. (1993). College Students' Racial Attitudes. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 23, 1933-1967.

⁸ Jone, E. (June 8, 2020). The Other Pandemic: Systemic Racism and Its Consequences. Retrieved from <https://equineteurope.org/2020/the-other-pandemic-systemic-racism-and-its-consequences/> on 14-08-2020.

⁹ Chaunda, L. S. A Discussion of Individual, Institutional, and Cultural Racism, with Implications for HRD. Retrieved from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED504856.pdf> on 13-08-2020.

¹⁰ Klinker, P. A., & Smith, R. M. (1999). *The Unsteady March: The Rise and Decline of American Commitments to Racial Equality*. New York: Free Press.

¹¹ Rowan, W. *Race and Racism*. Retrieved from <https://www.pcc.edu/illumination/wp-content/uploads/sites/54/2018/05/race-and-racism-curriculum.pdf> on 17-08-2020.

In view of the above, it can be inferred that racism serves as a very vital tool for both the perpetuation of White dominance and of White privilege, thus, it is imperative to attempt an ethical evaluation of racism as it has great effect on the individual and the society at large.

Racism as Moral Issue

The struggle against racism and its effect has been for years. This struggle has led to some being heroes that we celebrate today, while some lost their lives in procuring the end of racism. Amongst the several heroes being celebrated today are Martin Luther King Jr and Nelson Mandela. Mandela, at the opening of the defense case in the Rivonia Trial, Pretoria, South Africa, in 1964, said “*during my lifetime I have dedicated myself to this struggle of the African people. I have fought against White domination, and I have fought against Black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and to achieve. But if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die*”.¹² This implies that Mandela’s struggle against racism was not for the Black man, but for all men irrespective of their skin colour or race.

Suffice to say, some of the challenges we face in the world today are aftermath effects of racial discriminations from the past. The belief in ‘white supremacy’ has in a way distorted the minds of many, both white and black, especially in the way we perceive one another. Racism can be termed a moral issue as it is one of those things that affect how we perceive and treat our fellow men. Owing to a critical look at racism, one may opine that racism was a tool employed by the Whites to justify colonialism and imperialism, and as well destroy and impoverish indigenous people and their culture. It is no gainsaying that several discussions in our contemporary society about racism focuses on the American history, South African and Nazi Germany. The German Nazis upheld the distinction between the Aryans and other groups, most especially the Jews. For the fact that the German Nazis were only concerned about the welfarism of the people of Aryan race, not minding the sufferings of the Jews, Slavs and Gypsies, depicts the moral wrongness of racism.¹³

Prisoners captured from Africa to America were used and worked as slaves along with Native Americans and Europeans. These African slaves were called ‘negroes’ by the end of the 18th Century and thereby seen as being lower and inferior to the Whites in all ramifications.¹⁴ Towing the historical lane, far back as 1856 in colonial America, we were made to know that each time an enslaved person files an appeal to the U.S Supreme Court, seeking his freedom, the Court always ruled against them, and thereby reinstating that the ‘Bill of Right’ didn’t apply to African American. This is predicated on the argument that if the ‘Bill of Rights’ applies to the African American, then they would be permitted ‘the full liberty of speech in public and in private,’ ‘to hold public meetings upon political affairs,’ and ‘to keep and carry arms wherever

¹² Anonymous, Protest and Resistance through the Rivonia Trial 1964. Retrieved from <https://overcomingapartheid.msu.edu/unit.php?kid=163-571-8> on 12-08-2020.

¹³ Singer, P. (1983). Is Racial Discrimination Arbitrary? In J. Naverson (Ed.). *Moral Issues*. New York: Oxford University Press, p. 319.

¹⁴ Zack, N. (1993). *Race and Mixed Race*. Philadelphia, Pa: Temple University Press, pp. 116-122.

they went.’ In summary, African Americans, at that time, were unjustly discriminated and stripped off their human rights because of their racial background. In 1899, three Black families in Richmond County, Virginia were said to have challenged the closing down of the area’s only public black high school. These families petitioned the court to permit their wards to complete their education at the White high school following the closure of the Black high school. The Supreme Court, after three years, established that if there was no suitable Black school in a district, thus, Black students would have to do without an education. Going further, President Roosevelt, during the World War II, gave an executive order restricting the rights of Japanese Americans, thereby ordering 110,000 to be relocated to internment camps. This order was challenged in the Supreme Court by Gordon Hirabayashi, but he lost the case. Similarly, Fred Korematsu also challenged the order and lost, and it became established that individual rights are not absolute and may be suppressed at will during wartime.¹⁵

The foregoing gives a picture of how racism takes the human right of one away, thereby relegating one to the class of animals, and as such, this can be considered morally wrong. In view of this implication, it is no gainsaying that racism is a violation one’s fundamental human right, as it negates the core human rights of dignity, self-determination, and equality.¹⁶ Similarly, it denies a key ‘moral principle of person’. This principle holds that one ought to treat others the way one wants to be treated. This is further in line with the teachings of Jesus Christ in the book of Mathew 7:12, which says “therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them...”.¹⁷ This implies that as human beings, every of our actions towards our fellow men ought to be actions that we will appreciate and welcome if and when it is done to us. The big question now is ‘will any racist be happy to be discriminated in his environment?’, the obvious answer is NO. Thus, being a racist or promoting racism can be considered morally wrong, as racism is invariably an action that the people involved in it wont want such to be done to them.

Going further, Aristotle made us to understand that we know a thing better when we know what it is as against knowing the colour or size. He further brought a distinction between *essential* and *accidental* properties. *Essential* properties are things in themselves while *accidental* properties are the colours or sizes of things. In the case of humans, being a human being is an *essential* property, while being black, white, tall or short are just *accidental* properties. Being black or white does not imply being a human being, as anybody could be either black or white. That anyone is black or white is an *accidental* property on humans by predestination, nobody chooses to be either white or black. This raises a critical question that why should any human be judged or discriminated over what he or she has no power or choice over. Being black or white can be said to be determined by the Supreme Being. The Supreme Being created us all as humans but distinguished us with various *accidental* properties like our skin colour, hair colour, eyes colour, height and weight. Discriminating a fellow human being on the bases of

¹⁵ Tom, H. (2019). 10 Racist Supreme Court Rulings in US History. Retrieved from <https://www.thoughtco.com/racist-supreme-court-rulings-721615> on 17-08-2020.

¹⁶ See: United Nations, (2005). Universal Declaration of Human Rights. (Illustrated Edition) p. 4 (“All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and right”); Thornberry, P. (2016). *The International Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination*. Oxford University Press. (“Equality and non-discrimination are intrinsic to the architecture of human rights law.”)

¹⁷ KJV Bible

our skin colour can be considered a sin against the Supreme Being, hence making racism morally wrong. This can be further predicated on some of the verses of one of the holy books of the Supreme Being, the Bible; Acts 17:26 posits that God has made “of one blood all nations of men”¹⁸; 1 Tim. 5:21 kicks against doing things out of partiality and favoritism.¹⁹ This further depicts that every form of racism is morally wrong as all men, irrespective of our racial background, are one and the same.

Subsequently, we can claim that it is rational and logical to say that racism is nothing more than a tool in the hands of the oppressors (racist) to fulfill their desires. This claim can be justified on the ethical theories of hedonism and egoism. Hedonism as an ethical theory argues for pleasure as the most important pursuit of mankind, and the only thing that is good for an individual, as against pain.²⁰ Egoism on the other hand is a theory that asserts that “human beings act or should act in their own interests and desires. Egoism is opposed to altruism, which asserts that human beings should act in ways that help others.”²¹ With the actions of racists as earlier exposed, it is safe to say that they are exhibiting both the hedonist and egoist trait. Their actions depict that the discrimination and inhuman treatment of people of other racial backgrounds is to fulfil their selfish desires. This is conspicuously unveiled in the capturing of prisoners from Africa to America and thereby using them to work as slaves. As slaves, these Africans were used to work in attaining the desire, goal and development of America. These slaves were maltreated, underfed, overburdened, beaten and killed (in cases of rebellion). These treatments were not only aimed at making the slaves to suffer or to work harder, but it gave pleasure to these slave-masters as they joyed in the sufferings of the slaves. This can further be interpreted as the application of the Machiavellian assertion that ‘the end justifies the means.’ The behavior of these oppressors depicts that regardless of the action taken, in as much as the desired end result is attained, the means (action) is justified. It is glaring that racism is a tool (means) used by these oppressors to achieve their desired end result, which includes but not limited to development in their country. Thus, racism can be tagged morally wrong, because of the cruelty melted on fellow human beings as a result of racism being a tool in the hand of the oppressors.

Conclusion

So far, this work has been able to argue for racism as an ethical issue. Inarguably, there is a moral dimension to racism, morality can be said to be a principle as regards the differences between good and bad or right and wrong behaviors or actions. The ills and wrongs of racism on humanity were richly exposed and trialed within the ethical purview, it can be inferred from the various argument laid out that racism is morally wrong. The immoral state of racism can further be predicated upon Immanuel Kant’s “categorical imperative.”²² Kant’s categorical

¹⁸ KJV Bible

¹⁹ KJV Bible

²⁰ Anonymous, Hedonism. Retrieved from https://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_hedonism.html on 17-08-2020.

²¹ Dee A. S. Egoism. Retrieved from <https://www.learningtogive.org/resources/egoism#:~:text=as%20self%2Dism,-Egoism%20is%20a%20theory%2C%20in%20ethics%2C%20that%20human%20beings%20act,in%20ways%20that%20help%20others> on 17-08-2020.

²² See Tim, J. Immanuel Kant. Retrieved from <https://iep.utm.edu/kantview/> on 17-08-2020.

imperative is arguably a universal ethical principle which holds that one ought to always respect the humanity in others, and one's actions ought to be in line with rules that could possibly hold for everyone. With the above in mind, it is rationally and ethically right to claim that racism is all about degrading humanity. Only a few agree to racism, all because they use it as a means to an end, not minding its consequences on fellow humans. To this end, we don't only submit to the claim that racism is a moral issue that should be evaluated morally, but racism is morally wrong as it is a weapon used against humanity.