

Ethics and Race: Philosophical Perspectives

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Introduction to Ethics

Ethics and Race: Key Questions and Lesson Overview

- This lesson examines the ethical dimensions of race through historical and philosophical lenses.
- We will analyze key arguments from W.E.B. Du Bois, Martin Luther King Jr., and Kwame Anthony Appiah.
- Throughout history, philosophers have engaged with questions of racial justice in different ways.
- These perspectives help us understand both historical contexts and contemporary ethical challenges.

Key Question

How have philosophical approaches to race evolved over time, and what ethical insights can we draw from them?

Philosophical Approaches to Race and Justice

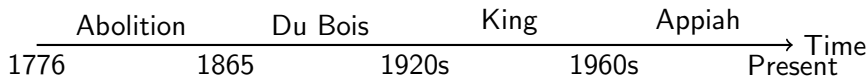
- **Ethics** is the systematic study of concepts of right and wrong conduct and the moral principles that govern behavior.
- Different philosophical traditions offer distinct frameworks for analyzing racial justice.
- These frameworks help us evaluate the moral arguments made throughout history regarding race.
- Understanding these approaches enables us to better analyze complex ethical questions.

Major Philosophical Approaches

- **Rights-Based:** Emphasizing inalienable human rights
- **Justice-Oriented:** Focused on fair distribution and treatment
- **Character-Focused:** Concerned with individual and societal virtue
- **Pragmatic:** Addressing practical social reform

Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on Race and Ethics

- Moral arguments about race have evolved significantly from the Revolutionary era to today.
- Historical contexts shaped how people understood and articulated ethical positions on race.
- Philosophical ideas have both reflected and challenged prevailing social attitudes about race.
- Contemporary discussions of race continue to engage with historical philosophical traditions.



The American Revolution: The Paradox of Liberty and Slavery

- The American Revolution was founded on ideals of liberty and equality while maintaining slavery.
- **Natural rights philosophy** articulated by Jefferson claimed "all men are created equal" while excluding enslaved people.
- This fundamental contradiction created ethical tensions in American political thought.
- Early abolitionists used these same revolutionary principles to argue against slavery.

Revolutionary Ideals	Contradictory Practices
Liberty for all	Enslavement of millions
Natural rights	Legal denial of personhood
Self-determination	Forced labor
Equality	Racial hierarchy

Abolitionist Moral Arguments Against Slavery

- Abolitionists developed moral arguments grounded in religious and secular philosophical traditions.
- **Religious abolitionists** like Quakers argued that slavery violated divine law and Christian principles of human dignity.
- Secular abolitionists appealed to natural rights philosophy and the inconsistency of American ideals.
- Frederick Douglass emphasized how slavery corrupted both the enslaved and the enslaver's moral character.

Frederick Douglass on Moral Corruption

"Slavery does away with fathers, as it does away with families. Slavery has no use for either fathers or families, and its laws do not recognize their existence in the social arrangements of the plantation."

Pro-Slavery Arguments: Examining Historical Justifications

- Defenders of slavery developed complex ethical justifications for the institution.
- **Paternalism** claimed that slavery benefited enslaved people who were viewed as incapable of self-governance.
- Biblical arguments selectively used religious texts to justify racial hierarchy and slavery.
- Economic arguments claimed that slavery was necessary for prosperity and social order.

Religious Justifications

- "Curse of Ham" narrative
- Divine ordering of society
- Enslavement in biblical texts

Pseudo-Scientific Claims

- Racial hierarchy theories
- Polygenesis (separate creation)
- Phrenology and cranial studies

The Ethical Crisis of the Union: Compromise vs. Moral Principle

- The decades before the Civil War featured ethical debates about prioritizing national unity over moral principle.
- **Compromise** arguments claimed that preserving the Union justified tolerating slavery where it existed.
- Radical abolitionists rejected compromise, arguing that moral principles transcended political expediency.
- These debates highlighted tensions between pragmatic politics and moral absolutism.

Lincoln's Evolving Position

Initially focused on preventing slavery's expansion while preserving the Union:

"If I could save the Union without freeing any slave I would do it, and if I could save it by freeing all the slaves I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone I would also do that."

Emancipation and Reconstruction: New Ethical Horizons

- The Emancipation Proclamation (1863) and 13th Amendment (1865) legally ended slavery in the United States.
- Reconstruction introduced a new ethical framework of **citizenship rights** for formerly enslaved people.
- The 14th and 15th Amendments established legal equality and voting rights, transforming ethical discourse.
- This period raised fundamental questions about repair, restitution, and the meaning of freedom.

The Rise of Jim Crow: Legalized Discrimination

- Following Reconstruction, Southern states established **Jim Crow laws** to legally enforce racial segregation.
- The Supreme Court's Plessy v. Ferguson (1896) decision endorsed "separate but equal" segregation as constitutional.
- These laws created a comprehensive system of racial control backed by violence and intimidation.
- Jim Crow represented a moral regression, reestablishing racial hierarchy through new legal mechanisms.

Key Philosophical Question

How could a nation that had constitutionally established equal rights revert to a system of legal discrimination and disenfranchisement?

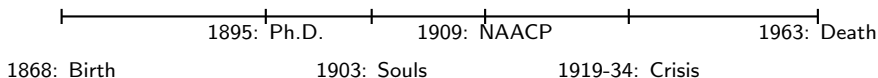
Resistance and Moral Arguments Against Segregation

- African Americans developed various forms of resistance to Jim Crow, each with distinct ethical justifications.
- **Accommodationism**, represented by Booker T. Washington, emphasized economic self-improvement and gradual progress.
- More radical approaches demanded immediate political rights and challenged the moral foundation of segregation.
- These divergent strategies reflected different ethical assessments of how to respond to injustice.

Strategy	Key Figure	Ethical Emphasis
Accommodationism	Booker T. Washington	Virtue, self-improvement
Political activism	W.E.B. Du Bois	Rights, dignity, justice
Pan-Africanism	Marcus Garvey	Self-determination, pride
Legal challenges	NAACP	Constitutional principles

W.E.B. Du Bois: Life, Education, and Historical Context

- W.E.B. Du Bois (1868-1963) was born just after the Civil War and lived through Jim Crow, the Civil Rights Movement, and decolonization.
- As the first African American to earn a Ph.D. from Harvard (1895), Du Bois combined rigorous scholarship with activism.
- He conducted pioneering sociological research on Black communities, challenging prevailing racist assumptions.
- Du Bois co-founded the NAACP in 1909 to advance civil rights through legal challenges and public education.



Du Bois vs. Washington: Competing Visions for Progress

- Du Bois directly challenged Booker T. Washington's approach to racial advancement outlined in the Atlanta Compromise (1895).
- **Washington's philosophy** emphasized vocational education, economic self-sufficiency, and accommodating to white power structures.
- **Du Bois's approach** demanded full political rights, higher education, and direct confrontation with discrimination.
- This debate represented contrasting ethical assessments of how to respond to injustice—accommodation versus resistance.

Washington's Position

- Economic independence first
- Industrial education
- Gradual, indirect approach
- Acceptance of segregation

Du Bois's Critique

- Political rights essential
- Liberal arts education
- Immediate equality
- Challenge to segregation

The Talented Tenth: Education and Leadership Philosophy

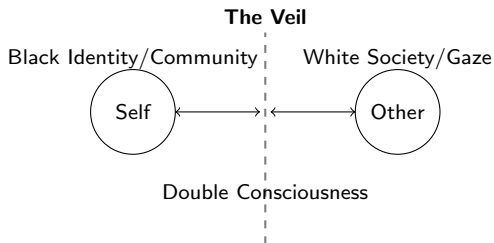
- In his 1903 essay, Du Bois argued that the **Talented Tenth**—highly educated Black Americans—should lead racial advancement.
- This educated elite would serve as teachers, writers, and leaders who could articulate rights claims and guide progress.
- Du Bois believed liberal arts education, not just vocational training, was necessary for developing effective leadership.
- The concept reflects a tension between meritocracy and collective uplift in Du Bois's early thought.

Du Bois on the Talented Tenth

"The Negro race, like all races, is going to be saved by its exceptional men. The problem of education, then, among Negroes must first of all deal with the Talented Tenth; it is the problem of developing the Best of this race that they may guide the Mass away from the contamination and death of the Worst."

The Veil and Double Consciousness: Living Behind the Color Line

- In *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), Du Bois introduces the concept of the **Veil** as a metaphor for racial separation.
- The Veil represents the physical and psychological barrier between Black and white Americans.
- **Double consciousness** describes the "sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others."
- These concepts illuminate the psychological and ethical dimensions of living under racism.



Psychological Wages of Whiteness: Understanding Privilege

- In *Black Reconstruction in America* (1935), Du Bois developed the concept of the **psychological wage** of whiteness.
- This "public and psychological wage" compensated poor whites for their economic exploitation with racial status.
- The concept explains how white workers often prioritized racial advantages over class solidarity.
- This analysis reveals how racial hierarchy functions to preserve economic power structures.

Key Insight

"It must be remembered that the white group of laborers, while they received a low wage, were compensated in part by a sort of public and psychological wage. They were given public deference and titles of courtesy because they were white."

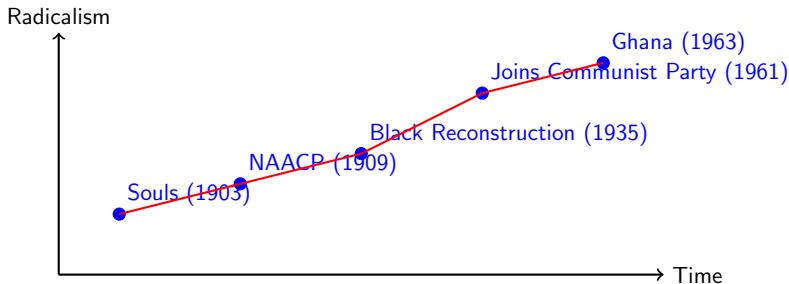
Du Bois's Critique of American Democracy

- Du Bois argued that American democracy failed to fulfill its promises for Black Americans.
- He identified racism as a fundamental contradiction within American democratic ideals.
- Du Bois challenged liberal assumptions that gradual progress would inevitably resolve racial injustice.
- His critique questioned whether American democracy could achieve justice without confronting white supremacy.

Democratic Promises	Contradictory Realities
Equal citizenship	Disenfranchisement
Equal protection	Lynch law and violence
Economic opportunity	Labor discrimination
Political representation	Exclusion from governance

Du Bois's Evolving Thought on Race and Justice

- Over his long career, Du Bois's thinking evolved from liberal reformism to more radical critiques of capitalism and colonialism.
- He increasingly connected racial oppression in America to global colonialism and economic exploitation.
- In his later years, Du Bois embraced **Pan-Africanism**, the idea that people of African descent worldwide share common interests.
- He died in Ghana in 1963, having renounced his American citizenship and embraced a more international perspective on racial justice.



Martin Luther King Jr.: Intellectual and Spiritual Foundations

- Martin Luther King Jr. (1929-1968) emerged as a leader during the Montgomery Bus Boycott (1955-56).
- King's philosophy combined **Christian theology**, specifically the Social Gospel tradition, with democratic ideals.
- He studied the works of Mohandas Gandhi and developed a philosophy of nonviolent direct action.
- King's doctorate in systematic theology from Boston University shaped his intellectual approach to justice.

King's Intellectual Influences

- **Religious:** Jesus Christ, Walter Rauschenbusch's Social Gospel
- **Philosophical:** Personalism, Hegel's dialectic
- **Political:** Gandhi's nonviolence, Henry David Thoreau's civil disobedience
- **Black Tradition:** Howard Thurman, Benjamin Mays

King's Critique of the White Moderate: The Ethics of Neutrality

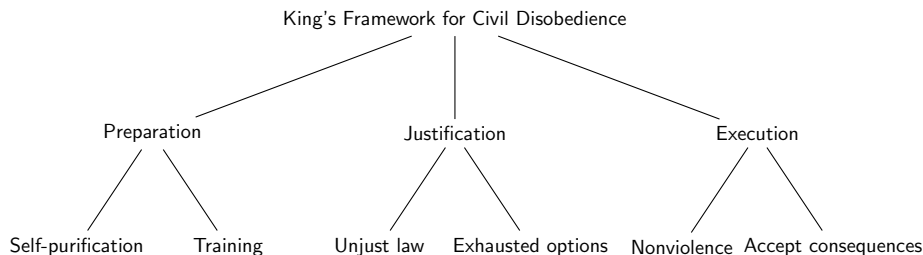
- In "Letter from Birmingham Jail" (1963), King criticized the **white moderate** who prefers "order" over justice.
- King argued that moderates' commitment to gradualism enabled continued injustice.
- He identified moral neutrality in the face of oppression as a form of complicity.
- This critique challenged the ethical stance that patience and compromise were adequate responses to injustice.

King on the White Moderate

"I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Counciler or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to 'order' than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice."

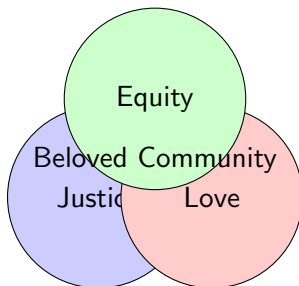
When is Civil Disobedience Justified? King's Framework

- King developed a sophisticated framework for **civil disobedience** as a moral response to unjust laws.
- He distinguished between just laws that uphold human dignity and unjust laws that degrade human personality.
- Civil disobedience requires willingness to accept consequences, demonstrating respect for law as a concept.
- King's approach balanced moral absolutes with practical considerations about effective resistance.



The Beloved Community: King's Vision of Social Harmony

- King envisioned the **Beloved Community** as the ultimate goal of the civil rights movement.
- This concept described a society based on justice, equal opportunity, and love for fellow human beings.
- The Beloved Community would transcend racism through reconciliation rather than victory of one group over another.
- This vision reflected King's belief that human destiny is shared and interconnected.



The Triple Evils: Racism, Poverty, and War as Interconnected Injustices

- King identified the **Triple Evils** of racism, poverty, and militarism as interconnected social problems.
- He argued that these issues reinforce each other and require comprehensive solutions.
- This analysis expanded King's focus beyond civil rights to economic justice and opposition to the Vietnam War.
- The Triple Evils framework challenged the separation of domestic and international ethical concerns.

Evil	Manifestation	Moral Challenge
Racism	Segregation, discrimination	Dignity and equality
Poverty	Economic exploitation	Material justice
Militarism	Vietnam War, arms race	Peace and nonviolence

King's Philosophy of Nonviolence: Principles and Practices

- King's philosophy of **nonviolence** went beyond tactical considerations to ethical principles about human relationships.
- Nonviolence seeks to defeat injustice, not to defeat or humiliate opponents.
- The approach requires willingness to accept suffering without retaliation, transforming pain into social progress.
- King believed nonviolence had transformative power for practitioners and witnesses alike.

Six Principles of Nonviolence

- 1 Nonviolence is a way of life for courageous people
- 2 Nonviolence seeks to win friendship and understanding
- 3 Nonviolence seeks to defeat injustice, not people
- 4 Nonviolence holds that suffering can educate and transform
- 5 Nonviolence chooses love instead of hate
- 6 Nonviolence believes the universe is on the side of justice

From Civil Rights to Human Rights: King's Expanding Vision

- In his later years, King expanded his focus from civil rights to **human rights** and economic justice.
- The Poor People's Campaign (1968) sought to address poverty across racial lines through economic restructuring.
- King increasingly criticized capitalism and militarism as systems that perpetuated injustice.
- This expanded vision connected domestic civil rights with international human rights struggles.

King's Later Vision

"True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar. It comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring."

Kwame Anthony Appiah: Philosophical Background and Influences

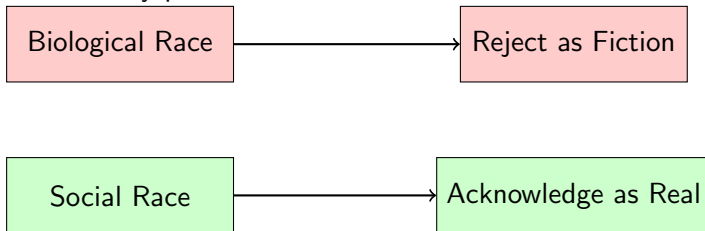
- Kwame Anthony Appiah (born 1954) is a gay Ghanaian-British-American philosopher who addresses race, identity, and ethics.
- His multicultural background—British mother and Ghanaian father—informs his philosophical perspective.
- Appiah synthesizes analytic philosophy with cross-cultural insights and historical analysis.
- His work builds on and critically engages with earlier philosophers while addressing contemporary ethical concerns.

Major Works on Race and Ethics

- *In My Father's House* (1992)
- *Color Conscious* (with Amy Gutmann, 1996)
- *The Ethics of Identity* (2005)
- *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (2006)
- *The Lies That Bind: Rethinking Identity* (2018)

Racial Anti-Realism: Challenging Biological Conceptions of Race

- Appiah's **racial anti-realism** argues that race as understood in biological terms does not meaningfully exist.
- He demonstrates that genetic variation within supposed "racial" groups exceeds variation between such groups.
- Appiah distinguishes between biological race (which he rejects) and racial identity (which he acknowledges as socially real).
- This position challenges both racist ideologies and certain forms of identity politics.



Appiah's Racial Anti-Realism

Racial Anti-Realism: Social and Ethical Implications

- Appiah argues that biological race concepts often serve as pseudoscientific justifications for oppression.
- The social construction of race has real-world consequences in shaping identities and distributing resources.
- Racial anti-realism does not deny racism's effects but reframes how we understand and address racial injustice.
- This view leads to a more nuanced approach to racial identity as historically contingent rather than essential.

Appiah on Racial Categories

"The truth is that there are no races: there is nothing in the world that can do all we ask race to do for us... The evil that is done is done by the concept, and by easy—yet impossible—assumptions about its application."

Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers

- **Cosmopolitanism** in Appiah's framework combines universal concern for all human beings with respect for legitimate differences.
- He rejects both rigid universalism that ignores cultural specificity and relativism that abandons shared ethical standards.
- Cosmopolitan ethics acknowledges the value of particular cultural traditions while maintaining cross-cultural dialogue.
- This approach seeks to balance universal human rights with respect for diverse ways of life.

Position	Universal Values	Cultural Differences
Universalism	Embraced	Ignored/Minimized
Relativism	Rejected	Absolutized
Cosmopolitanism	Core values affirmed	Respected within limits

Cosmopolitanism: Universal Ethical Principles Across Cultural Differences

- Appiah's cosmopolitanism emphasizes **conversation** across differences as essential to ethical progress.
- He argues that moral disagreements can be productive without requiring complete consensus.
- Cosmopolitanism acknowledges that people have obligations to those beyond their immediate communities.
- This approach seeks a middle path between imperialist universalism and isolationist particularism.



Identity: Virtue Ethics and Authentic Self-Development

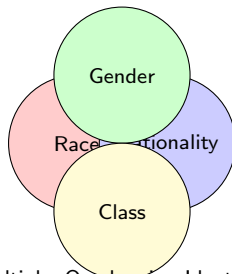
- Appiah analyzes identity as both socially constructed and individually negotiated through ethical choices.
- **Identities** provide scripts that shape our understanding of how to live but don't determine our actions.
- He explores the ethics of authentic self-development within inherited identity categories.
- This approach examines how people can reshape collective identities through their individual ethical choices.

Appiah on Identity Construction

"Identities are complex and multiple and grow out of a history of changing responses to economic, political, and cultural forces, almost always in opposition to other identities... They flourish despite our ignorance of their origins, despite the misunderstandings that form them."

Identity: Negotiating Multiple Social Categories

- Appiah challenges **essentialism**—the idea that identities have fixed, inherent characteristics.
- He emphasizes that all people navigate multiple, overlapping identities simultaneously.
- Real ethical freedom requires acknowledging the contingency of identity categories.
- This view frames identity as narrative and dialogical rather than predetermined or static.



Multiple, Overlapping Identities

Appiah's Challenge to Racial Thinking in Contemporary Ethics

- Appiah argues that ethical progress requires moving beyond racial essentialist thinking while acknowledging racism's effects.
- He challenges both color-blind approaches that ignore ongoing injustice and rigid identity politics that reinforce racial divisions.
- Appiah encourages ethical engagement with history without being determined by it.
- This balanced approach seeks to address real injustices while avoiding reification of problematic categories.

What Appiah Rejects

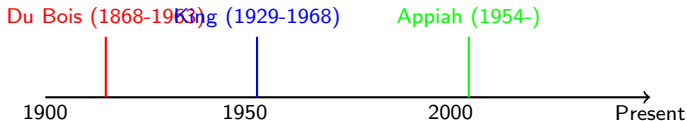
- Biological race
- Racial essentialism
- Uncritical identity politics
- Cultural isolationism

What Appiah Affirms

- Social reality of race
- Historical analysis of racism
- Cross-cultural dialogue
- Cosmopolitan ethics

Connecting Historical and Contemporary Approaches to Race and Ethics

- The philosophers we've studied share concerns with human dignity, freedom, and ethical consistency.
- Their approaches evolved in response to changing historical conditions and intellectual developments.
- Du Bois, King, and Appiah each developed frameworks that combined ethical theory with practical engagement.
- Understanding these thinkers in relation to each other reveals the evolving nature of ethical thinking about race.



Shared concerns: dignity, freedom, justice, community

Applying Ethical Insights to Contemporary Racial Justice Issues

- The insights of these philosophers provide frameworks for addressing contemporary ethical challenges.
- Du Bois's analysis of structural disadvantage remains relevant to understanding persistent racial inequalities.
- King's nonviolent ethics offers guidance for social movements seeking justice through moral means.
- Appiah's critique of essentialism provides tools for navigating complex identity politics in diverse societies.

Contemporary Issue	Relevant Philosopher	Key Concept
Persistent inequality	Du Bois	Structural analysis
Protest movements	King	Nonviolent resistance
Identity politics	Appiah	Anti-essentialism
Global justice	All three	Different approaches

Discussion Questions I

Questions on Historical Foundations and Du Bois

- How did abolitionists articulate moral arguments against slavery, and how did these arguments engage with American founding principles?
- Is Washington's accommodationist approach to racial progress inherently compromised, or does it represent a legitimate ethical strategy given historical constraints?
- How does Du Bois's concept of "double consciousness" reveal ethical challenges faced by marginalized groups navigating majority cultures?
- In what ways does the concept of the "psychological wage of whiteness" help explain the persistence of racism despite apparent economic disadvantages for some white communities?

Discussion Questions II

Questions on King, Appiah, and Contemporary Applications

- What are the ethical implications of King's critique of the "white moderate," and how might this critique apply to contemporary issues?
- How does King justify civil disobedience as a moral action while still respecting the rule of law as a concept?
- How does Appiah's racial anti-realism challenge our ethical thinking without undermining the need to address historical and ongoing racial injustice?
- What moral responsibilities toward others might follow from Appiah's cosmopolitan framework, and how do these compare with King's Beloved Community?