# What is Race? What is Racism?

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 as to its application. What we miss through our obsession with the structure of relations of concepts is, simply, reality. Talk of "race" is particularly distressing for those of us who take culture seriously. For, where race works-in places where "gross differences" of morphology are correlated with "subtle differences" of temperament, belief, and intention-it works as an attempt at a metonym for culture; and it does so only at the price of biologizing what is culture, or ideology.” (Appiah, “The Uncompleted Argument,” 1985)

**Kwame Appiah** is a British-Ghanaian philosopher known, among other things, for his defenses of **cosmopolitanism** (the idea that we are first and foremost “citizens of the world” as opposed to citizens of individual nations) and **racial anti-realism** (the claim that races are not “real” groupings—see the above quote for a famous expression of this view). Both of these are related to his defense of philosophical **liberalism,** which is the view that the rights of individuals (to speech, freedom, religion, etc.) should be protected and preserved, even when these conflicts with “communal” values (of religion, race, nationality, etc.). In this lesson, we’re going to take a look at his analysis of **racism**, both what it is, and why it is wrong. The sort of analysis he gives here can be extended with modifications to other categories of philosophical interest, such as gender, sex, nationality, ethnicity, or religion (Appiah’s 2018 book *The Lies That Bind: Rethinking Identity* does some of this).

## Three ideas about race

Appiah distinguishes between three different sorts of *beliefs* (or *propositions)* that he thinks are related to race: **racialism, extrinsic racism,** and **intrinsic racism.** We’ll talk about each in a little detail.

**Racialism** is the view that “there are heritable characteristics…that allow us to divide [humans] into a small set of races, in such a way that all the members of these races share certain traits and tendencies with each other that they do not share with members of any other race.” Examples of this heritable characteristics might be the genes that help determine skin and hair color, facial features, etc. Kwame has several points to make here

* He thinks that racialism is false, mainly on the grounds that contemporary biology does NOT support the claim that there are different biological “kinds” of people that might correspond to the different races. In other places, he also rejects the claim that races are “socially constructed” kinds that have been artificially created by society. In the end, Appiah defends **racial antirealism,** which is the view that race labels like “Black”, “White”, “Asian”, etc., are basically fictions. He argues that people *think* and *talk* as if these terms refer to real differences among people, but they simply don’t.
* Like most anti-realists, Appiah is open to the idea that fictions can serve “good” or “bad” purposes (and, in fact, he argues elsewhere that much of our self-identity is made up of such fictions), but he argues that the race has generally been a harmful one.
* While he thinks racialism is false, Appiah argues that it isn’t by itself *immoral.* After all, its perfectly possible to think that there are biologically different groups of people AND to hold that people are equal, despite these differences. In practice, however, Appiah thinks that this can be a difficult line to hold, and that racialism can and does lead to views that ARE immoral.

**Extrinsic racism** is the view that we can make moral distinctions (e.g., better/worse) between different races because of the differing *properties* the members of these races have. That is, the extrinsic racist thinks it is simply a “fact” that people of certain races are kinder, smarter, and braver while members of other races are crueler, stupider, and more cowardly .Since most people would agree that we can and should treat kind, smart, brave people better than cruel, stupid, cowardly people, we can and should make moral distinctions based on race.

* Appiah argues that we have plenty of scientific evidence that this is false (since races don’t actually exist!). Like racialism, extrinsic racism is a *cognitive problem* that involves having false beliefs. There’s simply no evidence that all members of race X are smarter/kinder/braver than members of race Y. A person who is genuinely motivated by extrinsic racism *should* give up their racism when confronted with this evidence. So, for example, a child who learned racist science when young, but gives it up when they learn better science might *technically* count as an extrinsic racist, even though they’ve done nothing morally wrong. The fact that the vast majority of (apparently) extrinsic racists don’t give up their beliefs points to a deeper problem: that many of the people who *talk* as if they are extrinsic racists might be (in effect) “intrinsic racists.”

**Intrinsic racism** is the view that we can make moral distinctions between different races based on the bare fact that they are different races. So, for example, race X might be “better” than race Y *even if individuals of these two races are the same in every way (beside their race).*

* Appiah notes that most people now won’t admit to this sort of racism. However, when people refuse to give up racial discrimination even when provided with evidence that extrinsic racism is false, the best explanation seems to be that they are intrinsic racists, even if they won’t admit it (to themselves or others). This sort of self-deception is a cognitive problem (of having false beliefs about oneself, and one what one believes). However, intrinsic racism (unlike racialism or extrinsic racism) represents a *moral error* and not a just factual one, since it denies pretty fundamental truths about morality.

## What Can Be Done About Racism?

The definitions above are meant to describe racism, and not to solve it. However, this doesn’t mean the definitions are useless:

1. Appiah offers **propositional** definitions of racism, according to which being a “racist” involves having certain *beliefs.* He thinks that believing these propositions can *cause* racial prejudice. So, if we want to fix racial prejudice, we need to fix these beliefs.
2. We can’t simply “tell people the truth” to fix their beliefs (or their actions). As Appiah notes, humans are really, really good at believing (false) things that benefit us, even when overwhelming evidence is presented to the contrary. The sorts of people who talk as if they are extrinsic racists, for example, are good at ignoring both (a) the scientific evidence against their beliefs that one race is superior to others AND (b) the evidence (from psychology) that their own beliefs might actually be closer to intrinsic racism. Getting these people to change their beliefs is tough, and Appiah doesn’t claim to have any magic bullet.
3. Since people don’t fully *choose* what to believe, there are probably some people (e.g., children who’ve never learned anything else) that can’t be held morally accountable. However, Appiah thinks that we and should expect normal adults to recognize the sorts of situations where they might be prone to having false beliefs (such as when the beliefs in question flatter me and my group, as is the case with extrinsic racism), and to be a bit more self-critical in these sorts of situations. (This point holds of prejudice more generally—any time you find yourself thinking *wow, this argument that “my group/party/tribe is better than yours” is really convincing!”* should set off warning bells.)
4. Finally, as in all of moral philosophy, there’s the problem of the unrepentant wrongdoer. In this case, this is the self-proclaimed intrinsic racist, who believes are other races are simply *intrinsically inferior* and that this justifies prejudice. It won’t work to reason with these people—they don’t even try to offer a rational defense of their beliefs! Thankfully, such people are relatively rare (and we can generally encourage them to behave better by social/legal pressure).

## Rethinking Identity

“There’s no dispensing with identities, but we need to understand them better if we can hope to reconfigure them, and free ourselves from mistakes about them that are often a couple of hundred years old. Much of what is dangerous about them has to do with the way identities—religion, nation, race, class, and culture—divide us and set us against one another. They can be the enemies of human solidarity, the sources of war, horsemen of a score of apocalypses from apartheid to genocide. Yet these errors are also central to the way identities unite us today. We need to reform them because, at their best, they make it possible for groups, large and small, to do things together. They are the lies that bind.” (Appiah, The Lies that Bind, 2018)

Appiah’s anti-realism about race contends that “race” isn’t a real category, and that we are literally *incorrect* when we claim that others (or ourselves) are members of a certain race. This doesn’t mean that we can’t or shouldn’t ever talk about race (for example, when talk about slavery; it’s obvious that *beliefs about race* played a big role in who was enslaved), but it does mean we need to cautious. Appiah’s version of anti-realism can also be applied to categories such as nationality, class, color, gender, or ethnicity. Basically, we should accept that these aren’t “real” categories in any deep, metaphysical sense—they don’t denote what philosophers would call **essences.** However, this does NOT mean that the way we categorize ourselves (or that others categorize us) don’t matter.

In the end, Appiah’s anti-realism says that we should keep only those identities that are good/useful, both to us, and society, and we should try to change/reform identities that are not. (By contrast, a *realist* would say “we should keep the identities that are TRUE or ACCURATE, and get rid of the rest). So, for example, we might well discover that it’s *useful* to keep talking about race in short- to middle-term (because, for example, it can help us identify people who’ve been harmed by racism in the past, or helps unify people to pursue common ends), but that doing so requires changing the way we talk/think about race. Appiah thinks this is fine, but that the way to judge the success of this sort of thing is to see if they make people lives better (as opposed to whether they correspond to some biological essence, which he argues they don’t). The same holds for many other “identities” that have historically caused problems—gender, nationality, etc. Appiah doesn’t necessarily think we can/should get rid of all of these concepts, but he in general thinks that (1) these ideas are created by humans, and not by nature and (2) we need to be open to changing them to make them work better for us.

## Review Questions

1. In your own words, describe the difference between *racialism, extrinsic racism,* and *intrinsic racism.*
2. Do you agree with Appiah’s claim that race isn’t “real”? Why or why not?
3. If we suppose that Appiah \*is\* right about race, what might be some practical ways to reduce racial prejudice and discrimination? Explain and defend your answer.