Chapter 2: Civil Disobedience and Racism

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In this chapter, we’ll be talking about two related issues. First, we’ll look at Martin Luther King’s influential defense of civil disobedience regarding racial segregation laws. Then, we'll turn to contemporary philosopher Kwame Appiah's compelling analysis of racism.

Contents

2 MLK, Civil Disobedience, and Obeying the Law 1

2.1 Background to King’s Letter 2

2.2 When is Civil Disobedience Justified? 3

2.3 What’s the Difference Between Just and Unjust Laws? 4

2.4 Plato and MLK on Obeying the Law 4

2.5 Review Questions 5

3 What is race? What is Racism? 6

3.1 Three ideas about race 6

3.2 What Can Be Done About Racism? 7

3.3 Review Questions 8

4 Reading: Letter From Birmingham Jail 8

4.1 “Why I am Here in Birmingham” 8

4.2 “Why Direct action?” 9

4.3 “How does One determine Whether a Law is Just or Unjust?” 10

4.4 “I have been Gravely Disappointed with the White Moderate” 11

4.5 “Oppressed People Cannot Remain Oppressed Forever” 13

5 Reading: Kwame Appiah on Ethics and Race 14

5.1 Question: Can I Utter a Racial Slur in My Classroom? 14

5.1.1 Appiah’s Answer 15

5.2 Question: I’m Realizing My Friends Are Racist. What Should I Do? 16

5.2.1 Appiah’s Answer 17

# MLK, Civil Disobedience, and Obeying the Law

In his “Letter from Birmingham Jail” (1963), addressed to Christian and Jewish clergy, **Martin Luther King** offers a defense of civil disobedience in this particular case and as a general policy. He has several goals:

* He wants to justify "nonviolent direct action sitting.” For example, he wants to defend the moral right of black people to sit in places reserved for “Whites only" and refuse to leave until they are arrested.
* He argues against the principle (apparently defended by some clergy) that “Outsiders do not have a right to participate in the political or moral life of a community.” King’s response: unjust laws are never purely local in their effects. For one thing, they indicate that the overarching system (e.g., federal law) has structural problems; these problems may well result in issues for many people.

King’s essay also argues for a distinction between **legality** and **morality.** He notes that there are plenty of cases (e.g., Nazi Germany, Ancient Rome, Biblical stories, etc.) in which obeying a law could be immoral. He thinks that this can happen even in a democracy. That is, *the mere fact that a majority has voted for a law does not mean that you are morally obliged to obey that law.*

## Background to King’s Letter

“History is the long and tragic story of the fact that privileged groups seldom give up their privileges voluntarily. Individuals may see the moral light and voluntarily give up their unjust posture; but as Reinhold Niebuhr has reminded us, groups are more immoral than individuals…We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed. Frankly, I have never yet engaged in a direct-action movement that was "well timed" according to the timetable of those who have not suffered unduly from the disease of segregation. For years now I have heard the word "wait." It rings in the ear of every Negro with a piercing familiarity. This "wait" has almost always meant "never."

While the history of race relations in the US (and especially in the states like Alabama, where King is writing from) is long and complex, King mentions some people and thinkers that are worth noting:

* **Colonial Times and Revolutionary War.** Slavery was an issue from the beginning of the United States (during the Revolutionary War, several British leaders promised to end slavery if it won, which may have helped convince Southern neutrals and loyalists to join the rebels). In the original drafts of the Declaration of Independence, **Thomas Jefferson** (who was himself a slaveholder) outlined a commitment to eliminating slavery in the US (in keeping with “all men are created equal”). This draft was vetoed by the Southern representatives in the Continental Congress. Jefferson apparently hoped slavery would slowly die of its own accord, but it expanded between 1776 and 1861. The UK outlawed slavery in 1833.
* **The US Civil War (1861 to 1865)** led to the end of legalized slavery. After the war, the federal government engaged in a project of “Reconstruction” aimed at, among other things, establishing the rights of African Americans in the southern states. The **13th Amendment** (banning slavery), **14th amendment** (guaranteeing “due process” of law at the state and local level, and not just at the federal level), and **15th Amendment** (ensuring people of all races the right to vote) were passed soon after the war. However, this was highly unpopular among southern whites, and northern politicians eventually lost the political will to enforce it. The infamous Supreme Court decision ***Plessy v Ferguson* (1896)** upheld laws instituting racial segregation so long it was "separate but equal." The southern States implemented **“Jim Crow” laws** that nearly eliminated African Americans' ability to vote or hold office. Again, the hope was that southern states would achieve equality "on their own." This did not happen, and the decision effectively destroyed the political power of southern African Americans until 1964 (with the passage of the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Act).
* ***Brown v Board of Ed* (1954)** held that state and local laws allowing racial segregation were "inherently unequal” and violated the 14th Amendment. It overturned Plessy v Fergusson. Many southern states resisted this ruling, sometimes violently. In Alabama (shortly after King’s letter), the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) bombed a church and killed four girls. The governor (and presidential candidate) **George Wallace** swore that he would support "segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever" and tried his best to block the desegregation of schools. President John F. Kennedy took control of the Alabama National Guard and ordered it to help enforce desegregation. This was around the same time that King was arrested (in Alabama) for leading nonviolent protests to end state and city laws that were still in place.
* Note: For those who don’t know, the **Ku Klux Klan** is a white supremacist organization founded just after the Civil War, which focused mainly on terrorizing African Americans (and later, immigrants, Catholics, Jews, and labor unionists). In 1963, it had a membership of maybe 30,000 people (so, it was big, but hardly a “majority”). King will argue that KKK simply isn’t big enough to be blamed for the problems confronting African Americans (and instead contends that the "white moderate" shares much of the blame).
* **Afterward,** King’s actions in Birmingham (and the subsequent KKK violence) helped build national support for his cause. However, in November 1963, the JFK-supported **Civil Rights Act** was blocked by southern legislators, even though it had enough votes to pass. JFK was assassinated in Dallas, TX, on November 22, 1963, and Lyndon Johnson managed to pass the law in 1964, along with the **Voting Rights Act** in 1965. King was assassinated in Memphis, TN, on April 4, 1968, while supporting a group of union workers. In recent years, the Voting Rights Act has been weakened by several Supreme Court Decisions.

## When is Civil Disobedience Justified?

“In no sense do I advocate evading or defying the law as the rabid segregationist would do. This would lead to anarchy. One who breaks an unjust law must do it openly, lovingly … and with a willingness to accept the penalty. I submit that an individual who breaks a law that conscience tells him is unjust, and willingly accepts the penalty by staying in jail to arouse the conscience of the community over its injustice, is in reality expressing the very highest respect for law.”

**Civil disobedience** occurs when a person (a) knowingly breaks the law and (b) voluntarily accepts the punishment for doing so because (c) they believe that the law is unjust. In his letter to the clergy, King proposes a set of criteria for determining whether a particular act of civil disobedience is morally justified:

* **Condition 1: The laws must, in fact, be unjust.** The people who wish to engage in civil disobedience must establish that the laws they want to break are unjust. In the case of Birmingham (and Southern segregation more generally), evidence is provided that the current situation is manifestly unjust. There is violence against black people, biased law enforcement, and so on. Plus, all the harm segregation causes to black children and adults.
* **Condition 2: A legitimate attempt to change the laws using legally allowed processes must be made.** In a democratic society, one must make an honest attempt to change the unjust laws via the procedure provided for in the political/legal system. For example, one must attempt to field candidates in elections, publish letters to the editor, organize petition drives, etc. This requirement is fulfilled so long as one has tried to change the laws via these procedures, and one has no reasonable expectation that they will be changed in this way. In the case of Birmingham, the members of the black community had previously negotiated with owners of segregated businesses, participated in local elections, and done everything else that could be reasonably demanded. They even postponed their planned activity until after an election.
* **Condition 3: The group intending to break the laws must prepare through “self-purification.”** "Self-purification" focuses on the intent of those who will engage in civil disobedience. In civil disobedience, the law-breaking act must be of a particular type—only unjust laws (or unjustly applied laws) may be broken, and the legal punishment proscribed for these transgressions must be accepted. The intent of breaking the laws must be to draw attention to their injustice (and shouldn’t be “because it’s fun” or “because I benefit from breaking the law”).
* **Condition 4: Direct action must be carried out appropriately.** If one goes through the above steps, one is justified in breaking the law provided that (a) the law is unjust, (b) one accepts the punishment for breaking the law, and (c) the intent of breaking the law is to help ensure that the law is changed.

The goal of civil disobedience is to change unjust laws. Civil disobedience creates a "crisis" and forces the community to choose between actively defending the law or altering it. The community no longer has the option of simply “doing nothing.” King supports civil disobedience as a "middle way" between the doing-nothing of the white moderates (and many members of the clergy) and the black nationalism that had been defended by thinkers like the young **Malcolm X** (though Malcolm X’s mature views are much closer to those of King).

One possible objection to civil disobedience might be as follows: *Civil disobedience harms many people and helps no one. It hurts those arrested for participating in it as well as lots of others (e.g., the white-owned businesses that were the sites of the protests). Surely nothing good can come of harming people.***King’s answer:**  It’s a fact about human psychology that people will stick with a status quo (even it is inferior to some proposed change) out of fear of the effort it will take to change it. Civil disobedience helps people act in their own long-term best interest (and the interest of justice) by creating immediate negative consequences to maintaining the status quo.

## What’s the Difference Between Just and Unjust Laws?

“A just law is a man-made code that squares with the moral law or the law of God. An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law…All segregation statutes are unjust because segregation distorts the soul and damages the personality. It gives the segregator a false sense of superiority, and the segregated a false sense of inferiority. To use the words of Martin Buber, the great Jewish philosopher, segregation substitutes an ‘I-it’ relationship for the ‘I-thou’ relationship, and ends up relegating persons to the status of things.”

Civil disobedience can only be directed against unjust laws; so a minority can't decide to go on a civil disobedience campaign just because it doesn't like a law. However, King argues that the mere fact that a law was democratically enacted doesn't mean it is just. His explanation suggests several different criteria for determining whether a law is unjust:

* **A Kantian/deontological definition: An** unjust law treats a minority as “*mere means”* (i.e., as “tools” for the majority to use). Segregation laws do this by reserving the best things (the seats at restaurants, schools, etc.) for white people. They nevertheless rely on the black population to do menial jobs, serve as consumers at white-owned businesses, etc.
* **A utilitarian/consequentialist definition:** A law is unjust if it increases overall suffering. In the case of segregation, King argues that we have excellent reason to believe this. People would generally be better off if these laws were repealed. A lot of people (primarily black people, but also others) would benefit.
* **General definition based on equality:** A just law must treat everyone equally on both the Kantian and utilitarian accounts. It must (a) treat the majority and the minority in the same way and (b) allow the minority a say in how this law is formulated and implemented. The first requirement concerns the *outcome;* the second is the process that led to the law's adoption.

## Plato and MLK on Obeying the Law

SOCRATES: “Reflect now, Socrates,” the laws might say, “that if what we say is true, you are not treating us rightly by planning to do what you are planning. We have given you birth, nurtured you, educated you; we have given you and all other citizens a share of all the good things we could. Even so, by giving every Athenian the opportunity, once arrived at voting age and having observed the affairs of the city and us the laws, we proclaim that if we do not please him, he can take his possessions and go wherever he pleases. Not one of our laws raises any obstacle or forbids him, if he is not satisfied with us or the city, if one of you wants to go and live in a colony or wants to go anywhere else, and keep his property. We say, however, that whoever of you remains, when he sees how we conduct our trials and manage the city in other ways, has in fact come to an agreement with us to obey our instructions. (Crito 51 c-e)

MLK’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail” is often compared with a much older text—Plato’s ***Crito****.* In this text, Socrates (a famous philosopher who has been imprisoned, like King, for bothering the powers that be) provides an argument for obeying the law even when it harms you.Crito tries to convince Socrates that he ought to accept the help of his wealthy friends (like Crito), who could help him escape and evade punishment. Socrates argues instead that he should stay and accept punishment (in his case, death by hemlock) rather than disobey the laws, *even if he “didn’t do anything wrong.*” There are some notable similarities between MLK and Socrates:

1. Both are written by people who have been imprisoned unjustly but have accepted this imprisonment. King was jailed for nonviolent protest, while Socrates was imprisoned (and would eventually be executed) for annoying people with his philosophizing.
2. Both MLK and Socrates see their actions are trying to *help* the society around them (as opposed to “punishing” or “threatening” their enemies). However, they understand that this is not how the people (who they are trying to help!) perceive them. King notes that civil disobedience is intended to "force a crisis," while Socrates compares himself to a "gadfly" that will sting/annoy society into change.
3. Both think there is a duty to “respect the law" even if particular laws are unjust.

Despite these similarities, they also clearly differ in *how* they reason. Socrates argues that he should obey the laws of Athens (even when they are unjust) at least in part because of what he “owes” to the society that raised and sheltered him and in which he has “agreed” to live. This suggests he thinks it would be wrong to intentionally break the laws of Athens (though Socrates definitely had a different understanding of the laws than did his fellow citizens). King, by contrast, famously argues that **"an unjust law is no law at all"** and that he is under no *moral* obligation to obey such laws. Instead, he thinks we can show respect for the law (in general) not by obeying such unjust laws but by *intentionally* breaking them and accepting the punishment.

## Review Questions

1. In recent years, many prominent political acts have been aimed at changing laws. To what extent would these count as civil disobedience, according to King's definition? Why? If you think these are NOT civil disobedience (or, if it depends on something not mentioned here), say why.
   1. After the 2020 presidential election, protests aimed to overturn the results and/or gain access to the places where votes were counted. One of these (the January 6 occupation of the US Capital) involved armed groups occupying federal buildings.
   2. Edward Snowden's (a CIA contractor) decision to make public confidential activities of the CIA, especially related to domestic surveillance in the US and other "friendly" nations. Snowden is now in Russia and has refused to return.
   3. The blocking of publicly owned roadways and sidewalks by pro-life groups, unions, anti-tax groups, Black Lives Matters protests, minimum wage advocates, etc. Many accept being peacefully arrested; some do not.
2. King argues that the history of race relations in the US shows that "white moderates" (and the middle class more generally) often stand in the way of social change by prioritizing law and order over issues of justice or equality. For example, when civil disobedience happens, these moderates focus on how disrespectful or disruptive it was (or on the bad behavior of some protestors) rather than on the actual *issue.* Do you agree with this diagnosis of the problem? Why or why not?

# 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 "citizens of the world" as opposed to citizens of individual nations) and **racial anti-realism** (the claim that races are not "real" groupings). 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 will 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 distinct *beliefs* (or *propositions)* that he thinks are related to race: **racialism, extrinsic racism,** and **intrinsic racism.** We'll talk about each in a bit of 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." 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 racialism is false, mainly because 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 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. People *think* and *talk* as if these terms refer to fundamental 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). However, he argues that race has generally been a harmful one.
* While he thinks racialism is false, Appiah argues that it isn’t by itself *immoral.* After all, it's perfectly possible to believe that there are biologically different groups of people AND to hold that people are equal, despite these differences. In practice, however, Appiah thinks this can be a tricky line to maintain, and racialism often leads to racism.

**Extrinsic racism** is the view that we can make moral distinctions (judge people of different races as morally “better” or “worse”) because of the different *properties* the members of these races have. The extrinsic racist thinks it is simply a "fact" that people of certain ethnicities are kinder, smarter, and braver while members of other races are crueler, stupider, and more cowardly. Since most people agree that we can and should treat kind, generous, brave people better than wicked, stupid, cowardly people, we can and should make moral distinctions based on race.

Like racialism, extrinsic racism is a cognitive problem involving false beliefs. Appiah argues that we have plenty of scientific evidence that this is false (since races don't actually exist!). There's simply no evidence that all members of race X are smarter/kinder/braver than members of race Y. A person 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 gave it up when they learned 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 (besides 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 what one believes). However, intrinsic racism (unlike racialism or extrinsic racism) represents a *moral error*, not just a factual one, since it denies 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, we must fix these beliefs if we want to improve racial discrimination.
2. We can't simply "tell people the truth" to fix their beliefs (or actions). As Appiah notes, humans are really good at believing (false) things that benefit us, even when overwhelming evidence is presented to the contrary. Believers in extrinsic racism, 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) of their own 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 entirely *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 can expect normal adults to recognize the sorts of situations where they might be prone to having false beliefs (such as when the ideas in question flatter my "group"), and to be more self-critical in these sorts of situations. This point holds mmore generally—*you should be wary of thoughts like "this argument that my group/party/tribe is better than yours is really convincing!"*. This means that adults *can* be held accountable for "racist" views and can't argue, "It's just the way I was raised! I just believe the same things my family and friends believe, and which I hear about on my favorite radio station…."
4. Finally, as in all moral philosophy, there's the problem of the unrepentant wrongdoer. In this case, this is the self-proclaimed intrinsic racist, who believes other races are *intrinsically inferior* and that this justifies prejudice. Reasoning won't work with such 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).

## 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.

# Reading: Letter From Birmingham Jail

By **Martin Luther King**

April 16 1963

My Dear Fellow Clergymen:

While confined here in the Birmingham city jail, I came across your recent statement calling my present activities "unwise and untimely." Seldom do I pause to answer criticism of my work and ideas. If I sought to answer all the criticisms that cross my desk, my secretaries would have little time for anything other than such correspondence in the course of the day, and I would have no time for constructive work. But since I feel that you are men of genuine good will and that your criticisms are sincerely set forth, I want to try to answer your statement in what I hope will be patient and reasonable terms.

## “Why I am Here in Birmingham”

I think I should indicate why I am here in Birmingham, since you have been influenced by the view which argues against "outsiders coming in." I have the honor of serving as president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, an organization operating in every southern state, with headquarters in Atlanta, Georgia. We have some eighty five affiliated organizations across the South, and one of them is the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights. Frequently we share staff, educational and financial resources with our affiliates. Several months ago the affiliate here in Birmingham asked us to be on call to engage in a nonviolent direct action program if such were deemed necessary. We readily consented, and when the hour came we lived up to our promise. So I, along with several members of my staff, am here because I was invited here. I am here because I have organizational ties here.

But more basically, I am in Birmingham because injustice is here. Just as the prophets of the eighth century BC left their villages and carried their "thus saith the Lord" far beyond the boundaries of their home towns, and just as the Apostle Paul left his village of Tarsus and carried the gospel of Jesus Christ to the far corners of the Greco Roman world, so am I compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my own home town. Like Paul, I must constantly respond to the Macedonian call for aid.

Moreover, I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states. I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. **Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.** We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. Never again can we afford to live with the narrow, provincial "outside agitator" idea. Anyone who lives inside the United States can never be considered an outsider anywhere within its bounds.

You deplore the demonstrations taking place in Birmingham. But your statement, I am sorry to say, fails to express a similar concern for the conditions that brought about the demonstrations. I am sure that none of you would want to rest content with the superficial kind of social analysis that deals merely with effects and does not grapple with underlying causes. It is unfortunate that demonstrations are taking place in Birmingham, but it is even more unfortunate that the city's white power structure left the Negro community with no alternative.

In any nonviolent campaign there are four basic steps: collection of the facts to determine whether injustices exist; negotiation; self purification; and direct action. We have gone through all these steps in Birmingham. There can be no gainsaying the fact that racial injustice engulfs this community. Birmingham is probably the most thoroughly segregated city in the United States. Its ugly record of brutality is widely known. Negroes have experienced grossly unjust treatment in the courts. There have been more unsolved bombings of Negro homes and churches in Birmingham than in any other city in the nation. These are the hard, brutal facts of the case. On the basis of these conditions, Negro leaders sought to negotiate with the city fathers. But the latter consistently refused to engage in good faith negotiation.

…

**[Brendan: In your own words, what does King mean by “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere?” Do you agree? Can you think of examples of this?]**

## “Why Direct action?”

You may well ask: "Why direct action? Why sit ins, marches and so forth? Isn't negotiation a better path?" You are quite right in calling for negotiation. Indeed, this is the very purpose of direct action. Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and foster such a tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue. It seeks so to dramatize the issue that it can no longer be ignored. My citing the creation of tension as part of the work of the nonviolent resister may sound rather shocking. But I must confess that I am not afraid of the word "tension." I have earnestly opposed violent tension, but there is a type of constructive, nonviolent tension which is necessary for growth. Just as **Socrates** felt that it was necessary to create a tension in the mind so that individuals could rise from the bondage of myths and half truths to the unfettered realm of creative analysis and objective appraisal, so must we see the need for **nonviolent gadflies** to create the kind of tension in society that will help men rise from the dark depths of prejudice and racism to the majestic heights of understanding and brotherhood. The purpose of our direct action program is to create a situation so crisis packed that it will inevitably open the door to negotiation. I therefore concur with you in your call for negotiation. Too long has our beloved Southland been bogged down in a tragic effort to live in monologue rather than dialogue.

**[Brendan: Both King and Socrates compare themselves to “gadflies”, who annoy their respective society “for its own good. Who else might count as a “gadfly” in this sense?]**

One of the basic points in your statement is that the action that I and my associates have taken in Birmingham is untimely. Some have asked: "Why didn't you give the new city administration time to act?" The only answer that I can give to this query is that the new Birmingham administration must be prodded about as much as the outgoing one, before it will act. We are sadly mistaken if we feel that the election of Albert Boutwell as mayor will bring the millennium to Birmingham. While Mr. Boutwell is a much more gentle person than Mr. Connor, they are both segregationists, dedicated to maintenance of the status quo. I have hope that Mr. Boutwell will be reasonable enough to see the futility of massive resistance to desegregation. But he will not see this without pressure from devotees of civil rights. My friends, I must say to you that we have not made a single gain in civil rights without determined legal and nonviolent pressure. Lamentably, it is an historical fact that privileged groups seldom give up their privileges voluntarily. Individuals may see the moral light and voluntarily give up their unjust posture; but, as **Reinhold Niebuhr** has reminded us, **groups tend to be more immoral than individuals. [Brendan: What do you think of this claim?]**

We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed. Frankly, I have yet to engage in a direct action campaign that was "well timed" in the view of those who have not suffered unduly from the disease of segregation. For years now I have heard the word "Wait!" It rings in the ear of every Negro with piercing familiarity. This "Wait" has almost always meant "Never." We must come to see, with one of our distinguished jurists, that "justice too long delayed is justice denied."

We have waited for more than 340 years for our constitutional and God given rights. The nations of Asia and Africa are moving with jetlike speed toward gaining political independence, but we still creep at horse and buggy pace toward gaining a cup of coffee at a lunch counter. Perhaps it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation to say, "Wait." But when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim; when you have seen hate filled policemen curse, kick and even kill your black brothers and sisters; when you see the vast majority of your twenty million Negro brothers smothering in an airtight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society; when you suddenly find your tongue twisted and your speech stammering as you seek to explain to your six year old daughter why she can't go to the public amusement park that has just been advertised on television, and see tears welling up in her eyes when she is told that Funtown is closed to colored children, and see ominous clouds of inferiority beginning to form in her little mental sky, and see her beginning to distort her personality by developing an unconscious bitterness toward white people; when you have to concoct an answer for a five year old son who is asking: "Daddy, why do white people treat colored people so mean?"; when you take a cross county drive and find it necessary to sleep night after night in the uncomfortable corners of your automobile because no motel will accept you; when you are humiliated day in and day out by nagging signs reading "white" and "colored"; when your first name becomes "nigger," your middle name becomes "boy" (however old you are) and your last name becomes "John," and your wife and mother are never given the respected title "Mrs."; when you are harried by day and haunted by night by the fact that you are a Negro, living constantly at tiptoe stance, never quite knowing what to expect next, and are plagued with inner fears and outer resentments; when you are forever fighting a degenerating sense of "nobodiness"--then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait. There comes a time when the cup of endurance runs over, and men are no longer willing to be plunged into the abyss of despair. I hope, sirs, you can understand our legitimate and unavoidable impatience. You express a great deal of anxiety over our willingness to break laws. This is certainly a legitimate concern. Since we so diligently urge people to obey the Supreme Court's decision of 1954 outlawing segregation in the public schools, at first glance it may seem rather paradoxical for us consciously to break laws. One may well ask: "How can you advocate breaking some laws and obeying others?" The answer lies in the fact that there are two types of laws: just and unjust. I would be the first to advocate obeying just laws. One has not only a legal but a moral responsibility to obey just laws. Conversely, one has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws. I would agree with St. Augustine that **"an unjust law is no law at all."**

**[Brendan: What does it mean to say “an unjust law is no law at all”?]**

## “How does One determine Whether a Law is Just or Unjust?”

Now, what is the difference between the two? How does one determine whether a law is just or unjust? A just law is a man made code that squares with the moral law or the law of God. An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law. To put it in the terms of St. Thomas Aquinas: An unjust law is a human law that is not rooted in eternal law and natural law. Any law that uplifts human personality is just. Any law that degrades human personality is unjust. All segregation statutes are unjust because segregation distorts the soul and damages the personality. It gives the segregator a false sense of superiority and the segregated a false sense of inferiority. Segregation, to use the terminology of the Jewish philosopher **Martin Buber**, substitutes an "I it" relationship for an "I thou" relationship and ends up relegating persons to the status of things. Hence segregation is not only politically, economically and sociologically unsound, it is morally wrong and sinful. Paul Tillich has said that sin is separation. Is not segregation an existential expression of man's tragic separation, his awful estrangement, his terrible sinfulness? Thus it is that I can urge men to obey the 1954 decision of the Supreme Court, for it is morally right; and I can urge them to disobey segregation ordinances, for they are morally wrong.

Let us consider a more concrete example of just and unjust laws. An unjust law is a code that a numerical or power majority group compels a minority group to obey but does not make binding on itself. This is difference made legal. By the same token, a just law is a code that a majority compels a minority to follow and that it is willing to follow itself. This is sameness made legal. Let me give another explanation. A law is unjust if it is inflicted on a minority that, as a result of being denied the right to vote, had no part in enacting or devising the law. Who can say that the legislature of Alabama which set up that state's segregation laws was democratically elected? Throughout Alabama all sorts of devious methods are used to prevent Negroes from becoming registered voters, and there are some counties in which, even though Negroes constitute a majority of the population, not a single Negro is registered. Can any law enacted under such circumstances be considered democratically structured?

**[Brendan: Can you give an example of a law that would count as “unjust” by King’s definition?]**

Sometimes a law is just on its face and unjust in its application. For instance, I have been arrested on a charge of parading without a permit. Now, there is nothing wrong in having an ordinance which requires a permit for a parade. But such an ordinance becomes unjust when it is used to maintain segregation and to deny citizens the First-Amendment privilege of peaceful assembly and protest.

I hope you are able to see the distinction I am trying to point out. In no sense do I advocate evading or defying the law, as would the rabid segregationist. That would lead to anarchy. One who breaks an unjust law must do so openly, lovingly, and with a willingness to accept the penalty. I submit that an individual who breaks a law that conscience tells him is unjust, and who willingly accepts the penalty of imprisonment in order to arouse the conscience of the community over its injustice, is in reality expressing the highest respect for law.

Of course, there is nothing new about this kind of civil disobedience. It was evidenced sublimely in the refusal of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego to obey the laws of Nebuchadnezzar, on the ground that a higher moral law was at stake. It was practiced superbly by the early Christians, who were willing to face hungry lions and the excruciating pain of chopping blocks rather than submit to certain unjust laws of the Roman Empire. To a degree, academic freedom is a reality today because Socrates practiced civil disobedience. In our own nation, the Boston Tea Party represented a massive act of civil disobedience.

We should never forget that everything Adolf Hitler did in Germany was "legal" and everything the Hungarian freedom fighters did in Hungary was "illegal." It was "illegal" to aid and comfort a Jew in Hitler's Germany. Even so, I am sure that, had I lived in Germany at the time, I would have aided and comforted my Jewish brothers. If today I lived in a Communist country where certain principles dear to the Christian faith are suppressed, I would openly advocate disobeying that country's antireligious laws.

**[Brendan: King here argues for a distinction between what is “legal” and what is “moral”. Can you think of examples of laws (either current or historical) that people *should* disobey?]**

## “I have been Gravely Disappointed with the White Moderate”

I must make two honest confessions to you, my Christian and Jewish brothers. First, I must confess that over the past few years I have been gravely disappointed with 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; who constantly says: "I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods of direct action"; who paternalistically believes he can set the timetable for another man's freedom; who lives by a mythical concept of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait for a "more convenient season." Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection.

**[Brendan: The previous paragraph is among the most famous parts of this letter. To what extent do you think things have changed since King wrote his letter? Do moderates still stand in the way of justice?]**

I had hoped that the white moderate would understand that law and order exist for the purpose of establishing justice and that when they fail in this purpose they become the dangerously structured dams that block the flow of social progress. I had hoped that the white moderate would understand that the present tension in the South is a necessary phase of the transition from an obnoxious negative peace, in which the Negro passively accepted his unjust plight, to a substantive and positive peace, in which all men will respect the dignity and worth of human personality. Actually, we who engage in nonviolent direct action are not the creators of tension. We merely bring to the surface the hidden tension that is already alive. We bring it out in the open, where it can be seen and dealt with. Like a boil that can never be cured so long as it is covered up but must be opened with all its ugliness to the natural medicines of air and light, injustice must be exposed, with all the tension its exposure creates, to the light of human conscience and the air of national opinion before it can be cured.

In your statement you assert that our actions, even though peaceful, must be condemned because they precipitate violence. But is this a logical assertion? Isn't this like condemning a robbed man because his possession of money precipitated the evil act of robbery? Isn't this like condemning Socrates because his unswerving commitment to truth and his philosophical inquiries precipitated the act by the misguided populace in which they made him drink hemlock? Isn't this like condemning Jesus because his unique God consciousness and never ceasing devotion to God's will precipitated the evil act of crucifixion? We must come to see that, as the federal courts have consistently affirmed, it is wrong to urge an individual to cease his efforts to gain his basic constitutional rights because the quest may precipitate violence. Society must protect the robbed and punish the robber. I had also hoped that the white moderate would reject the myth concerning time in relation to the struggle for freedom. I have just received a letter from a white brother in Texas. He writes: "All Christians know that the colored people will receive equal rights eventually, but it is possible that you are in too great a religious hurry. It has taken Christianity almost two thousand years to accomplish what it has. The teachings of Christ take time to come to earth." Such an attitude stems from a tragic misconception of time, from the strangely irrational notion that there is something in the very flow of time that will inevitably cure all ills. Actually, time itself is neutral; it can be used either destructively or constructively. More and more I feel that the people of ill will have used time much more effectively than have the people of good will. We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the hateful words and actions of the bad people but for the appalling silence of the good people. Human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability; it comes through the tireless efforts of men willing to be co workers with God, and without this hard work, time itself becomes an ally of the forces of social stagnation. We must use time creatively, in the knowledge that the time is always ripe to do right. Now is the time to make real the promise of democracy and transform our pending national elegy into a creative psalm of brotherhood. Now is the time to lift our national policy from the quicksand of racial injustice to the solid rock of human dignity.

You speak of our activity in Birmingham as extreme. At first I was rather disappointed that fellow clergymen would see my nonviolent efforts as those of an extremist. I began thinking about the fact that I stand in the middle of two opposing forces in the Negro community. One is a force of complacency, made up in part of Negroes who, as a result of long years of oppression, are so drained of self respect and a sense of "somebodiness" that they have adjusted to segregation; and in part of a few middle-class Negroes who, because of a degree of academic and economic security and because in some ways they profit by segregation, have become insensitive to the problems of the masses. The other force is one of bitterness and hatred, and it comes perilously close to advocating violence. It is expressed in the various black nationalist groups that are springing up across the nation, the largest and best known being Elijah Muhammad's Muslim movement. Nourished by the Negro's frustration over the continued existence of racial discrimination, this movement is made up of people who have lost faith in America, who have absolutely repudiated Christianity, and who have concluded that the white man is an incorrigible "devil."

I have tried to stand between these two forces, saying that we need emulate neither the "do nothingism" of the complacent nor the hatred and despair of the black nationalist. For there is the more excellent way of love and nonviolent protest. I am grateful to God that, through the influence of the Negro church, the way of nonviolence became an integral part of our struggle. If this philosophy had not emerged, by now many streets of the South would, I am convinced, be flowing with blood. And I am further convinced that if our white brothers dismiss as "rabble rousers" and "outside agitators" those of us who employ nonviolent direct action, and if they refuse to support our nonviolent efforts, millions of Negroes will, out of frustration and despair, seek solace and security in black nationalist ideologies--a development that would inevitably lead to a frightening racial nightmare.

**[Brendan: King argues that his way is a moderate way between two positions he disagrees with. What are these positions? Do you agree with King that his moderate way is best?]**

## “Oppressed People Cannot Remain Oppressed Forever”

Oppressed people cannot remain oppressed forever. The yearning for freedom eventually manifests itself, and that is what has happened to the American Negro. Something within has reminded him of his birthright of freedom, and something without has reminded him that it can be gained. Consciously or unconsciously, he has been caught up by the Zeitgeist, and with his black brothers of Africa and his brown and yellow brothers of Asia, South America and the Caribbean, the United States Negro is moving with a sense of great urgency toward the promised land of racial justice. If one recognizes this vital urge that has engulfed the Negro community, one should readily understand why public demonstrations are taking place. The Negro has many pent up resentments and latent frustrations, and he must release them. So let him march; let him make prayer pilgrimages to the city hall; let him go on freedom rides -and try to understand why he must do so. If his repressed emotions are not released in nonviolent ways, they will seek expression through violence; this is not a threat but a fact of history. So I have not said to my people: "Get rid of your discontent." Rather, I have tried to say that this normal and healthy discontent can be channeled into the creative outlet of nonviolent direct action. And now this approach is being termed extremist.

But though I was initially disappointed at being categorized as an extremist, as I continued to think about the matter I gradually gained a measure of satisfaction from the label. Was not Jesus an extremist for love: "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you." Was not Amos an extremist for justice: "Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream." Was not Paul an extremist for the Christian gospel: "I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus." Was not Martin Luther an extremist: "Here I stand; I cannot do otherwise, so help me God." And John Bunyan: "I will stay in jail to the end of my days before I make a butchery of my conscience." And Abraham Lincoln: "This nation cannot survive half slave and half free." And Thomas Jefferson: "We hold these truths to be self evident, that all men are created equal . . ." So the question is not whether we will be extremists, but what kind of extremists we will be. Will we be extremists for hate or for love? Will we be extremists for the preservation of injustice or for the extension of justice? In that dramatic scene on Calvary's hill three men were crucified. We must never forget that all three were crucified for the same crime--the crime of extremism. Two were extremists for immorality, and thus fell below their environment. The other, Jesus Christ, was an extremist for love, truth and goodness, and thereby rose above his environment. Perhaps the South, the nation and the world are in dire need of creative extremists.

**[Brendan: How would you define a “creative extremist” when it comes to morality? Can you think of other examples, besides those cited by King?]**

…

I wish you had commended the Negro sit inners and demonstrators of Birmingham for their sublime courage, their willingness to suffer and their amazing discipline in the midst of great provocation. One day the South will recognize its real heroes. They will be the James Merediths, with the noble sense of purpose that enables them to face jeering and hostile mobs, and with the agonizing loneliness that characterizes the life of the pioneer. They will be old, oppressed, battered Negro women, symbolized in a seventy two year old woman in Montgomery, Alabama, who rose up with a sense of dignity and with her people decided not to ride segregated buses, and who responded with ungrammatical profundity to one who inquired about her weariness: "My feets is tired, but my soul is at rest." They will be the young high school and college students, the young ministers of the gospel and a host of their elders, courageously and nonviolently sitting in at lunch counters and willingly going to jail for conscience' sake. One day the South will know that when these disinherited children of God sat down at lunch counters, they were in reality standing up for what is best in the American dream and for the most sacred values in our Judaeo Christian heritage, thereby bringing our nation back to those great wells of democracy which were dug deep by the founding fathers in their formulation of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence.

Never before have I written so long a letter. I'm afraid it is much too long to take your precious time. I can assure you that it would have been much shorter if I had been writing from a comfortable desk, but what else can one do when he is alone in a narrow jail cell, other than write long letters, think long thoughts and pray long prayers?

If I have said anything in this letter that overstates the truth and indicates an unreasonable impatience, I beg you to forgive me. If I have said anything that understates the truth and indicates my having a patience that allows me to settle for anything less than brotherhood, I beg God to forgive me.

I hope this letter finds you strong in the faith. I also hope that circumstances will soon make it possible for me to meet each of you, not as an integrationist or a civil-rights leader but as a fellow clergyman and a Christian brother. Let us all hope that the dark clouds of racial prejudice will soon pass away and the deep fog of misunderstanding will be lifted from our fear drenched communities, and in some not too distant tomorrow the radiant stars of love and brotherhood will shine over our great nation with all their scintillating beauty.

Yours for the cause of Peace and Brotherhood, Martin Luther King, Jr.

**[Brendan: Why do you think that so many Christian/Jewish clergy had been so reluctant to support King’s protests, even though they supported “racial equality”? How effective a job has King done in arguing that they *should* support such protests?]**

# Reading: Kwame Appiah on Ethics and Race

Adapted from “The Ethicist” column from the *New York Times:* https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/05/magazine/racial-slur-classroom-ethics.html.

Here, the prominent philosopher **Kwame Appiah** answers people’s ethical quandaries (see above for his general account of race and racism). Appiah teaches philosophy at NYU. His books include "Cosmopolitanism," "The Honor Code" and "The Lies That Bind: Rethinking Identity.

## Question: Can I Utter a Racial Slur in My Classroom?

***Reader's question:*** *I teach business law at a private university. One undergraduate course I teach is employment law, which covers discrimination under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. I believe it is important to explain the groundbreaking significance of this legislation to my students, so I delve into the de facto apartheid in the South, with its Jim Crow laws, the widespread discrimination against all types of minority groups and the resistance by many legislators, especially in the South, to the passage of this law.*

*Senator Strom Thurmond was a vocal opponent of the bill, and I quote from an earlier speech of his in which he used the N-word. And herein lies my dilemma. Do I use the actual word in class? I believe that using the actual word dramatizes how shocking and offensive his speech was and that using the watered-down version robs it of its power. I strongly believe that I am entitled to use the word for pedagogical purposes. On the other hand, I know that the use of that word is effectively forbidden, and some students may be offended by it, especially coming from a white professor. Also, I know that faculty members have been dismissed because they quoted literary passages that use the slur.*

*I am at a loss. I keep changing my mind, at times determined to use the word and at times thinking it wiser to obfuscate. I wonder if you can provide some guidance.*Name Withheld

### Appiah’s Answer

Word-magic, **in** a variety of forms, is an ubiquitous phenomenon: Simply uttering a word, we often think, can be an act of summoning. And so verbal taboos, which all communities seem to evolve, apply to both the sacred and the profane. Many Orthodox Jews regard the name of God as too holy to be uttered in ordinary contexts and instead use the word *“Hashem,”* which literally means “the name.” (That too-holy name is itself a substitute for an even holier, truly ineffable name.) But words to do with sex or excrement, and the associated body parts, are the more familiar candidates. We all know about the words you can’t say on broadcast TV, under penalty of law. In Twi, the first language of my Ghanaian father, there’s an apologetic word you can say in advance, *“sebe,”* if you want to use a proscribed word. That won't cut it with the FCC.

Logicians and linguists sometimes distinguish between using and mentioning a word. Use: “God, please show me the way.” Mention: “The word ‘God’ has three letters.” Decent people will obviously refrain from using ethnic slurs — “dysphemistic” epithets — that express contempt for some designated group. Yet verbal taboos are more demanding: Both use and mention are typically prohibited. Many publications, including this one, have a general stricture against, say, using or mentioning the F-word. Should the N-word join the unmentionables?

Many wish it would. Fifteen years ago, the NAACP actually staged a burial ceremony for the word. (Awkwardly, the fourth letter of the organization's name stands for another now-shunned designation.) The prohibitionist case is that the word has been associated with horrendous cruelty and injustice, that it has been used to dehumanize and degrade, that it can, accordingly, inflict pain and produce a sense of vulnerability. No matter how many quote marks may surround the word, the argument runs, to utter it is to summon the horrors of history. A thousand *sebes* won’t remove its sting.

But do efforts to make a word unsayable diminish its power or magnify it? Back in the 1920s, Walter White, the future head of the NAACP, someone who personally investigated dozens of lynchings, insisted that the equanimity with which Black people greeted a new novel with the contested word in its title was a sign of “how far we have progressed.”

And sometimes words meant to stigmatize have been rehabilitated. When I was in school, “queer” was one of those fraught dysphemisms. If you weren't homophobic, you would have avoided the word. Then, over the course of my lifetime, the sort of people it designated reclaimed the word, and the term "L. GBTQ" has gained mainstream currency. Norms of social acceptance changed; so did norms of verbal usage. Back in the 1990s, there were Black people, such as the hip-hop artist KRS-One, who advocated and anticipated the same development for the word we’re discussing. At the very least, they thought it would lose its ability to wound as it became ordinary, its edges blunted by its banality. But the career of such words is hard to predict.

It’s true that, in a convention dating back more than a century, many Black people have adopted an in-group use of the word, in a way that’s now often marked in writing by ending it with an “a” rather than an “er.” Some even contend that it’s a different word. Yet the usage depends on knowing that the standard N-word is an insult. Precisely because it’s off-limits to outsiders, it can function as a shibboleth among certain Black speakers, who use it more or less interchangeably with “guy” or “brother.” (It tends to be gendered in this way.) The main usage rule has to do with who can use it. The hip-hop artist Kendrick Lamar once invited a white woman from the audience to join him onstage in the performance of one of his songs — then stopped her when she failed to skip over the N-word, which recurred 20 times in the lyrics. It was off-limits to her.

Should it be off-limits to you? Your aim, as you make clear, is to discuss an episode of racial derogation, not to produce one. Now, some will say that Black Americans have been so traumatized by the odious uses of the word that the very sound of it causes distress. Others don’t find this to be a credible generalization; that simple psychological story is certainly hard to reconcile with the shifting attitudes you can trace within the Black press across the generations. Besides, you have a pedagogic rationale to offer.

The trouble is that no individual can simply override social and semantic norms and decide what the utterance of a word will signify. You yourself grasp that words have a performative effect. You don’t have to say the word in order to convey the information that Thurmond said it; you’re aiming for a performative effect beyond the factual content. You should recognize, then, that it would have another performative effect: It would announce that you’ve chosen to violate a norm your students mainly subscribe to and defy a demand many Black people have made. Some of your students will take that as a gesture of disrespect. They will ask why you felt entitled to flout the taboo. Especially given the history of racism in this country, there’s much to be said for listening to Black people on topics like this and taking such lexical requests seriously.

Norms do evolve over time. Efforts to banish that in-group, fraternal usage have mainly failed: Those complaints have been readily dismissed as “saddity,” primly classist or schoolmarmish. By contrast, a taboo on its utterance by non-Black people has grown only more entrenched. That there are reasons for wondering whether this is a sensible or salutary norm doesn’t cancel the norm or give you the power to suspend it. So, while you should certainly feel free to discuss what Senator Thurmond said with your students, you have to accept that uttering those two syllables is likely to spin your class off course.

**[Brendan: What do you think of Appiah’s answer here? Are there any circumstances in which the N-word should be used by white teachers/students in a classroom setting?]**

## Question: I’m Realizing My Friends Are Racist. What Should I Do?

Although Sydney, Australia, has been my home for almost 40 years, I am temporarily living in Melbourne to be close to family. The Covid-19 situation here has caused a lot of anger among many residents. We went into a second lockdown following outbreaks in aged-care facilities and in the city’s public-housing estates, which have a high concentration of Sudanese and Asian immigrants.

The handful of friends I have in this city live in the very affluent eastern suburbs (as do we) and have relatively little cause for concern. Yet they are fuming over the fact that we are inconvenienced because of people whom they repeatedly refer to as “these ethnics.” This is clearly intended as a racial slur and causes me much angst. My friends, like me, are Jewish; unlike me, they are children of Holocaust survivors. Should they not feel greater compassion for the suffering of those recent immigrants escaping violence and ethnic cleansing in their home countries?

Australian colonists decimated native populations and stole native land. Is it ethical for us to be so self-congratulatory when so many Indigenous Australians, who make up more than 3 percent of our population, live in fourth-world conditions?

My friendships have endured because I have found my friends to be loving, family-oriented and honest citizens. They observe the Jewish concept of chesed (kindness) to its limit. However, this recent racist narrative disturbs me deeply. I have rehearsed several responses to the “these ethnics” comments along the lines of “Except for our Aboriginal people, we are all ethnics in this country,” while suggesting charities to which my friends can contribute so that their fellow Melburnians receive basic care.

I can be very direct when I respond to injustice and racism. I am afraid my responses will be misconstrued and mark the beginning of the end of a very long friendship. What is the most appropriate response in this situation? Name Withheld

### Appiah’s Answer

**In Jonathan Coe’s** Brexit novel “Middle England,” a British woman makes approving mention of a notorious 1968 speech in which the politician Enoch Powell declared that Britain was being menaced by nonwhite immigration. The younger woman she’s talking to is appalled and jolted by a sense that the two “lived in different universes,” which were “separated by a wall, infinitely high, impermeable.” It sounds as if you’ve recently had an experience like that.

The word “racism” actually came into widespread use in English in reference to Nazi attitudes toward Jewish people. Being the victim of prejudice, however, does not inoculate us from our own prejudices. Edward Augustus Freeman, who went on to be Regius professor of history at Oxford, wrote, while visiting America in 1881, that his interlocutors generally agreed with his proposal that “this would be a grand land if only every Irishman would kill a Negro and be hanged for it.” Yet WASP bigotry toward the Irish immigrants didn’t save them from bigotry toward Black people. (Nor, conversely, did suffering from anti-Black animus prevent the likes of Frederick Douglass from disparaging Irish-Americans.) I’ve heard Africans complain about being subject to racism from Europeans and Americans while denigrating Africans of certain other ethnic groups in ways that sound awfully like racism. Consider, for that matter, the tensions that have lately arisen between Asian-Americans and Black Americans. “Suffering is partial, shortsighted and self-absorbed,” the philosopher Olufemi O. Taiwo observes. “We shouldn’t have a politics that expects different: Oppression is not a prep school.”

Nor is displaying lovingkindness (as the King James Bible I grew up with often translated *chesed*) toward your in-group incompatible with displaying hostility toward members of an out-group. I think of the writer Doris Lessing’s memoir about trips she took as an adult to Zimbabwe (formerly Rhodesia), where she grew up. She had left, in part, because she detested the racism and sexism of her fellow white colonials. Yet she managed to convey the appealing sense of community among the whites with whom she stayed, including her brother. Because she was only visiting, she didn’t bother to challenge their racist attitudes — she thought it would make no difference — and she didn’t have to decide whether to be friends with the people who had them.

You, on the other hand, are not merely visiting, however long you stay in Melbourne. So far as I can see, you’ve got three choices. One is simply to tolerate your friends’ intolerance — though my sense is that this won’t work for you. Another is to conclude that these moral failings are an obstacle to friendship; friendship is a moralized relationship, after all, and taking certain values seriously can entail not condoning them in your friends. But at this point in your life, you’re clearly reluctant to lose longstanding, meaningful relationships.

That leaves you trying to scale a formidable wall. You’re in good company. The great rabbi and civil rights leader Abraham Heschel, who lost much of his family in the Holocaust, worried about the many people whose “moral sensitivity suffers a blackout when confronted with the Black man’s predicament”; he wanted each of us to be the sort of person who, like you, “resents other people’s injuries.” There can be *chesed* in lovingly calling friends to account and reminding them that, in Heschel’s simple formulation, humanity is one. We can hope that your friends will take your thoughtful responses for what they are — a sign that you care about our common humanity and that you care about them. Of course, they could be offended or else simply decide to shut up about the “ethnics” when you’re around. But it’s just possible that the warmth of your conviction will prompt them to reconsider their attitudes. It would be a kindness, anyway, to try.

**[Brendan: Have you ever had a friend who held views you thought were morally wrong? How did you respond to it at the time? What, if anything, would you do different now?]**

# Case Study: Dungeons and Racists (Ethics Bowl)

US game companies producing role-playing games (RPGs) and video games have long fielded complaints about sexism and racism, and RPGs and video games in the United States have been dominated in production and consumption by white males. Even though the gamer demographic has broadened over the years, the gamer stereotype remains male and white.

Dungeons & Dragons (D&D) was the first commercially available RPG, dating to 1974 and published by TSR. The RPG is currently published by Wizards of the Coast (WotC), a Hasbro subsidiary since 1999. For most of the game’s history, the white male gamer stereotype was on point, as female-identifying players and non-white players were few and far between. Although the gender demographics of D&D players has changed drastically over the years, with femaleidentifying players approaching 40 percent, according to WotC, D&D players are still predominantly white.

The consumer base for many products is skewed towards a particular demographic, but the criticism of fantasy games like D&D is that people of color and female-identifying players have been routinely excluded from the game. The main method of exclusion has been by perpetuating harmful and degrading stereotypes of race and gender. In particular, the “races” of D&D that most closely resemble non-white cultures and ethnicities are typically construed as “evil” or criminal, like Drow, Orcs, Goblins, Vistani, Yuan-ti, and others.

According to a January 2020 article in *Wired* magazine, in light of more widespread recognition of racial prejudice, injustice, and violence, WotC announced an effort to remove what some critics call “racial essentialism,” or having the moral qualities of game characters dictated by their supposed genetics. If you encounter a Drow character in the game, for example, that character will be evil, unless the dungeon master has bent the game rules a bit. Players choosing to be an Orc character would get a negative modifier to Intelligence and a bonus to Strength, because Orcs as a race are large, strong, and dumb. Therefore, in their effort to address the history of racism that many critics perceive D&D to instantiate, WotC has announced that future editions of the game will eliminate such race-based statistics.

One D&D race that has received particular attention is the Vistani, who are predominantly depicted in the Ravenloft world source material and who are rather clearly based upon the Romani peoples. Vistani are described as nomadic people of neutral alignment and as a subjugated race who are universally distrusted by all others, as demonstrated by the large negative reaction modifier for interactions with non-Vistanis. WotC recently announced it will remove or reduce references to the Vistani’s affinity for alcohol, superstitions, and thievery. Such efforts are not without criticism, however, as some argue that such changes will barely scratch the surface of the racism built into the game. Others criticize these changes to game mechanics for making little sense: D&D is a *fantasy* world, and such prejudices don’t necessarily carry over to the real world. After all, magic, mythical creatures, and talking nonhumans populate D&D, making it rather significantly divergent from the real world.

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## Questions

1. Do you agree or disagree with the changes to the “Vistani” people, and the reasons for them Why or why not?
2. Many video games, roleplaying games, and science-fiction/fantasy movies/books have different fictional races/species. To what extent is it a moral problem if some of these races are portrayed as being “inherently” evil or stupid?
3. Have you ever played an old game (or watched an old movie, etc.) that you felt was based on outdated/immoral views of race/gender? How did you respond? (Did this stop you from enjoying it? Would you show it your kids?)