

### Volition vs. Belief Centered Explanations of Racism (**Prompt 1**)

In America, racism is generally now accepted to be a negative phenomenon and something to be abhorred. Though it is ubiquitously present in our society and politics, racism is a surprisingly complex concept to define and rationally make sense of. Yet, defining racism is necessary for determining which situations are “racist” or not and for directing how we might fight it. Jorge Garcia and Kwame Anthony Appiah offer two conflicting philosophical explanations of racism. Garcia builds his version from a virtue and volitional perspective, whereas Appiah’s account focuses on the beliefs and cognitive processes of racism. I will start by focusing on Garcia’s view and demonstrating areas where his view fails, and then show how these are readily handled by Appiah’s cognitive system. I will then note points where, at first glance, Garcia’s view seems to more intuitively represent racism, such as racial solidarity and the relation of racism to xenophobia or homophobia. However, I will subsequently build on Appiah’s arguments to show how an extended belief-based explanation still better comprehends these cases than Garcia’s.

In “The Heart of Racism”, Garcia’s eponymous definition of racism is a “volitional conception” that focuses on attitudes and motives in “the heart” (Garcia 6). To Garcia, racism constitutes having a racially based intent to harm, “ill-will”, or lack of regard, insufficient “good-will” (Garcia 6, 22). Garcia’s definition is built solely from the perspective of the perpetrator’s internal emotions. In this way, the development of any cognitive processes, including beliefs, underlying any actions of Garcia’s racists are neglected. Instead, Garcia expresses racism and its immorality in the context of personal virtues (Garcia 9, 11).

There exist several inconsistencies with Garcia’s interpretation. Principally, Garcia seeks to find a definition for racism for the purpose of “clarify[ing] why racism is always immoral”

(Garcia 9). This reasoning assumes that racism is immoral before defining it; that is to say, the definition of racism must lead to its immorality, not start with immorality. Thus, Garcia is somewhat begging the question which could be an indication of how personal bias has influenced the formulation of his definition. Likewise, another problem concerns the source Garcia claims the immorality of racism originates from. Garcia contends the immorality of racism stems from its “ill-will” motive and the fact that holding these attitudes or motives are “opposed to the virtues of benevolence and justice” (Garcia 9). However, this is not an adequate enough demarcator of immorality. Consider an example, Ardem and Ben, who are members of a racial identity A. Suppose that racial identity B committed genocide against racial identity A. Both Ardem and Ben hold hatred towards members of racial identity B. However, Ardem hates B because they believe that all people of B are inherently evil, whereas Ben hates B because they committed genocide. From the standpoint of volition Ardem and Ben equally hold “ill-will” against racial identity B. Yet while Ardem’s hatred is more clearly immoral and racist, Ben’s race-based hatred is not necessarily immoral (nor, I will argue later, racist). Thus, Garcia’s ill-will qualification fails to adequately provide immorality to racism.

The difference between Ardem and Ben lies in their beliefs, and careful inspection of Garcia’s argument reveals the necessity of cognitive processes in racism. Garcia begins his definition of racism as ill-will or disregard “on account of [someone’s] assigned race” (Garcia 6), but the act of “accounting” someone to a race involves a cognitive process itself. In classifying someone as being of a particular race, one must hold beliefs about how that race is defined and what it means to be a member of it. By assigning someone to a race, one also simultaneously ascribes all the beliefs and characteristics associated with that race to this individual. Following this, it is not clear that any subsequent racial emotions or attitudes one might have about this

individual are separate from their beliefs about the race. In fact, it seems more plausible that emotions and attitudes toward this individual are actually *derived from* beliefs about the characteristics of that race. For example, one might hate a person from racial identity A *because* they believe people from racial identity A have negative personality traits. Therefore, one cannot be racist without cognitive processes about racial identities, and one's following racial attitudes are related to these beliefs rather than existing in a vacuum of only virtues.

My examples of Ardem and Ben show that a "heart" of ill-will is insufficient to delineate the immorality of racism. With the involvement of cognitive beliefs, it can also be shown that volition is not always necessary for racism. Consider another example, Carla, who is a judge who genuinely believes people from racial identity B are inherently violent. Carla has no racist ill-will nor disregard for people from racial identity B and has no motivation to harm any member of racial identity B. However, Carla may still discriminate against defendants from identity B in criminal cases simply because she truly believes that all members of B are violent, and in doing so, she contributes to racial injustice and oppression against B. Despite not having any racist attitudes or motives, it is difficult to say Carla is not racist. Thus, whereas cognitive beliefs are necessary for the construction of a racist, intent to harm or disregard itself is neither sufficient nor necessary for explaining racism.

It is helpful to look at Appiah's definition of racism to understand how a cognitive perspective is more comprehensive. Appiah defines two forms of racism: extrinsic and intrinsic. In extrinsic racism, one believes races have real "racial essences" that legitimize the act of making moral distinctions between races. A key point in Appiah's overall argument is the fictitiousness of racial essences or any true racial character attributes (outside of some trends in physical characteristics). Appiah describes the moral fault of extrinsic racists as holding and

acting on a fictive belief, a “cognitive incapacity”. In contrast, intrinsic racists “believe each race has a different moral status, quite independent of the moral characteristics entailed by its racial essence” (Appiah & Goldberg 5-6). This intrinsic partiality, an irrational assigning of moral value to a valueless identity label, is still a belief, albeit one that is likely to be more subtly indoctrinated through socialization. The immorality of intrinsic racists is understood as failing the Kantian injunction that “what matters... is not who you are but how you try to live” (Appiah & Goldberg 14). Rephrased, it is immoral to judge someone on their racial identity instead of their actions and life experience. Thus, Appiah successfully encapsulates both the dependency of cognitive beliefs and each belief-based category of racism’s derivation for immorality.

Nevertheless, some objections can be made that Garcia’s view of racism provides several attributes that, superficially, appear to be more helpful in representing racism than Appiah’s account. Firstly, there seems to exist moral race-related partiality, such as racial affinity groups and racial solidarity, that do not come across as racist. Garcia’s ill- vs. good-will duality makes space for these “good” partiality situations (Garcia 14-15), whereas, ostensibly, Appiah’s strict exclusion of any race-based partiality seems to suggest that even these groups are racist. In particular, intrinsic racism, a favoring of people simply because they are of the same racial identity label, seems like it is at play here. However, racial solidarity can be carefully distinguished from intrinsic racism by extending Appiah’s Kantian reasoning. While explaining intrinsic racism, Appiah asserts that intrinsic racists might use the erroneous “kin” analogy to equate partiality for the same racial identity to partiality for family members. He explains this is invalid because family relationships are not based on the label in itself of being a family member, but instead built through the shared experience of facing life together as a family unit (Appiah and Goldberg 13-15). Applying a parallel line of reasoning, racial solidarity and race affinity

groups can be based on the shared experience of being similarly discriminated against or oppressed under the racial identity label that society has dealt them, rather than the label itself. They can have *race-related* rather than true racial partiality. Contrarily, if one were to prefer someone of the same race without relating to any shared experiences, this would be breaking Kantian universality by treating someone differently purely due to their societally assigned racial label. This example would therefore be a genuine case of intrinsic racism. On the reverse side, hatred of a racial identity because of the actions of its members, such as in my previous example of Ben, can now be understood as justified and not intrinsic racism. Thus, Appiah's focus on beliefs enables finer-grained examination of racial partiality and racism that Garcia's virtue centered model is unable to foster.

A second objection that could be made for Garcia's conceptualization is when Garcia notes that racism is "intuitively... structurally similar to xenophobia and anti-homosexuality... 'homophobia'" (Garcia 8-9). By defining racism as a form of individual ill-will and harmful motive, the link with xenophobia and homophobia becomes clear, and Garcia insinuates that xenophobia and homophobia are similar because they share this motive to harm and attitude of hatred. Garcia is correct that racism, xenophobia, and homophobia can share the motive of hatred in their manner of dispensing harm. However, he misses a further, more sinister offense that the *beliefs* underlying racism, xenophobia, and homophobia commit.

Exploring Appiah's description of identities is useful here. Appiah defines two dimensions of identities: "personal", such as witty or charming, and "collective", such as race and sexuality (Appiah & Gutmann 93). Collective identities provide "scripts: narratives that people can use in shaping their life plans and in telling their life stories", for example, "proper ways of being black and gay" (Appiah & Gutmann 97-99). The problem (and why Appiah

advocates to move “beyond racial identities”) is when these collective identities dominate over other identities by limiting what scripts an individual can choose (Appiah & Gutmann 32). Thus, what racists, xenophobes, and homophobes have in common, in addition to harmful motives, is that they commit the more nuanced crime of stripping the victim’s autonomy and individuality by confining them to restrictive collective identity scripts.

In conclusion, Garcia’s negation of cognitive processes in racism leads to an inadequate understanding of racism, while Appiah provides a more comprehensive explanation that allows examination of the nuances and subtleties of racial beliefs. Furthermore, Appiah’s argument against “family” justifications of intrinsic racism is extendable to understanding how situations such as racial solidarity are distinct from truly racist partiality. Including analysis of cognitive beliefs also better explains how racism relates to similar phenomena such as xenophobia and homophobia. Ultimately, a comprehensive belief-based definition of racism gives a key insight: that unintentional racist beliefs can continue to be societally indoctrinated, even in those of pure “heart”, and perpetuate racism in modern society.

**References:**

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