

**Joshua Glasgow: How not to think about racism:
Concepts that blame the victim.**

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Joshua Glasgow has written about the definition of racism. His paper on this subject reviews many contemporary approaches and presents his own.¹ At a time of BLM it is perhaps a good opportunity to revisit some of these discussions. Let us look more closely at these views.

Taking Glasgow's paper as a starting point it reveals a horrendous mixture of confusion over judicial and philosophical terms. Racism is potentially a criminal act and so one must be careful to distinguish juridical concepts from philosophical. What counts as racism as a matter of law has all the complexity inherent in all legal context. To have racism with no visible manifestation is a juridical nightmare as is having a murder without a dead body.

It is well known that you cannot murder a dead man. But at an ethical level consider a person who intends on murdering Mr A, finds him sitting down in his study shoots him in the back. He has committed an ethical act. If it is later discovered the man had just died from a heart attack, the shooter is not guilty of murder but that cannot change the ethical color of his act. To suggest that the two must align is absurd confusion of philosophy and law.

To then say that a man who intended to murder Mr A but Mr A died before he could do anything is also a murderer is to go down a rabbit hole. But down this rabbit hole go most of the philosophers (Black and White) that he discusses.

To illustrate the legal absurdity of much of the discussion consider this quote:

“A very different kind of agent-based view holds that talk of institutional racism can be understood as personifying institutions, in the way that, say, corporations are sometimes legally treated as persons. According to Arthur, when asking whether some institution is racist, we are “asking whether *if we were to assume that an action taken by an institution had been performed instead by a single person, would that person [in his attitudes] be racist?*” (*Race, Equality, and the Burdens of History*, 33). The particular shortcoming of this approach is that, while personification might be a useful heuristic, it does no explanatory work in accounting for the actual wrongness of actual institutional, rather than agential, racism. It can say why institutional arrangements would be racist, and would be wrong, were they arranged by an agent, but not why they are racist, and are wrong, when not arranged by agents. Furthermore, since people can produce any given outcome

¹ (Glasgow, 2009)

with a number of different attitudes, it is also, I think, difficult to speculate on what attitude would have motivated an institution were it a person instead of an institution.”²

This is seriously wrong. To start with corporations are *persons*, they can own property, have obligations and liabilities and sue and be sued in court. They are not *sometimes* treated as persons. They are however not *individuals*.

However the discussion has other serious flaws. There is an assumption about the nature of the object of discussion. The attempt to envision an understanding of racism under formal logic has seriously misleading consequences. A formal logical definition of racism would capture racism in all places at all times. But this assumes racism is the same in all places at all times. This dis-historicising of a phenomena is an issue.

If we sought to define a flu in these terms it would assume that flu is the same in all places and at all times. Clearly a flu virus can evolve, and be a family of viruses. Why should not racism evolve and develop differently at different times and places?

Glasgow writes:

‘What we have seen so far, then, is the following. First, none of the rival accounts considered above can accommodate all cases that seem intuitively to be classified as racist. Thus we still need an analysis that can make sense of the wide range of cases of racism; that is, we still need to solve the location problem. Second, our analysis should find a set of properties (perhaps a disjunction of properties) that specifies necessary and sufficient conditions for racism. Finally, that analysis should somehow make sense of the judgment that racism is morally problematic’³.

This makes no sense at all. Racism could be a family of behaviours that evolves and adapts to different environments.

We then come to a discussion of institutional racism. He misconstrues Dummett’s approach and effectively accuses him of logical errors. Given Dummett’s position as a major logician one would normally tread with care in making such assumptions.

Glasgow confuses the nature of institutional racism given his obsession with agency and intention. An institution may be setup with no racist intent but once the results are found to be discriminatory NO effort is made to correct it, whereas in other areas when the effects are determined and found discriminatory in practice then efforts are made to correct it. According to Glasgow this behaviour cannot be racist.

What is behind this attitudinal approach?

Glasgow quotes Levine: ‘Michael P. Levine, for example, insists that a “causal account of racism, in particular one that involves a psychological or psychoanalytic underpinning, is necessary to understanding what racism is.”’⁴

² (Glasgow, 2009, p. 74 note 30)

³ (Glasgow, 2009, p. 80)

⁴ (Glasgow, 2009, p. 90)

Historically this approach arises from post war work of Allport⁵ and Adorno⁶ which focussed on personality and attitude as the source of racism. This work suggested that poorly educated people and people with personality disorders were the source of racism. Note how this excludes almost all academics from being racist. This is an astonishing result as western academia was patient zero of genocidal racism. It was born out of major western scholars from Hume, Kant, Hegel to now lesser known scholars such as Gobineau et al. As the subject has privileged access to his innermost motivation only he can confess to racism and his own denial of racist intent in the view of attitudinalists is final. This allows every Western academic to self exculpate.

Milgram's experiments⁷ pushed a serious dent in the personality theory but it appears the attitudes approach which is the same by another name still lives.

CRITICAL REFLECTIONS:

When Western racism is divorced from its genocidal roots it becomes an incoherent phenomenon. It is the genocidal project that determines the dynamic of western forms of racism. This project involved the wiping out of all other 'races', starting with Native Americans⁸. Outside of the genocidal project we have concepts such Gauls, Franks, Normans, Saxons, and Germanic tribes. These are used in controversies over rulership and legitimacy. To claim that the ruling class are different i.e. Norman not Saxon or Gaulish can be used to undermine their legitimacy to rule and assist the speaker to foment rebellion. This is quite a different grammar to one where the concept is used to identify those targeted for genocide.

Attitudinal approaches are fundamentally flawed as they appear to require a negative attitude or a mistaken attitude of the racists to the target. This is a cartoon version of history. Many of history's most dangerous 'racists' were quite aware that 'races' did not exist and did not fool themselves about this. Mussolini explicitly denied he believed in races but found the concept politically useful. During the debates over Nuremberg Laws many senior Nazi's explained that there was no such thing as race and therefore defining a Jew had to be taken in a non-scientific but socially acceptable manner.

Attitudinal approaches conceal more than they reveal. Heydrich could be happy with attitudinal approaches. Firstly, he could say he did not actually believe Jews were a separate race. Secondly, he could say he was not motivated by hostility to Jews but by his love of the fatherland and he acted for the best interest of the future of the fatherland.

One way or another these approaches to racism have the aspect of blaming the victim. If 'racism' arises in the mind or heart of the spectator towards certain people then, taking classic western analysis, their sense perception is receiving information about the target that triggers this response. The racists' logic may be wanting but the original source is his sense perception of the other. It is unavoidable to conclude that the target is somehow implicated in this process. This is

⁵ (Allport, 1954)

⁶ (Adorno et al., 1982)

⁷ (Milgram, 1963)

⁸ (Ladimeji, 2019)

the alibi given to Hume by Julian Baggini⁹. Despite a specialist historian, Dr Felix Waldman, describing Hume as an 'unashamed racist', Baggini trots out this absurd defence that Hume's racism was based on his experience. This defence is only the more absurd as it is in fact historically factually false and known to be false. Hume was presented with plenty of evidence to the contrary of his views at the time but never revised his opinions. Whatever the source of Hume's racism it was definitely not the evidence of his senses.

CONCLUSIONS:

Western philosophers have constructed the debate in such a way as to absolve themselves of racism rather than to shed light on the issue. But then again these are clever people and such a defence is breathtaking in its logical cleverness. Should we have expected anything other from patient zero?

⁹ (baggini, 2020)

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