

The Ironclad Argument Against Racism

Being labelled a “racist” is scary. If you scour the Internet, you will find a few confessed racists. For the most part, though, “racism” is a doctrine we ascribe to others in order to damn and ostracize them. The strange result: While we hear endless debates about whether a person, idea, or practice is “racist,” we rarely hear arguments against racism itself. Arguments of the form, “Racism is wrong because...”

So suppose you wanted to construct such arguments. What would they be? Many people would start with something like, “Racism is wrong because it has been used to justify mass murder and slavery.” True enough. But you could just as easily say, “Equality is wrong because it has been used to justify mass murder and slavery.” See any episode of revolutionary communism.

Alternately, you could declare, “Racism is wrong because all races have equal intrinsic ability. All observed performance gaps in achievement and behavior stem from oppression.” The obvious weakness in this argument: How could anyone possibly know this? We’re never seen a world of zero oppression, so we can’t verify this by direct observation. The best we can do is apply standard social science, where we measure performance, then try to statistically control for oppression. Alternately, we could measure performance, then try to statistically control for ability, and call the residual “oppression.”

Yet either social science route is clearly risky. Maybe you won’t find that all races have equal intrinsic ability. Maybe you’ll find that some performance gaps stem from something other than oppression. And what happens to the researcher who makes such discoveries? Can testing hypotheses with an open mind transform you into a “racist” against your will?

Fortunately, an *ironclad* argument against racism does exist. An argument simple enough for a child to understand, yet compelling enough for an adult to embrace. Namely:

Racism is wrong because collective guilt is wrong.

The intuition has been around for a long time: If a man commits murder, you shouldn’t punish his son. Why not? Because it’s not the son’s fault; he’s a different person than his father. And if that’s wrong, it’s even more wrong to punish someone because he lives on the same street, resides in the same city, practices the same religion, or is a citizen of the same country. Collective guilt may be emotionally tempting, but it is intellectually absurd.

The one exception is when you voluntarily join a group of wrong-doers, such as the Mafia. But that’s not really collective guilt; it’s *individual* guilt for belonging to a criminal conspiracy.

The belabor the obvious, belonging to a race is nothing like belonging to the Mafia. You're born into a race, you can't control what other members of your race do, so you should bear no liability for their actions. No matter how awfully other members of your race have behaved, you should be judged as an individual. To hold you responsible for anything they did is a grave injustice.

What makes this argument so ironclad? Because it rests on rock-solid microethical foundations. Meaning: Almost everyone can see that collective guilt is wrong in simple hypotheticals. Such as: John murdered Sally. Is it morally permissible for Sally's family to murder John's infant son in retaliation? No? Then it can't be morally permissible to blame other people who share John's race, either.

In my childhood, I heard the ironclad argument against racism frequently. But I sense that it's no longer popular. Why not? Because once you reject collective guilt, you have to abandon any notion of collectively punishing racism itself! And that is largely what the fashionable creed of "Anti-Racism" is all about.

In the past, most whites were racist. Even today, many are. Without collective guilt, however, you have no basis for punishing whites in general. You couldn't tell a white college applicant, "We're going to discriminate against you, because white people in the past discriminated against blacks." Or even, "We're going to discriminate against you, because modern whites continue to discriminate against blacks." Instead, you would have to tailor any punishment for specific misdeeds – ever mindful of the danger that if you stray into collective guilt, the punisher himself deserves punishment.

So while the ironclad argument against racism unequivocally condemns racism, it also bars the way to a no-holds-barred, by-any-means-necessary War Against Racism. Which, on reflection, is a feature, not a bug. If your road to a just society requires constant injustice, you're headed in the wrong direction.