



## On racism



Racism. We don't seem to get enough of this topic. Most of us have intuitive ideas of what constitutes racism, but only few of us have bravely waded through the proverbial swamp of grey areas, where questions like 'is a subject to racism conforming to racial stereotypes a form of racism?', 'are jokes based on race racist?' And 'can racism be benevolent or morally neutral?' Reside. This is exactly what I will try to do in the following words; to take the reader on a perilous journey into one of the hardest social questions and biggest social problems that are plaguing our societies at this time.

## **Racism, a definition**

The Oxford living dictionary defines race as;

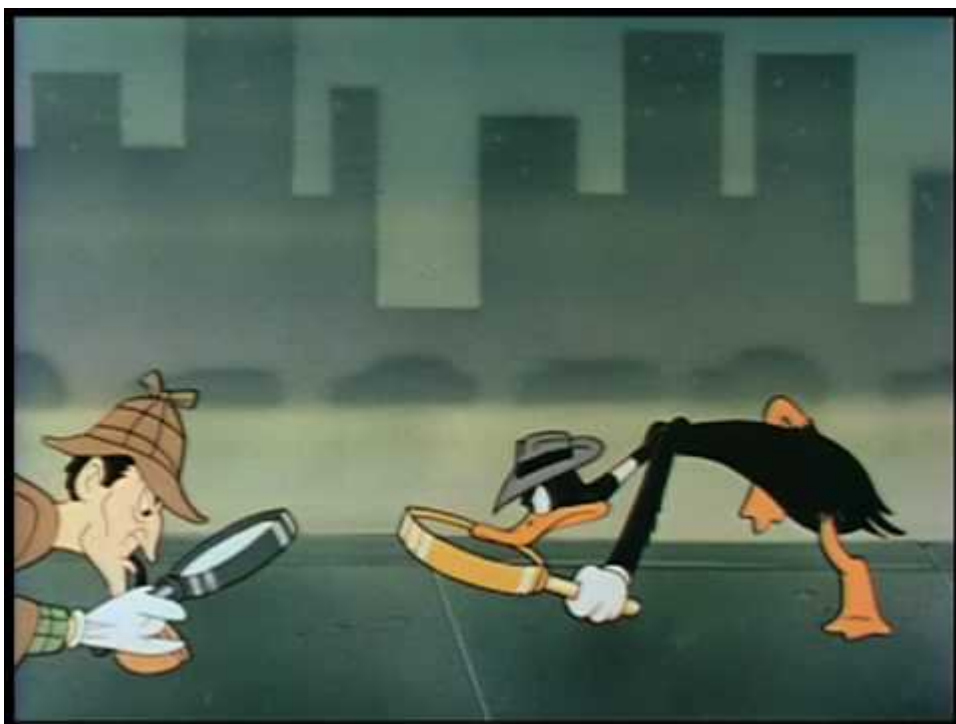
[mass noun] 1. Prejudice, discrimination, or antagonism

directed against someone of a different race based on the belief that one's own race is superior:

1.1 The belief that all members of each race possess characteristics, abilities, or qualities specific to that race, especially so as to distinguish it as inferior or superior to another race or races

In this definition, at point 1, we find a working definition for the practice of racism, which seems to be what we are looking for. It tells us that prejudice, discrimination or antagonism are important factors in declaring something or someone racist, but the most important factor seems to be the basis upon which these remarks are made or these persons functionally form their assumption; they must believe their own race is superior. More importantly, the definition works only for differences in 'race', race being of course, a controversial subject.

## Investigation of the definition



At this point, we must ask ourselves the question; is this definition a practical one? I always prefer doing this

Socratically. That is, by means of investigative questions, because not only is philosophy, simply put the asking of questions about questions and answers, it also allows us the peace and respect to take our time and figure this out for ourselves. I also want my readers to disagree with me. Not because I want to write shit articles, but because it means I have stimulated thought. So, please, take your time to judge my questions on accuracy and relevance and do try to answer them yourself.

We may for instance ponder the question; *'If I do not believe my race to be superior over that of someone else, can I still be racist?'*

The definition, as given above, tells us the source of a racist remark has the basis of a belief in one race's superiority. Then again, it does not expressly limit itself to such occasions.

A point in defense of this definition, can be made in the difference between racial discrimination and racism, racial discrimination then being a more incidental type of racism, or a-structural racism. This might be a good working definition, after splitting a-structural racism from the whole. But, this would logically mean that we'll have to redefine the whole of racism to fit both definitions of structural and a-structural racism. Let's put a pin in this one, for the time being.

Another question we must ask ourselves, ought to pertain to the first part of the definition and perhaps one of the most entered grey areas of racism;

*'are jokes based on race, racist?'*

There are certainly a lot of jokes that fit the nomers of prejudice (stereotype) and antagonism. The point of a race joke is to be discriminatory, but either lightheartedly or shockingly so, as to create a comedic effect. So, we can

constitute, with relative ease, that many if not all race jokes are racist. Now, if this is the case, we have a choice to make; the answer is either yes and we continue with this definition, or we re-postulate our definition and try again.

If we continue with this definition, we will need to search for two more kinds of racism; hurtful racism and non-hurtful racism, as it is not evident that not all race jokes are hurtful.

If we postulate a new definition, we must reason from the ground up and include our findings thus far.

As our definition still has some possibility of life, and has served us well thus far, I will allow it the courtesy of seeing if it can be revived, or at least follow the trail to its death.

## **Harmful and benign racism?**



Civil rights groups have on occasion claimed that there is no benign racism, and that race jokes are harmful, because they are often sources for stereotypes, set apart people from different races and have a diminishing effect on the quality of interracial relations. This had of course been disputed by

many, mostly on the questions of whether it is really hurtful to joke about stereotypes. A lot of comedians would reply by saying that stereotypes help us take each other and ourselves less seriously, though we can all ascribe to the fact that there is a difference between the racism in jokes by Chris Rock and the approach to hecklers taken by former Seinfeld-actor Michael Richards.

To answer this question, we must first define for ourselves *harmful racism*.

Let us start with; 'a racist statement or action that serves to harm (members of) a different race.'

This seems like a fair start, as we are speaking of the practice of racism, it seems like 'statement or action' bears the load sufficiently. To stay true to our previous definition, harmful racism also refers to race. Seeing as we are speaking explicitly about *harmful racism*, I refer to the harm we expect it to cause; namely either (groups of) individuals of another race or another race in its entirety. Notice, too that this definition holds the word 'racist' in it, to refer to our earlier definition.

Now, we can proceed to once again, to ask ourselves if this definition works. We can ask ourselves, firstly, if our definition carries its load, by asking:

*'Do we need to clarify this definition?'*

Well, we have yet to define what racist harm is, which we need to do in order to get our definition to work. An obvious start would be the deprivation of rights and/or privileges of (members of) a different race. This is, historically the biggest problem of racism, after all. But is there perhaps more to it? Does harm exhibit itself in other ways? If we believe those who say they are subject to racism, they say they experience a general mistrust as a result of racism.

Remember here, that we are not discussing whether or not this is the case. We are rather discussing if this *can be* a result of racism. The answer here is plainly yes; through dehumanizing rhetoric and the association of people from different races as in any sense less trustworthy, we might imagine a general mistrust toward people of certain races.

Thusly, we can define racist harm as;

*'That which serves to deprive people of certain or different races of rights or privileges or to establish mistrust among people of certain races'*

This seems a bit long and hard to understand. Considering this is only a supportive definition, we might consider shrinking it to a more portable size. We can do this by finding a common denominator in 'deprivation of rights and privileges'. These pertain to equality. We can also see that mistrust is negative trust. Thusly, we may postulate our definition of racist harm as such;

*'That which serves to reduce equality and/or trust among (people of) different races'*

We ought to again check ourselves before we wrickety-wrickety-wreck ourselves, by asking;

*'Are we missing another form of racist harm?'*

At this time, there doesn't seem to be, but we will revisit the topic, should the need arise.

To recap; we have thus far decided that we must define for ourselves, irrespective of whether or not its counterpart exists, harmful racism. We did this initially by defining it as 'a statement or action that serves to harm (people of) a different race'. We then clarified that, by harm in this sense, we mean 'that which reduces the equality or trust between (people of) different races'. This means or definition

of **harmful racism** is *'a statement or action that serves to reduce equality or trust between (people of) different races'*.

Let's take this definition back to our question about the comedians, if you'll remember, our question was; 'are all racist jokes harmful?', or 'do all racist jokes cause racist harm?' Considering the civil rights groups at the beginning of this article, who claimed jokes based on race set apart different races, we must ask ourselves if being 'set apart' necessarily contributes to reducing equality or trust between different races.

We can assert that, at least in terms of attention, being set apart means equality is reduced; those who are set apart are more closely observed. However, aside from the obvious downsides of this, such as less anonymity and privacy, this also entails more influence in the way people act around you, depending on the situation and the reason for being set apart. This essentially, is a function of the crudeness of the joke and the sensitivity of the person or persons being discriminated against as a punchline, as is the influence of a joke on general trust among races.

This means, that we can only really define benign racism as a negative to harmful racism: **Harmless racism** is then *'a racist statement or action that does not serve to reduce equality or trust between races'*.

Again, remember that this does not necessarily mean harmless racism exist, but that it could exist, if an action or statement is conducive to the conditions mentioned in the definition.

## **What is 'race'?**



A looming question that we have yet to answer, but is at the center of all of this, is the following;

*'What is a race exactly?'*

The Oxford living dictionary defines race as follows:

1. Each of the major divisions of humankind, having distinct physical characteristics

1.1 [mass noun] The fact or condition of belonging to a racial division or group; the qualities or characteristics associated with this.

1.2 A group of people sharing the same culture, history, language, etc.; an ethnic group

1.3 A group or set of people or things with a common feature or features:



1.4[Biology] A population within a species that is distinct in some way, especially a subspecies

We can see, then that we are offered a plethora of choices, allowing for racism to be attributed something as randomly as one would desire. One could, for instance, state that Europeans are a race, but that Italians and Greeks have a significantly different history and culture than other Europeans and be right, only to go on and be equally right when you say all Europeans are the same race. So, we must see if we can in a way refine this.

A combination of 1 and 1.2 seems to suffice, at first glance. These together would form:

*'a group of people sharing the same culture, history, language and major division of humankind'*

Testing out new definition, we may ask ourselves: *'does this definition include or exclude groups that our attention?'*

One possible objection to this definition of race, is that it doesn't mention religion. This objection stems from the fairly recent international debate that sparked on 'Real time with Bill Maher' in a discussion with Ben Affleck;

*'Are muslims their own race?'*

According to our definition, they are not, because cultures within the 'Dar-al Islam' are very diverse, they only share a part of their history as muslims, languages differ per country of origin and they are born on all continents.

Honestly, the only reason to make an extra exception for religion, is that muslims or people who look like them are often subject to systematic discrimination and are looked down upon as inferior by other people. And though I do not want to give off the impression that I find this a lesser problem, because it is a big problem, we can't in good conscience make

this exception, as it would be a special pleading fallacy.

## Conclusion

With our questions answered to satisfaction, and a working concept of 'race' established as; *'a group of people sharing the same culture, history, language and major division of humankind'*, we can now aptly and I believe accurately describe **racism** as;

*'A statement or action based on the shared culture, history, language and major division of humankind of a certain individual or group of individuals'.*

In which we can discern between **harmful racism**: *'A racist (see; racism) statement or action that serves to reduce the equality and mutual trust between (people of) certain races'.*

And **benign racism**: *'A racist statement or action that does not serve to reduce equality and mutual trust between (people of) different races.*

And motivational influences, using the terms **structural/intentional racism**: *'A racist statement or action that is brought about by a belief that ones own race is superior'*

And **a-structural/incidental racism**: *'A racist statement or action that is not motivated by a belief of racial superiority'.*

These definitions show us that the issue of racism is a hard one to ponder and harder yet to solve. Because that is what the goal ought to be; for each and every one of us; black, white, green and purple, to recognize our racism, whether it be harmful or benign, structural or incidental and make sure we can all exist equally and together in an open, trusting society.

I hope that, even though I am a privileged, white cisgender European male, I have been able to take you through the swamp of grey and applied some contrast, or at least to have given you some tools with which to traverse this hard-to-tread intellectual terrain with.

Humbly yours,

Mvdgoes

