Is Racism in the “Heart”?

Tommie Shelby

In a series of thought-provoking articles and in his forthcoming book, Jorge Garcia has defended what he calls a volitional conception of racism.¹ On this account, racism is rooted, not in the content or irrationality of certain beliefs about so-called races, as is commonly supposed, but in certain noncognitive attitudes, motives, and feelings. Garcia suggests that we view racism as “a vicious kind of racially based disregard for the welfare of certain people.”² This way of approaching racism sees it as essentially involving the “heart” of the racist—that is, his or her wants, intentions, hopes, fears, predilections, aversions, and so on. According to Garcia, this connection to human sentiments and attitudes is what explains why racism is always wrong. For as he maintains, “its immorality stems from its being opposed to the virtues of benevolence and justice.”³ Racism, on Garcia’s account, is fundamentally a type of individual moral vice, the expression of a bad character. Building on the idea of racism’s being “rooted in the heart,” he goes on to develop what he calls an “infection model” of racism. According to this model, an act is racist insofar as a racist heart infects the conduct of the racist; and an institution is racist insofar as it is rooted in the racist attitudes and the resulting racist-infected actions of its founders and/or current functionaries.

I want to critically examine Garcia’s analysis of racism. While it is highly sophisticated and vigorously argued for, it suffers, I believe, from a number of significant defects. A careful examination of these defects will reveal how we might develop a more adequate conception of racism.

I. Methodological Considerations

Garcia, like many people these days, thinks that racism is necessarily wrong. And he maintains that “no account of what racism is can be adequate unless it at the same time makes clear what is wrong with it.”⁴ However, Garcia offers little argument for this claim, despite the fact that it is far from obvious. Clearly, a sociological or historical account of racism need not make clear what is wrong with it; it would be sufficient if such accounts explained the nature and origins of racism—surely a demanding enough task. So, assuming Garcia would not disagree with this, I take it that he means to apply this methodological requirement to only moral-philosophical analyses of racism. However, I would like to suggest that even here the requirement is unreasonable.

One type of philosophical investigation Garcia might be engaged in here assumes the usefulness of the commonsense thick concept “racism” and goes
on to clarify why racism is necessarily evil and perhaps to tighten up our often slipshod usage of the notion. This approach simply seeks to provide a rigorous philosophical reconstruction that preserves the descriptive core and condemnatory force of the concept. The strategy seems to work best when our pretheoretic understanding of the relevant phenomenon is sufficiently clear and complete to justify the generalization that all manifestations of it are morally problematic. When this condition is met, the task of the moral philosopher is to make explicit precisely what makes it wrong. So, for example, if we were analyzing “murder”—the malicious killing of one human being by another—we would want to explain why this type of homicide is always immoral (e.g., that it is incompatible with autonomy and natural right, that it prematurely and gratuitously ends a life of value, that it causes unnecessary pain and suffering, or whatever). But this approach will be much less successful when (1) the relevant phenomenon is not clearly wrong, or (2) ordinary use of the relevant concept is so vague or inconsistent that moral appraisal lacks a distinct and steady target. The concept “fornication” is an example of the first obstacle to this type of philosophical analysis. Its descriptive content is clear enough—voluntary sexual relations between two or more persons who are not married to each other—but its inherent wrongness is widely (and rightly) disputed. Thus, any moral analysis of “fornication” that aims to preserve its ordinary descriptive and normative content will have to convince us that it is wrong in the process of explaining precisely what makes it wrong. However, I take it that “racism” does not present us with this particular problem; instead, it illustrates the second obstacle to thick conceptual analysis. Nowadays, as Garcia himself correctly points out, the term “racism” is so haphazardly thrown about that it is no longer clear that we all mean, even roughly, the same thing by it. Some even complain that the term is fast becoming (or has long since become) a mere epithet, with strong emotive force but little or no clear content. This doesn’t mean the concept is no longer useful, but it does suggest that we need to clearly specify its referent before we can determine whether the relevant phenomenon is always morally problematic. This will require some philosophical reconstruction, which may diverge, even radically, from ordinary usage. Until such a reconstructive project is completed, though, we should remain agnostic about whether every instance of “racism” is immoral, for our best reconstruction may show that many of our pretheoretic moral convictions are unfounded or inconsistent. Thus, if Garcia is engaged in thick conceptual analysis, he cannot lay down as a condition of adequacy that any analysis of racism must show it to be always morally wrong. The claim that racism is necessarily immoral must be a conclusion of such an analysis, not a theoretical presupposition.

A second approach to the moral analysis of racism simply stipulates that racism is always immoral. According to it, the term “racism” functions within the relevant theoretical discourse as a term of condemnation, and the role of the moral philosopher is to define it so that it (1) picks out only those attitudes, behaviors, and practices that are moral evils and (2) retains as much of its ordinary descriptive content as is compatible with analytical clarity. But this approach would make Garcia’s methodological “requirement”—that any account of racism show why it is necessarily wrong—a presupposition of his
particular theoretical project. This leaves it entirely open for another social theorist or philosopher to take a nonmoralized approach to racism without running afoul of logic, clarity, or good sense, provided the resulting analysis is an illuminating one.

I want to suggest an alternative to both the “thick concept” and “stipulative” approaches, one that takes place in two distinct parts. In the first, we make use of the behavioral sciences (including psychology and history) to define the concept of racism in a morally neutral way. Our reconstruction of the concept should illuminate the history, structure, psychological mechanisms, and social consequences of the phenomenon. Once we have properly identified its referent, we can then offer our moral evaluation, but without antecedently assuming that everything that is properly called “racism” on our theoretical account will turn out to be immoral. Now of course as philosophers engaged in moral-philosophical analysis, our investigation should have some moral import. But we can satisfy this desideratum without requiring that every philosophical inquiry into the nature of racism show it to be inherently evil. It is enough if we require that any such inquiry have moral significance: it must seek to reveal what is and what isn’t morally troublesome about the phenomenon under investigation.

Garcia would likely reject this proposal, for he thinks that the ordinary concept of racism is so morally loaded and uncomplimentary that it is “counter-intuitive” to use it in a morally neutral way. As he says, “the term is used almost entirely as a dyslogistic one today. Virtually no one is willing to accept the label ‘racist’ for herself or himself, nor do we bestow it on others without a sense of impugning them.” But ordinary usage, no matter how broad or entrenched, is not morally infallible. There are many condemnatory thick concepts that have dubious moral content (e.g., “fornications,” “slut,” “shack up,” “fag,” even “nigger”). Even if we want to hold on to such a term, as we might want to do with “racism,” it simply is not reasonable to allow ordinary usage to determine substantive moral questions. Now Garcia might say at this point that, given its thorough moralization in ordinary discourse, using the term “racism” in a morally neutral manner would be just too misleading. But this practical worry can be dealt with simply by being explicit about our theoretical reconstruction and moral-political aims. As we know, philosophical projects can sometimes be esoteric and misunderstood and yet may nevertheless reveal something important.

II. The Role of Racist Beliefs

We can better appreciate the relevance of the above discussion once we consider the role of racist beliefs in an adequate account of racism. According to Garcia, racist beliefs are a secondary and an inessential feature of racism. Race-based noncognitive attitudes are the key ingredient, and it is the possession of these attitudes that makes an individual a racist and, thus, morally vicious. Garcia maintains that in the typical racist, race-based animosity or contempt is the root cause of the racist’s belief in the superiority of his own “racial group” and in the inferiority of another, and that this belief is just a convenient rationalization for his vicious attitude toward the other “race” or
some member of it. While Garcia admits that racist beliefs may be psychologically necessary for some racists—given our deep need to justify our actions to others, ourselves, and perhaps God—he insists that it is not logically necessary for the existence of racism. And in those (presumably rare) cases where racist beliefs lead (causally) to racist attitudes, rather than the other way around, Garcia maintains that it is the attitudes, not the beliefs, that make the person a racist.

Now, I would agree that racist beliefs are typically rationalizations for racist attitudes, actions, and institutions; however, contrary to what Garcia maintains, I contend that such beliefs are essential to and even sufficient for racism. For one thing, we cannot even identify a person’s intention as a racist one without positing that he or she holds some racist belief. If all we know, say, is that Stephen (a white person) dislikes Andre (a black person), then we don’t yet know whether Stephen’s dislike for Andre is racist. To settle that, we also need to know why he dislikes him. If it is simply because Andre is having a love affair with the woman Stephen loves (who, let us say, happens to be white), then this is not racist, provided Andre’s “race” is not an aggravating factor. In order for his dislike to be racist, it would have to be based at least in part on the fact that Andre is a member of the “black race,” where Andre’s “blackness” (at least partially) grounds Stephen’s dislike. Thus, if Stephen’s dislike of Andre is racist, this has to be (at least in part) because of Stephen’s beliefs about the racial characteristics of black people and the role that these beliefs play in his motivation, speech, and conduct.

In response to this, Garcia might say, as he sometimes does, that it is enough for Stephen to be a racist if his dislike is “racially based,” that is, if he dislikes Andre because of Andre’s racial designation. On this view, in order for Stephen’s dislike of Andre to be racist, Stephen need not dislike him because of any beliefs he (Stephen) holds about “races” in general or about black people in particular, provided he makes a racial distinction “in his heart.” But is this correct? Let’s suppose that Peter X, a white but problack radical, has contempt for Andre because Peter believes that no self-respecting black man committed to the black freedom struggle would be involved romantically with a white woman. Peter’s contempt is directed at Andre because of Andre’s “race,” but in being contemptuous of him for this reason Peter would be simply echoing the sentiment of many blacks who believe that the cause of black liberation requires observing the rule of racial endogamy. Peter’s contempt for Andre may be unjustified, but surely it is not racist, despite its being “racially based.” Thus, the fact that a vicious attitude has a “racial basis” is not sufficient to ground the charge of racism; the exact nature of the corresponding racial beliefs will also be relevant. (It is perhaps also worth pointing out that Garcia’s talk of making distinctions “within one’s heart” is quite misleading, for surely our ability to discriminate on “racial” grounds is a cognitive capacity, and not a purely volitional one.)

Now one response to this objection is to say that the relevant vicious motive or intention must be based simply on the fact that the targeted person(s) is (are) of one “race” rather than another, and for no better reason. The more complicated story involving Peter’s commitment to black nationalism would obviously not meet this criterion. However, I think this approach
would leave the motives of the racist largely opaque, mysterious, even unintelligible. What would it mean for a racist to hate someone simply because he or she is black? Does the racist hate blacks because they have dark skin and kinky hair? Surely “blackness” has deeper meaning for the racist than that—unless he or she is psychotic. Unpacking this “meaning” is a matter of uncovering and making explicit the beliefs of the racist that “make sense,” from a hermeneutic standpoint, of his or her attitudes and actions. Fully comprehending the attitudes and actions of a (possible) racist, especially when our ultimate aim is moral appraisal, must involve appreciating his or her particular beliefs about so-called races.

Now, there are some people who have a visceral dislike for the members of certain “races” but are unable to adequately explain why they have this strange aversion. Perhaps Garcia is simply trying to make room for these people within the class of racists when he denies that racist beliefs are essential for racism. But I think we can accommodate this group while still allowing that racist beliefs are necessary. Leaving aside the (implausible) view that racism is a “natural” disposition to favor one’s “kin,” the best explanation for their visceral dislike of blacks is that they have been socialized into a racist culture, where racist beliefs and attitudes are widespread, taken for granted, reinforced through a variety of media, and often tacitly transmitted from generation to generation. In such a culture, like our own, the existence of pervasive racist ideas, often unspoken and implicit, explains the attitudes of the “visceral” racist, attitudes which would otherwise be quite puzzling. So, even here, racist beliefs are central to the analysis of racism.

Rather than focus on the mental states of individuals without regard to their sociohistorical context, which can often lead us astray, I would suggest that we view racism as fundamentally a type of ideology. Put briefly and somewhat crudely, “ideologies” are widely accepted illusory systems of belief that function to establish or reinforce structures of social oppression. We should also note that these social illusions, like the belief that blacks are an inferior “race,” are often, even typically, accepted because of the unacknowledged desires or fears of those who embrace them (e.g., some white workers have embraced racist beliefs and attitudes when they were anxious about the entrance of lower-paid blacks into a tight labor market. Racial ideologies emerged with the African slave trade and European imperialist domination of “darker” peoples. These peoples were “racialized” in an effort to legitimize their subjugation and exploitation: the idea of biological “race,” the linchpin of the ideology, was used to impute an inherent and unchangeable set of physically based characteristics to the subordinate Other, an “essential nature” which supposedly set them apart from and explained why they were appropriately exploited by the dominant group. This ideology served (and still serves) to legitimize the subordination and economic exploitation of non-white people. Even after slavery was abolished and decolonization was well under way, the ideology continued to have an impact on social relations, as it functioned to legitimize segregation, uneven socioeconomic development, a racially segmented labor market, and the social neglect of the urban poor. The ideology is so powerful and devious that oppressors from all over the world have found it to be an effective tool of domination. Indeed, even some
members of oppressed groups have been seduced by it, though often remolding or reinterpreting its discursive content for their own purposes. While racist ideology has far fewer explicit adherents or proud defenders in the United States today than it once did, it continues to exert an influence on the culture, politics, race relations, and economic conditions of the United States.\textsuperscript{12}

Given his theoretical and moral concerns, this way of thinking about racism has several virtues of which Garcia should approve. First, viewing racism as an ideology passes the test of moral significance, for ideologies function to enable and sustain oppression. Though ideologies, being belief systems, are not in themselves immoral, they do perpetuate social injustice; and thus they are the proper objects of our moral concern. Second, we can retain the pejorative force of “racism” if we treat it as referring to an ideology, since ideologies, especially racist ones, are epistemically unsound, are irrationally held (given their dependence on self-deception), and serve as vehicles for domination and exploitation. This is not the same as saying that racism, qua ideology, is itself immoral; however, it does suggest that where racist ideology exists, immorality and injustice are probably not far behind. Finally, the ideology approach is compatible with Garcia’s “infection model” of racism. Like vicious racist attitudes, racist beliefs, especially when sustained through false consciousness, can also “infect” the behavior of an individual, leading a person (consciously or not) to racially discriminate against others or to act on the basis of false assumptions or stereotypes about members of other “races.” And when a racist ideology influences the decision making of those acting in official capacities, this can “infect” the basic institutions of social life (e.g., consider the impact of widely accepted racial stereotypes on the operation of the criminal justice system).

So why, then, is Garcia so adamant about rejecting belief-centered accounts of racism? I think part of the explanation is to be found in his commitment to the immorality requirement discussed above. His reasoning is something like the following. If racism must always be morally wrong, and racism is primarily a matter of having certain beliefs, then it must be possible to be held morally blameworthy for holding some viewpoints. This conclusion, however, seems problematic on at least two grounds. First, it would appear to commit a category mistake. Beliefs aren’t the kinds of things that can be immoral; they can be true or false, warranted or unwarranted, rational or irrational, but certainly not virtuous or evil, just or unjust, at least not in themselves. Second, a belief-centered conception of racism seems to be incompatible with freedom of thought and expression. It would be intolerant and illiberal of us to morally condemn people for sincerely holding certain beliefs, however wrongheaded or unsound we may think they are. Racist beliefs are no exception. It is only when such beliefs lead to race-based hatred, racist actions, or racist institutions, that we rightly condemn those who hold them; and even then, we should condemn them not for holding the beliefs, but for the vicious attitudes and the actions and institutions that these attitudes bring into being.

This all seems quite compelling, but only if we assume that racism is necessarily wrong and, thus, that the racist is always morally vicious and his or
her racist actions are always immoral. Indeed, much of Garcia’s case against the necessity and sufficiency of racist beliefs for racism rests on this assumption. But as I argued earlier, we need not accept this methodological constraint as a condition of adequacy for an account of racism. Given our weaker methodological constraint—that an account of racism must have moral significance—a belief-centered conception of racism does not commit a category mistake, and it is no threat to intellectual freedom. In treating racism as an ideology, we are not claiming that ideological beliefs are in themselves immoral; nor are we suggesting that people should be (legally or otherwise) prevented from expressing their racist opinions.

But Garcia sometimes employs a different argumentative strategy against the claim that racist beliefs are essential to racism. The basic move is to take some specific racist belief (e.g., that whites are superior to blacks in some important respect), and then show that a person need not hold it in order to be a racist, provided he or she has racist motives and sentiments. This maneuver will be convincing, however, only if a person can be a racist without holding *any* racist belief. But as I’ve argued above, we cannot identify an intention, action, or institution as racist without knowing that it is rooted in racist beliefs. The mere fact that the victim of a vicious attitude, action, or institution is a member of some despised “race,” or that the perpetrator(s) is (are) of a different “race,” is inconclusive. Moreover, while the belief in the racial superiority of one’s own “race” is a paradigmatic racist belief, racist views are part of a complex and dynamic system of ideological belief. These beliefs have greater specificity and variety than the belief in a hierarchy of “races”; they often shift and are reformulated given specific political contingencies, economic circumstances, and sociohistorical context. And, with the possible exception of the belief in the reality of “races,” no one belief is essential to the legitimating function of the belief system: during the period of American slavery, black slaves were commonly thought to be docile, superstitious, easily satisfied, and obsequious, but in the present postindustrial phase of capitalist development, blacks are more often viewed as socially parasitic, full of (unjustified) anger, irresponsible, and dangerous. So, there is no one belief (again, with the possible exception of the belief that there are “races”), or even a set of beliefs, that definitively constitutes racist ideology. But this doesn’t show that racism is not a matter of people holding certain beliefs.

### III. Is a Racist Heart Essential?

Now that we have established that racist beliefs are essential to racism, we need to ask whether vicious racist attitudes, intentions, or motives (i.e., what Garcia calls a “racist heart”) are also necessary. According to Garcia, the most fundamental conative states of mind that are relevant to the charge of racism are hatred, animosity, hostility, dislike, contempt, ill will, hard-hearted indifference, and disregard for the welfare of others. There is no doubt that racists often have these attitudes toward other “races,” but I think it would be a mistake to hold that racism exists only when such attitudes are present.
Consider the case where racist ideology is advanced to justify economic exploitation, as was the case with American slavery. Here, as many historians of New World slavery would maintain, the motive is financial profit, not hatred—as the historian Barbara Fields argues, the primary goal of American slavery was not the production of “white supremacy” but the production of cotton, sugar, rice, and tobacco. This exploitative practice is racist because racist ideology is invoked to conceal the injustice, particularly from the exploiters themselves. Now Garcia might say that, though he doesn’t necessarily hate them, the racist exploiter doesn’t care enough or in the right sort of way about the racial Others he is exploiting. I would certainly agree, but the exploiter’s lack of concern for the welfare of his victims need not be because of their “race”; he might just as well have exploited those of his own “racial kind” had this been a more expedient and cost-effective option. Perhaps he exploits members of another “race” because he would receive less resistance that way and because he and others like him can convince themselves (with perhaps more than a bit of self-deception) of a silly theory about their own racial superiority in order to legitimize their oppressive conduct at a time when liberty and equality are supposed to be the foundation of their social life. I think it is clear that this type of conduct is still racist, even paradigmatically so. What could be more “counter-intuitive” than to deny this? But even if economic exploiters do hate those they exploit, they need not hate them because of their racial classification. They may hate them because the subordinate Other reminds them of their own injustice; or perhaps the conditions of servitude and degradation naturally breed contempt (which would also explain so-called racial self-hate), as Tocqueville suggests.

Consider a different type of racist. She has no ill will toward blacks but learned as a child to believe that they are “naturally” disposed to be violent, irresponsible, and indolent, and now that she is an adult, she uncritically continues to hold on to this belief, much as she does certain of her religious beliefs and many of her social values. She is what Appiah would call a “sincere extrinsic racist.” Now Garcia is forced to say that she is not “really” a racist, since her racist beliefs are not rooted in racist motives. But is this plausible? What if she relies on this belief while acting as a juror in a criminal case involving a black defendant; or what if this belief leads her to discriminate against blacks in hiring, renting property, or approving loans? I can’t see how these acts fail to be racist just because the perpetrator has a “pure” heart. And if I’m right, then the following claim must be false: “One whose racist beliefs have no such connection to any racial disregard in her heart does not hold them in a racist way and if she has no such disregard, she is not herself a racist, irrespective of her prejudices.”

This last example suggests that a fundamental problem with a volitional conception of racism—and indeed with many overly moralized analyses of racism—is that it can blind us to the ways in which seemingly “innocent” people can often be unwittingly complicitous in racial oppression. Thus, in order to avoid this defect, perhaps we might extend Garcia’s “infection” metaphor: racist ideology is a virus that people can catch and spread through no fault of their own and without (fully) knowing that they are contaminated by it. If this is acknowledged, we must recognize that the “heart” does not
have to be involved in order for an action or institution to be racist, and unjust because racist. It is sufficient for the existence of racism that individuals with racist beliefs act on those beliefs in their private lives, the marketplace, or the public sphere. Such actions lead to and perpetuate oppression—an unnecessary, systemic, and undeserved burden that is imposed on one group as a result of the actions of another—and they have this result whether or not they are performed with a racist heart. Racist ideology enables and sustains the oppression of subordinate “racial” groups, and this gives racist beliefs great moral significance, regardless of whether these beliefs are accompanied by racially based vicious intentions.

For helpful comments on earlier drafts of this essay, I would like to thank Anthony Appiah, Lawrence Blum, Jorge Garcia, David Kim, David Lyons, Howard McGary, and Kathleen Schmidt. A version of the paper was presented at the 2001 Pacific Division APA Meeting.

Notes

5 “Thick concepts,” to use Bernard Williams’s characterization, are concepts whose application is simultaneously “world-guided and action-guiding”; that is, they have both descriptive and evaluative content. Bernard Williams, Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 141.
7 Garcia, “Philosophical Analysis and the Moral Concept of Racism,” 5.