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# Race, Colorblindness, and Continental Philosophy

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The "colorblind" society is often offered as a worthy ideal for individual interaction as well as public policy. The ethos of liberal democracy would seem indeed to demand that we comport ourselves in a manner completely indifferent to race (and class, and gender, and so on). But is this ideal of colorblindness capable of fulfillment? And whether it is or not, is it truly a worthy political goal? In order to address these questions, one must first explore the nature of "race" itself. Is it ultimately real, or merely an illusion? What kind of reality, if any, does it have, and what are the practical (moral and political) consequences of its ontological status? This paper will explore the issue of colorblindness, focusing particularly on recent developments dealing with this topic in Continental philosophy. Beginning with the question of racial ontology, I will argue that race has a social reality that makes the practice of colorblindness, at least for the time being, politically untenable, and it may remain suspect even as a long-term goal.

Race continues to be a central feature of the North American political landscape. To be sure, no small amount of ink and rhetoric have been spent attempting to deny the significance, and even reality, of race, but even this effort serves as evidence of its ongoing importance. The fracas surrounding the governmental and media responses to Hurricane Katrina alone should make this point abundantly clear (indeed, we might say that in North America, even "natural disasters" have racial significance). In keeping with the liberal

democratic ideals of meritocracy, one response to the continued political significance of race has been to call for "colorblindness." This approach construes *race* as "color," and color as irrelevant to issues of justice. In other words, something so insignificant as one's pigmentation should be irrelevant to questions of the distribution of social goods (broadly construed). The intuitive and rhetorical appeal of this response to race should be obvious to anyone who came of political age in North America. This is consistent with the rhetoric of all men being created equal and judged by the content of their character. But what are the ultimate merits, theoretical and practical, of the ideal of colorblindness? Is there a plausible account of a colorblind society as an ideal toward which we ought to aim, and does this ideal offer any concrete strategies capable of bringing that dream of colorblindness to fruition? In order to even begin to address these questions some account must be offered of the ontological status of race itself. One cannot argue for or against the disavowal of race unless one knows exactly what it is that one is (or is not) denying. Philosophers in the Continental tradition have recently taken up these questions, and in doing so have offered some crucial insights. Beginning with the ontological question, this essay will survey some of the recent efforts of philosophers working within the Continental tradition(s) to deal with the issue of colorblindness. In addition to this survey of the literature, I will offer my own position both on racial ontology and on the question of colorblindness.

## Is Race Real? – The Question of Ontology

The issue of colorblindness is deeply informed by the question of the *ontology* of "race" itself. That is, what sort of thing is race? Is it something that is built-in to the natural world (i.e., biological)? Or is it something "socially constructed"? Is it real, or merely a conceptual tool used historically for nefarious ends? The answers to these questions will have an enormous impact upon the kinds of responses one can have to the ideal of colorblindness. If one believes, for example, that race is a real biological fact, then "colorblindness" becomes a kind of selfdeception.[1] If, on the other hand, race is in some strong sense non-existent or illusory, then "colorblindness" is neither more nor less than simple accuracy as regards the facts of the matter. If race is not real, then acting as if it is irrelevant is no more

problematic than conducting oneself as if the ancient Norse pantheon were irrelevant. Any exploration of the question of colorblindness should thus begin by mapping out the landscape of "racial ontology" before confronting colorblindness directly. Just what is it that we ought or ought not (can or cannot) to ignore?

Traditionally, the way to approach the ontological question is through an appeal to scientific methodology. This can be especially felicitous, since the history of the concept of race (see Harris; Zack, *Bachelors of Science*) is replete with efforts to demonstrate the "scientific" reality of racial differentiation by using everything from phrenology to the *Bell Curve* (see Herrnstein and Murray). According to this approach, if race exists, it is as a real, biological fact.[2] There must be observable differences in phenotype that are localized to specific breeding populations.[3] In the absence of such observable (and ultimately quantifiable) facts, race cannot be said to be real. Of course, the technological developments associated with genetics in the twentieth century have provided a new arena in which to wage the debate concerning race. Rather than looking at easily observable differences in appearance (skin color, hair texture, etc.), it is now possible to "map" the DNA of individuals and measure the extent to which "race" can or cannot be said to be a biological fact, or to look at the DNA sequences of specific individuals and describe their racial membership(s) without ever setting eyes on the actual person. The kinds of justifications and categorizations based upon gross morphology that held sway in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries have been replaced by more sophisticated conceptions predicated upon the analysis of genetic variation between and within populations, and this shift has produced some very interesting results.

There is mounting evidence that no scientific foundation for the concept of race can be found within the human genome. Kwame Anthony Appiah has argued persuasively that the scientific/biological justification for race is specious, and that race ought to therefore be understood as "illusory". Appiah points out in particular that the percentage of genetic variation between individuals *within* a given "race" can be greater than that between individuals from *different* "races." Without any clear correlation between racial membership and particular sequences of DNA, Appiah concludes that race is not real, and should therefore be abandoned as a means for classifying individual human beings. On the other hand, Philip Kitcher, a

philosopher of science, has argued for the "biological significance" of race (114). We might take, for example, the recent evidence that has suggested that certain pharmaceuticals will have varying efficacy depending upon the race of the recipient as evidence for this "biological significance" (see Villarosa). Kitcher admits that the resultant notion of race is not nearly as "thick" as the traditional one (that is, it doesn't have anywhere near the breadth of social, cultural, moral, and political content as the "folk" conception of race), but there is room to hold that it is *real*, nonetheless. The debate rages on, and the proverbial jury may still be out when it comes to the biological reality of "race." The question that emerges from this debate, however, is whether there can be good reasons for affirming or denying the "reality" of race regardless of the underlying biology. In other words, there may be a suspicion that a purely biological approach may be too limited, and here is where philosophers working within the Continental tradition have made their greatest contribution to the question of the ontology of race.

If there is a possible biological foundation for some conception of race, it seems clear, as Kitcher suggests, that it has only a passing resemblance to the popular (and historical) use of the term (109–10). If one rejects reductionist materialistic accounts of human reality (which seems common to most "Continental" approaches to philosophy), then biology alone cannot settle the question of racial ontology. That is, to assert that the absence of an underlying biological reality proves the non-existence of race assumes that reality is the *sole* purview of the natural sciences. But this is a proposition that Continental philosophy, since Hegel, has rejected. Thus, even if one grants that Kitcher is correct, the "race" which he claims has biological significance is simply not the same thing as the "race" which has been used to justify chattel slavery, genocide, Jim Crow, and continuing manifestations of systematic oppression and exploitation. The latter concept has often tried to use biology in efforts to lend itself legitimacy, but in the end the biological and cultural concepts are only cousins, and not ultimately the same thing. By the same token, the "illusory" status of race, biologically speaking, might not, on its own, rule out the cultural "reality" of race. Without a robust correspondence between biological evidence and the more common understanding of race, the rejection of the former in no way entails the rejection of the latter, nor does the affirmation of the former entail the affirmation of

the latter. At stake in all of this is the question of the nature and scope of "reality" itself. It is not enough simply to say that race is real or unreal without first making clear how one's conception of "real" functions in this context.

If the correspondence between biology and our actual experience of race is tenuous at best, then it makes sense to focus our investigation on the nature of that experience itself – in other words, we should make a phenomenological turn. Naomi Zack ("Race, Life, Death") has argued from the perspective of existential phenomenology (drawing on her predecessors Martin Heidegger and Simone de Beauvoir) for a rejection of the reality of race. According to her, "race" simply is not a brute *fact* of nature, but rather it "is the result of complex myths and social fictions that form a powerful *cultural reality*" (100, emphasis added). This "cultural reality," according to Zack, emerged in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as a way to justify the brutal treatment of African, Asian, and (Native) American peoples in a manner that openly contradicted the dominant humanistic political theories of the time. "Race," therefore, has existed, and continues to exist, but only as a convenient political/cultural tool of exploitation. We must, if we are to successfully deal with racial oppression, make clear that the underlying concept lacks scientific reality, but possesses an all-too-potent cultural reality.

With this analysis in mind, according to Zack, we find further that from any particular individual's perspective, racial identifications (the ways in which we are identified racially by other individuals) are always *imposed* upon us from the outside. Consequently, it is up to us whether we *choose* to incorporate those identifications into our particular *identities* (the ways in which we understand ourselves) – we decide whether to make the racialized ways in which others perceive us (identifications) part of who we are as individuals (identities). Given that racial identifications exist only as tools for oppression and exploitation, to incorporate those identifications into our individual identity, Zack claims, amounts to a self-imposed constraint upon our freedom. In affirming a racial identity, according to her, we are willingly taking up externally imposed identifications whose historical provenance and present day functions are saturated with oppressive meanings. It is tantamount to choosing to be deprived of freedom. She argues that we must "purify" ourselves of racial identifications if we are to realize our full potential as free human agents (105). This is

an account of the ontological status of race with clear implications for the question of colorblindness.

For Zack there is a sharp distinction between race as such, racial identities, and racial identifications. The existence of the latter two categories is independent of the existence of the first. Zack denies the existence of races as a biological fact, but in no way denies that there are racial identifications (imagining what it would take to sincerely deny that racial categories are employed by other human beings is extremely difficult) from which the "cultural reality" of race emerges. And racial identities, as options open to any given agent, also clearly exist, whether the (biologically) "real" races to which they refer exist or not. Furthermore, Zack holds that racial identifications and identities must be challenged (for example, by refusing to employ racial terms in one's own identity and by openly contesting attempts by others to identify one in racial terms) in the hope of one day eliminating them. Thus, Zack offers a moral/political argument for the repudiation of racial identifications and identities, predicated upon her rejection of the biological reality of race itself.

Zack's account allows for a certain kind of reality for race, but it is one that is ultimately reducible to the collected *identifications* of others, which in turn sets the context in which we choose our individual *identities*. This is effectively a kind of elimitavism (a rejection of the reality of race), inasmuch as what little reality this view grants to race is always already a *mistaken* one. Race is "real" as a cultural reality, but only because we *falsely* take it to be real in the more important, biological sense. There seems to be operant within Zack's account two kinds of reality: the *really* real, which has to do with the *facts* about race revealed by the natural sciences, and then there is the merely *culturally* real, which has to do with our *beliefs* about the really real. Zack's prescription for rejecting race (and *purifying* our identities) cannot be understood as the elimination or destruction of a real (biological) category, but rather must be conceived of as an affirmation of and witnessing to a *lack* of reality. In short, it seems that the conflation of reality as such with the natural sciences continues to operate within Zack's argument.

Another common approach, and one which grants a more robust status of "reality" to race, is to understand it as a "social construct." On this view, race exists as a real, though socially contingent and context dependent, category. There are rules for racial designation

that are culturally specific, and may vary over time, but at a given time and in a given place, one's racial designation cannot be purely subjectively determined. One can, in other words, not only be wrong about the ascription of racial membership to others, but also to oneself. To be sure, these rules for racial designation may be vague in various ways (as the growing literature on "mixed race" will attest),[4] and differ from place to place and time to time, but in general, claims about racial membership have a real truth value in relation to the rules of racial designation within that specific context. In this way, they have a degree of objectivity – my race is not simply up to me. Charles Mills has offered one of the best articulations of this general view, which he refers to as "racial constructivism" (47). Some Continental philosophers of race have sought to provide an even more robust theoretical account of race as this kind of "constructed" reality.

In his first major work, *Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism*, Lewis Gordon used Sartrean existentialism (and especially the concept of "bad faith" from Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*) to provide just such an account of racial reality. Bad Faith, at its heart, is a kind of self-deception – a flight from responsibility and from one's freedom.[5] Sartre offers numerous examples, but in general bad faith takes the form of an attempt to convince oneself that one is either completely determined by one's situation or that one is completely independent of that situation. The applications of this Sartrean concept to race are quite useful. The racist sees her value and the value of others as *determined* by racial membership. She is virtuous, intelligent, or trustworthy *because* she is White, while they are none of those things *because* they are Black. But what does Sartrean bad faith tell us about racial ontology?

One crucial aspect of Gordon's account for the present purposes is his distinction between what he refers to as "strong" (individual) and "weak" (institutional/social) bad faith (*Bad Faith* 45–8). "Strong" bad faith in a racial context is the individual choice to view oneself as either completely separate from one's racial situation (pure transcendence), or as completely determined by it (pure facticity). The latter might take the form already mentioned in which one sees oneself as inherent virtuous simply as a result of *being* White (in which case one is not responsible for that virtue). The former might take the form of a denial of the role that race, or the history of racism, has played in one's life. It is "strong" because it is manifest in a particular

individual, and targets a specific group or individual. "Weak" bad faith, on the other hand is more diffuse. It may be understood as a kind of "background milieu" which supports, fosters, and legitimates the "strong" bad faith of particular individuals. Its "weakness" lies not in the fact that it is somehow a lesser manifestation of bad faith (as we shall see, the opposite is often more accurate), but in the fact that it cannot be specifically pinned down or located in any particular individual or set of individuals. To avoid confusion, I will refer to this latter form of bad faith as "institutional."

In order to see more clearly how institutional bad faith functions in relation to individual ("strong") bad faith, take, by way of example, the informal segregation of housing markets. The institutional bad faith in this example would be the ways in which racial demographics correspond to housing values, interpretations of the dangerousness of a given neighborhood, the perceptions of those neighborhoods by larger institutions such as media, law enforcement, government, business, and so on. Any individual agent acting within this milieu can appeal to these different manifestations of institutional bad faith in order to avoid explicitly acknowledging or confronting his or her own individual bad faith. The real estate agent isn't racist, he is simply responding to the desires of his clients. The potential buyer isn't racist, she is simply responding to the "realities" of the market. In short, the normative claims and assumptions made by individuals can be cloaked in a vast array of "built-in" symbols, meanings, and norms, while each individual act of bad faith within this context serves only to further entrench and legitimize this background. Thus, individual and institutional bad faith are dependent upon and influence each other. Individual manifestations of bad faith generate institutional bad faith, and institutional bad faith in turn inculcates, legitimates, and reinforces institutional bad faith.

Race itself can thus be understood as a manifestation of institutional bad faith. Its *reality* is a matter of its symbolic and interpretive power. Racial statements, racial terms, racial identities, racial analyses, and so on all have meaning only within that context of institutional bad faith. And this is, importantly, independent of any particular individual will. To illustrate this point, I'll use the example of communication. Suppose I have a habit formed in my youth in rural Indiana of using the word "boy" as a term of endearment ("Boy, you're crazy!" or "That boy can shoot some serious pool"), and that I *intend*

only to communicate familiarity and affection by its use. But if I apply that term to a Black man, the meaning is fundamentally altered in a way that is *real*, and *independent* of my intent. This change in meaning is a matter of a shift in the *racial* context in which it is employed. Racial *reality* in other words has impinged itself upon my communicative practices in a way that will doubtless have real consequences for me and my interlocutor(s). This reality, in turn, is strictly a matter of the collected history, formal and informal rules, and symbolism (in short, the milieu), that give race the meaning it has in this time and this place. Thus the concept of race itself, as a kind of background milieu of bad faith, is contingent upon, but something more powerful than, the choices and beliefs of individuals (precisely because the choices and beliefs of individuals are conditioned by and interpreted through the structures of this background of bad faith), and that is the source of its reality.

None of this is to say, however, that race is independent of human beliefs or actions. Race could not exist, even as institutional bad faith, without human beings undertaking the kinds of actions, choices, and interpretations that give meaning and power to it. But at the same time, the content of race as a concept is not simply up to the choices or beliefs of any particular individual. Indeed, one could argue that any individual denial of racial reality would be a further manifestation of bad faith, in that it evades the ways in which race conditions one's own life and one's interactions with others. If I deny that I am White because I believe that races are ultimately illusory, or nonsense, or otherwise less-than-real, then I am rendering myself blind to the ways in which Whiteness operates in my life (both positively and negatively). To treat all people, including myself, as if race didn't exist is effectively saying that it is truly irrelevant, which is, from this Sartrean perspective, a convenient way to avoid taking responsibility for one's racial position. It is analogous to simply denying that one is American when traveling abroad because "American" is *merely* a social construct. One can contest the reality of race, but one cannot in good faith deny it outright, even if its reality is socially contingent. It is more than simply the sum of individual beliefs (identifications), because it is partially *responsible* for those beliefs.

Part of what motivates the racial elimitavists is the very laudable goal of challenging racism. From their perspective, racism, which is undeniably real, is predicated upon (mistaken) beliefs about

the biological reality of race. If those beliefs can be disproved, then the proverbial rug will be yanked out from under racism. The implicit claim here is clearly that race is logically prior to racism. The existentialist approach offered by Gordon argues that this claim is mistaken. It isn't that the racist discovers races and then attaches normative content to racial categories after the fact. Rather, the bad faith of racism *generates* races, and employs that concept to legitimate the racist's social and political aims. This is not to say that racism is logically prior to race either. They are co-dependent moments in a very complex and convoluted social phenomenon with a long and rather murky history. The institutional bad faith of race relies upon individual manifestations of bad faith for its continued existence, but those individual manifestations are only possible (and intelligible *as racist*) within the context of institutional bad faith that gives them meaning and power in the first place.[6] What must be stressed, however, is that this insistence on the reality of race brings with it a rejection of the logical priority of race over racism. The claim – that eliminating or rejecting race ontologically will undermine racism as a social phenomenon – treats these two things as distinct in a way that cannot be sustained.

Before turning to the question of colorblindness, another possible response to some of the approaches to racial ontology should be explored. Specifically, I would like to examine the distinction between race and ethnicity. Linda Martín Alcoff has approached this issue by paying specific attention to Latina/o identity in North America, and with a particular emphasis on the way in which *visible* signifiers of race (and gender) play a vital role in identity construction and expression.[7] "Race," she allows, is understood both to be a questionable biological category and also to be homogeneous. But neither of these claims about race apply very well to the case of the peoples of Latin America.[8] Ethnicity, on the other hand, "builds on cultural practice, customs, language, sometimes religion, and so on" ("Is Latina/o Identity a Racial Identity?" 315). It is supposed, in other words, to be more explicitly cultural and less biological. One could argue, therefore, that *race* is not real, but *ethnicity* is real, and the confusion is a matter of *conflating* race with ethnicity. But this particular response is inadequate, Alcoff argues, inasmuch as ethnicity in North America has been "racialized." She states: "[Latinas/os] have been shut out of the melting pot because we have been seen as racial

and not merely cultural 'others' " (331). Attempts to portray a particular group as "ethnic" rather than "racial" have been thwarted, in other words, by the persistence of racial identification on the part of a dominant group (in this case "whites" or "Anglos"), who continue to constitute a collection of individuals (from Latin America) as a *race* that is fundamentally "other. "The force of race, according to Alcoff, emerges along four axes: the color axis, the physical-characteristics-other-than-color axis, the cultural-origin axis, and, in the cases of Asian Americans and Latinos, "nativism" (*Visible Identities* 259). The position of Latinas/os in North America is such that they are persistently racialized along all four of these axes, she contends. To be sure, the *visible* axes are most pernicious and most potent, but racial reality does not simply reduce to these visible signifiers so readily (259). Race is thus something impossible to simply explain away. Alcoff contends that for all its contingency and cultural specificity, race "dogs our steps" ("Is Latina/o Identity a Racial Identity?" 332), and exerts a kind of ontological force that can only be confronted, never evaded. Rather than offering a plausible means to deny the reality of race, the study of the intersection of race and ethnicity actually further demonstrates the reality and potency of race, in that race has, in this case, effectively taken over an ethnic category.

At this point the importance of these ontological issues for the question of colorblindness should be readily apparent. Even if there should be some kind of biologically justified notion of racial membership, it could not correspond directly to the dominant cultural/political use of the term both historically and in the present. Whatever supports the notion of race, it is not, and has never been, *good science*. The question of colorblindness, therefore, must of necessity revolve around the kind of *reality* race might have beyond the purely biological. If one could reject the reality of race altogether, then colorblindness would most definitely be a viable ideal. To hold that race is contingently real, however, need not obligate one to reject the ideal of colorblindness. It may very well be desirable to work to bring about a world in which race is *no longer* real, even if it happens to be real at the present. In addition to attending to the ways in which one's ontological positions impact the question of colorblindness, it is also important to explore the way in which one's approach to the question of colorblindness informs one's ontological positions. When the ontological positions are so contentious, and so underdetermined

by biological science, the plausibility of those positions may have more to do with one's intuitions regarding colorblindness than anything else. That is, if my political intuitions are strongly sympathetic to colorblindness, then I am more likely to be persuaded by elimitavist arguments. I am not claiming that one's ontological position is *determined* by one's political views in this case. Rather, my point is that when there is a lack of decisive evidence one way or the other, one is likely to be more readily persuaded by those arguments which are most consistent with one's political views. Just as one's ontological position impacts one's take on colorblindness, one's position on colorblindness can impact one's view of racial ontology. In what follows, it will be important to bear this reciprocal relationship between colorblindness and ontology in mind.

## "Colorblindness"

Given the variety of positions on racial ontology, what is the best way to approach the question of colorblindness? There are two distinct, though interrelated, dimensions of this question. The first has to do with the function of colorblindness as a *practice*. Given the current racial climate, is colorblindness even possible for any given individual? Furthermore, if it is possible, is it indeed the best way to resolve the political problems that arise within a context that pervasively "sees" race? The second dimension has to do with colorblindness as an ideal toward which our racial politics ought to strive.[9] Would a racially just society necessarily be a colorblind society? These two questions are distinct insofar as one could consistently hold that colorblindness is inadvisable as a current practice, but nevertheless aim toward colorblindness as an ultimate ideal for racial justice. As was the case with racial ontology, contemporary Continental philosophers have taken a variety of different positions on these questions.

Given Naomi Zack's rejection of race altogether, it seems to follow that she would endorse colorblindness both in practice and as an end goal. "A racialized person," she states, "cannot effectively resist racism from within a racialized identity" ("Race, Life, Death" 104). Of course, this does not mean that one should *pretend* that others do not identify one as a particular race nor does it mean that one must refuse to take into account how others tend to be identified racially. Our

*identity*, according to Zack, is the way in which we understand our own selfhood and agency, and thus to incorporate external identifications used to enforce and legitimize systematic oppression and exploitation into our identity is to choose to cripple that agency. "Racialized persons," Zack concludes, "have to remove from themselves external identifications about their biology and culture which would, if incorporated into their identities, be impediments to their agency" (105). This rejection of racialized identity is *not*, Zack stresses, the same thing as "wanting to be white," however. If the rejection of racialized identity is understood as wanting to be white, then *whiteness* would be nothing more than the absence of racialized identifications. Whiteness, in this sense, would therefore just *be* the absence of race, and as such would be a laudable goal for anyone (106). A desire to be white could also be a desire for racial privilege (or at least a mitigation of racial disadvantage), or a desire to assume the role of oppressor, and in this sense it would merit moral disapprobation. The difference is that one understanding of whiteness equates it with a racial position of superiority while the other equates it with a *lack* of racial identification altogether. The former is a further manifestation of racism that Zack rejects, while the latter is a kind of colorblindness that she endorses.

Thus, for Zack, "race" exists as nothing more than a long-standing and powerful myth used to justify practices of exploitation and oppression, and the goal of liberation is in part to arrive at a future in which *race* becomes a meaningless concept. The goal, in other words, just *is* colorblindness. At the same time, Zack holds that this goal cannot be reached so long as individuals continue to accept racial identifications as part of their identity. We can "see" color *as* something that is *imposed* upon ourselves and others, but this imposition must ultimately be rejected – and most especially it must be "purged" from our subjective identity (I can recognize that I am identified in a racialized way, but I must never accept that identification when I construct my identity). Our acknowledgement of racial identification, therefore, should extend no further than an explicit critique and rejection of that identification. Beyond that, we should be "blind" to race. Any acceptance of race into our identity, even if it is intended as a challenge to racialization, only serves to lend credence to the myth of race. Thus, Black Pride is ruled out, even though it is an effort to challenge racist oppression, because it accepts

racial categories even as it tries to alter their normative content. Freedom, Zack contends, is race-less, and thus a commitment to human freedom, both as an ideal and in practice, requires colorblindness in the here and now as a rejection of racialization.

Zack's position is tenable, however, only if one accepts her effectively elimitavist position. If one holds that race has a reality beyond mere the third person ascriptions of racial identification, then colorblindness becomes self-deception, rather than liberation. What is more, Zack seems to understand "identity" as entirely self-determined – she offers a hard and fast distinction between *external* identifications and *internal* identities. But what if this distinction is not so neat and clear, or perhaps even collapses altogether. The distinction between self and other has been a frequent theme of Continental philosophy, and it is often the target of critique. Even Sartre, in his later works, understood the self to be deeply and inescapably conditioned (though not determined) by the larger social context into which it is thrown. Indeed, if we take the earlier discussion of institutional bad faith seriously, we can see the way in which this external" context conditions my subjective intentions, meanings, and actions in ways that are not necessarily consistent with one's intentions. In short, this makes Zack's project of "purifying" one's identity incoherent from the start – which in turn renders her prescription of colorblindness, at least as a current practice (if not as an ideal), highly problematic. I will turn now to a thinker who has addressed exactly this issue.

In her book *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition*, Kelly Oliver explores the question of colorblindness in light of her critique of the politics of recognition (147–68). Oliver opens her discussion of colorblindness with a critique of the *visual* metaphor that preserves a hard distinction between subject and object. By presuming that individuals are at complete liberty to choose whether or not to *see* some aspect of the world around them, the rhetoric of colorblindness "denies and ignores the affective implications of seeing race in a racist society" (159). By way of example, she points out that well-intentioned people may often equate *racial* "colors" (white and black) with non-racial colors (green and purple), in claiming, for instance, that they do not care whether someone is black, white, green, or purple. Such a formulation "denies the social significance of color and the history of racism by treating socially meaningful colors on par with colors without a social history and meaning" (159). By making this

rhetorical equivocation, and portraying the reality of race as something individually chosen in the act of *voluntarily seeing* different "colors," racism is reduced to a purely individual (as opposed to social) problem. The injustices of racism thus become the result of those misguided individuals who choose to see races (instead of seeing "just human beings"), and the socially institutionalized aspects of racism can thus be ignored (160–1). This has the further result of dismissing not only acts of racism but also *experiences* of racism as manifestations of paranoia or self-serving appeals to victimhood (playing the "race card"). Oliver's point is that race has a reality that resists individual efforts to see or not see it (largely, she argues, because the visual metaphor itself is misleading and should be abandoned), and so colorblindness cannot be an adequate response to that reality. Ultimately, Oliver argues, "Colorblindness is a symptom of racism" (166). By reducing racism to individual weaknesses and pathologies, and then enjoining those individuals to simply refuse to "see" race, the all-too-real social manifestations of racism are left wholly unchecked.

It seems clear from her discussion of colorblindness that Oliver rejects it as a current practice. The answer to problems of racial justice is not to render oneself blind to difference and reduce individuals to featureless social atoms. Rather, according to her,

> working-through the pathology of racism requires "seeing" and embracing the responsibility for the ability to respond – the responsibility to witnessing and witnessing subjectivity – even and especially in our blind spots. (168)

In other words, our relations with others need to take our real differences, whether they be biological or social, into account if we are to take seriously the agency of another not merely as abstractions (*any* person), but as concrete particular agents (*this* person). In other words, race inevitably conditions our identities, and to attempt to ignore this fact is to blind ourselves to its influence in ourselves and the world around us. Thus, rather than striving as much as possible to "not see" race, we ought rather to attend closely to the ways in which we do "see race," and the ways in which this racial vision impacts our own lives and the lives of others.

Lewis Gordon makes a similar point when he points out that colorblindness, and political liberalism in general, make a critical mistake when they attempt to overlook *otherness* as such. "Otherness," he points out, is a category shared by all "selves. "The problem with racism is not that it treats certain individuals as if they were *other*, but rather that it treats certain individuals as if they were *sub*-other (*Existentia Africana* 85). Colorblindness in practice, therefore, becomes an evasion of an important "social reality," the impact of which "is ontological; it transforms concepts – knowledge claims – into lived concepts, forms of being, forms of life" (84). This social reality cannot, according to Oliver and Gordon, be altered by turning a "blind" eye toward it.

Colorblindness in practice, accordingly, must be rejected. First, if one rejects the claim that race is logically prior to racism, then simply refusing to acknowledge races will not challenge racism or eliminate its pernicious effects. Second, if who we are as individuals is not radically distinct from our social context and if our social context is deeply racialized, then ignoring race amounts to a kind of (often convenient and comforting) self-deception. So what *ought* we to do if the immediate practice of colorblindness is rejected? Foremost, it should be noted that the recognition or acknowledgement of the reality of race does not entail the endorsement or affirmation of that reality (at least not in its present form). That is, one can accept *that* race is real and powerful without accepting that it ought to be real (or ought not to have this character) or exert this kind of power. This means that rather than comporting oneself in a manner consistent with colorblindness, one ought to instead work to *make* racial reality and its functioning *explicit* both individually and institutionally. This would include insisting on the historical and contingent character of that reality. The institution of race functions at once to give race reality and power and to obscure the nature of that reality and power. Opening these operations to scrutiny would not eliminate them, but it would compel people to take an explicit stance in relation to them.[10] In other words, in striving to understand and openly confront the reality and function of race in ourselves and in our institutions, we do more to challenge racism than we could if we practiced colorblindness.

Of course, these analyses do not offer decisive responses to the issue of colorblindness as an ideal. Even if colorblindness should turn out to be ineffective as a *means* for achieving racial justice, it might

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nevertheless be possible to conceive of the ideal state of racial justice as one in which *race* itself is no longer seen, precisely because it either has ceased to exist altogether (if one understands its reality to be socially contingent), or because it has lost its political/cultural significance (if one understands its reality to be in some way socially independent).

On the one hand, one might argue that any actual racially ideal state would be one in which race, whether it still exists or not, could not function in any way similar to the way it presently functions. In other words, even if we continued to "see race," it would not be the same races, with the same "forms of being, forms of life" as we presently understand them. It might function in the same way that we "see" insignificant physical differences in the present. That is, the difference between being one race or another might be understood in the same way that I can see that Bob has thicker hair than Phil. In a world in which hair-thickness has no political or moral relevance whatsoever, we can still recognize differences in hair-thickness; they are just not relevant unless we are shopping for hair product. From this point of view, race would function, in an ideal state, in exactly the same way. We would "see" differences in pigmentation, facial structure, and so on, but they would utterly lack the significance that they presently possess. One way to understand this condition would be as "race-less," and the people in this state as "colorblind," even though there might still be "races" in some purely descriptive sense, and people could still see "color" in the same way that they see any number of politically insignificant physical differences. Whether or not this can be understood as "colorblindness" becomes merely a matter of semantics.

On the other hand, even if the ideal state were one in which the political and moral significance race were dramatically different, a case might be made that colorblindness would not and ought not to be the functional norm. This is a matter of the degree to which one takes race to be a significant aspect of *identity*, and is related to discussions of the extent to which racial assimilation is actually a process of "whitening." It depends, in other words, upon whether one believes that the ideal state of racial justice would be one in which there were no racial identity whatsoever. The underlying idea is that one might want to preserve racial notions of identity even in conditions where the current political/moral significance of race is nil. This view is in part

motivated by the worry that identity in a "race-less" world would be a *de facto* white identity. The proponent of colorblindness might point out that if race were *truly* insignificant in the political arena, then what would be the point of incorporating it into one's identity? This in turn raises the question of the role of history. In this hypothetical future state, there may not be a racial landscape politically, but one certainly would have existed in the past, and my racial membership would situate me in relation to that history in a manner that could be significant for my identity. One can see this view informing Frantz Fanon's desire to "assert" himself not as a human being in the abstract, but "as a BLACK MAN" (114–15), and in Sartre's description in *Anti-Semite and Jew* of the liberal "democrat" as one who "saves the [Jew] as man and annihilates him as Jew" (56). From this perspective, the proponent of colorblindness as an ideal is assuming a sharp distinction between history and identity in order to prescribe a race-less identity, despite a long history of significant racial difference. If one rejects that distinction, then the case for an ideal of colorblindness becomes less appealing.

Both of these responses, however, take for granted the idea that the goal of our actions in response to racism can properly be understood as an *end state* at all. Is race, in other words, something that can ever be completely laid to rest, put behind us, or otherwise understood to be over and done with? Is "racial justice" properly understood as an end state to be achieved? A strong case can be made that it is not. Consider, by way of example, the explicit admonition to "never forget" the Nazi Holocaust. To be sure, anti-Semitism remains a serious problem both in North America and elsewhere, but the argument is not that we ought to remember the Holocaust so long as anti-Semitism persists, but that we ought *never* to forget. The remembrance, therefore, is not understood as a conditional means to some ideal end state, but rather as an important and *on-going* project. Our actions and interactions must continue to be understood *in light* of the events of the mid-twentieth century, or else we run the risk of missing some of the significance of those actions and interactions. We can never, in other words, arrive at some end state in which the Holocaust may be forgotten. Similarly, one might argue that we ought not to become "blind" to race, no matter how ideal our society may become, for similar reasons. The significance of race, or the Holocaust, may change over time, and may even be

reduced, but it remains a hugely significant feature of our history, both as individuals and as a society, and perhaps this significance should always be remembered. This argument is linked in important ways to the argument offered by Oliver and Gordon that colorblindness in practice obfuscates certain important aspects of social reality. The complacency that would come with colorblindness as an ideal state would make conditions ripe for a surreptitious return of racism – for any given individual in a situation where race is no longer seen, it would be difficult to recognize the (re)emergence of racism should people begin to stray from the ideal.

If colorblindness is rejected both in practice and as a political ideal, what then *ought* we to be envisioning as a blueprint for racial justice? Though a fully adequate response to this question is beyond the purview of the present essay, I would offer some modest suggestions. First and foremost, the idea that racial justice can be understood as an end state or a finite goal must be abandoned. Racial justice is about *how* we interact both on an institutional and an individual level. As such, it requires not a single plan or prescription but an ongoing *process* of negotiation, renegotiation, critique, and reform. This will require us to take race seriously as we attempt to root out its effects on our own identity, on the identity of others, on our religious, cultural, and political institutions, and in our histories. On an institutional level, this requires not just blindness to color, but a critical sensitivity to the reality of race and its impact on issues of justice. By "critical sensitivity" I mean not a passive acknowledgement or affirmation, but a public recognition that can, when it is warranted, challenge the present state of affairs or interpretation of history. On the individual level, what is required is exactly the same sort of critical sensitivity. I cannot pretend that race has had no impact on my life, nor can I simply accept that impact as if it were a law of nature. I cannot pretend that race has no influence over the way I interact with others from the same race or from different races, but neither can I simply accept this influence as inevitable and immutable.

We need, in other words, to openly *contest* those aspects of racial reality that are unjust, but not to deny that reality altogether, nor condemn it *in toto*. In practice, this can range from challenging racist jokes to pointing out a racial bias in news reports to organized political action. One ought to neither accept nor deny racial reality, and one's efforts to challenge that reality ought to be performed in

such a public way that they invite others to confront racial reality as well. Through this constant *process* of openly contesting racial reality, and not in some ideal race-less end state, lies our hope for superseding racism.

## Short Biography

Michael J. Monahan is Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Marquette University, where he works in social and political philosophy and philosophy of race. His publications include an article on racial authenticity in *Philosophia Africana* 8.1, titled "The Conservation of Authenticity: Political Commitment and Racial Reality."

## Notes

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1. Of course, it is a separate move from the biological reality of race to the imputation of any normative content to that reality. That is, it is one thing to say that there are White people, and another thing entirely to say that White people have specific moral, intellectual, or political virtues *as Whites*.

2. In such a case, saying that there are White people is akin to saying that there are birds. Both are broad categories of biological description into which individuals may or may not fit. Some creatures are birds, some creatures are not. Some people are White, some people are not.

3. This is true only since the shift from what Ernst Mayr has referred to as "typological" thinking (which makes an original appeal to innate characteristics *essential* to a particular species *as such*), to "population" thinking (which begins with the observation of unique individuals and generalizes from those individuals to particular species). A definition of race, for example, based upon genetic variation across relatively discreet populations, would be a manifestation of "population thinking." See Mayr 38–47; Smedley 303–10.

4. For example, see Kwan and Speirs.

5. In addition to Sartre and Gordon, see also Schroeder 221–8; Bell 26–47.

6. The significance of this can be seen by means of a thought experiment. Suppose one were to behave in a manner typical of a virulent racist toward a target that is not, in any typical sense of the term, oppressed. Let's say, for example, that Steve truly hates engineers, and wishes to see them rounded up and confined to reservations. Steve could shout anti-engineer slogans, deface the homes and offices

of engineers, distribute anti-engineer literature on campus, and so on. How would Steve's actions impact the engineers he targets? How would they impact engineers *as a group*? How would the general public understand Steve's position and actions? It seems clear that the answers to these questions are strikingly different in this case than they would be if Steve were an anti-black racist carrying out an anti-black agenda. And that is because the larger social context lends a power and meaning to the racist's actions that are absent when Steve simply decides that he hates engineers. That is the difference that institutional bad faith can make.

7. Alcoff, "Is Latina/o Identity a Racial Identity?"; *Visible Identities* 179–204; "Toward a Phenomenology of Racial Embodiment." This latter anthology is a particularly rich resource for treatments of race and racism within a broadly "continental" context.

8. Indeed, the exact boundaries of "Latin America," the understanding of who counts as being properly *from* Latin America, and what to call such people, are all hotly contested. See Gracia 1–43, 88–129.

9. For example, the journal *Race Traitor* states that it is working "toward the abolition of *Whiteness*." See the editorial "Abolish the White Race" 9–14.

10. For a discussion of this point in relation to racial authenticity see Monahan.

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