



## Who Is a “Racist?” An Original Analysis

If, as Eric Holder claims to want, we have ourselves an honest discussion of race, then we should determine, or at least try to determine, what it means for one to be a “racist.”

### **Is a “Racist” One Who Has Certain Types of Thoughts?**

“Thoughts” aren’t necessarily *beliefs*. Fantasies, sensations, emotions — in short, perceptions of all types, are thoughts. To experience thoughts isn’t automatically to believe in those thoughts.

That a person’s thoughts are an insufficient basis for judging his character can easily be gotten from an infinite number of examples from everyday life. A person who fantasizes about being a hero is no hero until he actually acts heroically — and even then, as Aristotle would be quick to note, the true hero isn’t just one who acts heroically; the hero is he who habitually acts heroically. In any case, there is all of the difference between imagining oneself a hero and acting like one. Conversely, one who only thinks about ripping off the head of the person who cuts him off on the highway, or, say, imagines himself killing the lowlife who raped and murdered one of his loved ones is no killer until he actually kills.

Similarly, whatever a “racist” thought might be, he who has such thoughts is no more a “racist” than is the person a killer who merely has thoughts of killing another.

### **Is a “Racist” One Who Holds Certain Types of Beliefs?**

For the same reason that thoughts generally can’t establish character, neither can thoughts that are beliefs do so. A person is what he does. The familiar objection that beliefs are the basis of actions can be met by one very simple reply: It simply ain’t so.

First, it is not at all uncommon for the average person to have any number of beliefs that he never acts upon. As even his star pupil Plato recognized, Socrates was wide of the mark when he sought to account for wrongdoing in terms of ignorance of the good. All too frequently, we act wrongly in spite of knowing that we are acting wrongly. We act contrary to our beliefs, for the old Enlightenment fiction notwithstanding, human beings are not logic-chopping machines.



Second, even if it was true that our beliefs are always the basis of our actions, any belief can lead to more than one possible kind of action.

For instance, the belief that animals are inferior to humans need not motivate its holder to treat animals unkindly. It could — and, as we know from experience, it more frequently than not *does* — drive the believer to go to great lengths to make sure that animals are protected. The believer in animal inferiority could be an “animal lover” or an “animal hater.” For that matter, his belief could lead him to be altogether indifferent toward animals.

Similarly, a white person who believes in, say, the inferiority of blacks could *support* or *oppose* “affirmative action,” Jim Crow, slavery, reparations for slavery and Jim Crow, “historically” black colleges and universities, etc. Such a person could believe that while blacks are inferior to whites, it is precisely because of this that whites have a responsibility to care for blacks, to provide them with opportunities that they otherwise wouldn’t have left to their own resources.

Or a white person who believes in, for instance, the moral *superiority* of blacks may be moved to either a murderous envy or an admiration that propels him to seek out the company of blacks for instruction (or redemption).

But notice, in all of these examples, it is the actions that follow from the beliefs, not the beliefs themselves, that elicit opprobrium or approval. Actions are praiseworthy or blameworthy, while beliefs are true or false. If one is immoral for holding a false belief, then all of us are immoral, for there isn’t one among us who hasn’t entertained false beliefs. But if all of us are immoral for holding false beliefs, then we are still left wondering what is so distinctively objectionable about false beliefs that are “racist.”

Of course, one may contend that only some false beliefs — say, those beliefs of a moral nature — are immoral. “Racist” beliefs could fall into this category. And one could further argue that such false beliefs are the function of a corrupt character.

This, sadly, will not do.

In fact, it even proves the point that it is not beliefs, but actions, that are moral or immoral, for a corrupt character is nothing other than a vicious character, i.e., a character that is the product of *acting* viciously.

### **Is a “Racist” One Who Acts in Certain Ways?**

If anyone can be said to be a “racist,” then, it is he who acts in certain ways. The question that remains, however, is in what ways can we expect for the “racist” to behave?

To judge from the popular manner in which the “racist” is spoken of, it would seem that the “racist” is he who treats, or aspires to treat, the members of other races cruelly, or at least more cruelly, than he treats those of his own race.

Now, is the “racist” despicable because he acts cruelly and it is always despicable to treat others cruelly, or is the “racist” despicable because he acts cruelly toward the members of other races and it is always despicable to treat the members of other races cruelly?

If the first, then it is cruelty that is objectionable and the cruel person’s reasons for acting cruelly are logically and morally irrelevant. If the latter, then we’re left wondering why cruelty grounded in racial animus is somehow more egregious than cruelty springing from other considerations. Is the man who beats his wife to death because of his possessiveness somehow less despicable than one who hurls



racial epithets at a stranger?

Presumably, the “racist” is despicable because his cruelty is wildly irrational. Race, so goes the conventional wisdom, is as trivial a characteristic as is a birthmark. But if this is what makes the “racist” so despicable, then it isn’t the racial, but the *irrational*, character of his cruelty that offends our sensibilities.

This, though, can’t account for our revulsion to the “racist,” for it is far from obvious that the moral and the rational are one. And even if they were, why is the “racist’s” irrationality supposed to be so much worse than that of anyone else?

### **If One Is a “Racist” Due to One’s Actions, Then Must These Actions Be *Habitual*?**

During the Bill Clinton impeachment proceedings, Dan Rather was asked if he thought Clinton was a “liar.” He replied that he did not. Rather explained that a lie on this or that occasion does not a liar make, for the liar is he who lies as a matter of course, as a matter of habit.

One of the oldest ethical traditions of the West is the same tradition that, in some form or other, informed as well the ethical thought of other civilizations. It is called “virtue ethics.” Confucius is among its most notable proponents in the East, Aristotle in the West. The idea here is that morality is a matter not primarily of observing rules, but of developing one’s character, developing virtuous habits: We are what we (habitually) do.

With this in mind, we can revisit Rather’s general point. If a person who lies only once or only on the rarest and most extraordinary of occasions cannot properly be judged a liar, then is it so that a person who acts cruelly toward the members of other races only once or on the rarest and most extraordinary of occasions cannot properly be judged a “racist?” In other words, is it not more accurate to say of such a person that while his actions in this or that circumstance are “racist,” he is not a “racist?”

Now, suppose that a person does habitually act cruelly toward the members of other races. Does this establish that he is a “racist?” Not necessarily.

“Racism” is an “ism.” Like every other “ism,” it is, ostensibly, a creed or doctrine that tolerates no competitors. For the “racist,” *his* race trumps all other considerations; his loyalty is first and foremost to his race.

Suppose, for example, a white man dislikes blacks and goes out of his way to treat individual blacks cruelly (whatever this might entail) but has no problems with any other race. Maybe he is even in awe of, say, some Asian groups. While this makes such a man a cruel man, and perhaps even a “racial” man, does it make him a “racist” if it is only one other racial group that he dislikes?

Think of it this way. The true individualist is one who elevates his creed, his individualism, above all else, including his family. As such, the individualist, if there is any such thing, is a most unenviable figure. The lover of individuality, on the other hand, is a different sort of figure altogether, one who recognizes that his individuality need not and does not conflict with his other attachments and, in fact, is constituted by them.

Similarly, maybe the white person who acts on his dislike for blacks while showing respect and even reverence for other races is not a “racist” but, say, an affirmer of “*raciality*.”

Even this analogy, however, may not be sound, for while the proponent of individuality loves his individuality, the person in our example who dislikes blacks but respects other races may not have any special affection at all for his own race. He may not even be a lover of his own “*raciality*.”



Written by [Jack Kerwick, Ph.D.](#) on August 15, 2013

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Toward that honest discussion of race that Eric Holder says he wants, I pose these questions. To my knowledge they have never been raised. Sadly, I don't expect that the Holders of the world will pay them any mind.



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