

# Racism as Civic Vice\*

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I argue that racism is essentially a civic character trait: to be a racist is to have a character that rationally reflects racial supremacist sociopolitical values. As with moral vice accounts of racism, character is my account's primary evaluative focus: character is directly evaluated as racist, and all other racist things are racist insofar as, and because, they cause, are caused by, express, or are otherwise suitably related to racist character. Yet as with political accounts of racism, sociopolitical considerations provide my account's primary evaluative standard: satisfying the sociopolitical standard of racial supremacy is what makes racist character racist.

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Like any other embodiment of social and material interest, peculiar to a given community, slavery generated its own sentiments, its own morals, manner, and its own religion; and begot a character in all around it, in favor of its own existence.<sup>1</sup>

## I. A PUZZLE ABOUT RACISM

Here I propose and defend a novel analysis of the concept of racism: namely, that racism is essentially a civic character trait. The analysis highlights the role of civic agency (including but not limited to participation in social movements) in perpetuating or countering racially unjust social structures. It also incorporates insights from competing accounts and introduces distinctions that resolve disagreements between proponents of these accounts.

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1. Frederick Douglass, "Speech on the 23rd Anniversary of Emancipation in the District of Columbia" (1885), manuscript/mixed material, retrieved from the Library of Congress, [www.loc.gov/item/mfd.24010/](http://www.loc.gov/item/mfd.24010/), 49.

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Consider the disagreement about whether racism is primarily a moral vice of individuals (like cowardice, cruelty, or unfriendliness) or, instead, primarily a political feature of social structures (like inequality or injustice).<sup>2</sup> Both accounts capture genuine insights and yield some plausible results.

Prima facie reasons to understand racism in terms of character (or lack thereof) include the following. First, racists, like cowards, the cruel, and the unfriendly, exhibit a wide variety of characteristic mental states, including thoughts, feelings, and intentions. Racists do not merely, and perhaps need not at all, accept certain theories or behave in certain ways, but they do tend to notice and imagine certain distinctive things (and not others) and experience certain distinctive emotions (and not others). Second, becoming racist—like becoming cowardly—involves developing habits: of thought, feeling, perception, and action.<sup>3</sup> As with many or all moral virtues and vices, these habits are plausibly culturally inculcated.<sup>4</sup> Third, the huge variety of racist things—including jokes, crimes, motivations, thoughts, people, symbols, practices (and the traditions they are housed in), interpretations of history, public policies, corporate policies, algorithms, and governments—and the diversity of types of racism within each category (e.g., demeaning, paternalistic, homogenizing, and dehumanizing racist jokes) warrant despair about finding a simple yet substantive principle that codifies racism.<sup>5</sup> Plausibly, “racism” is not univocal but rather a core-dependent homonym centered on character: just as things

2. For defense of the moral vice account, see J. L. A. Garcia, “The Heart of Racism,” *Journal of Social Philosophy* 27 (1996): 5–46; J. L. A. Garcia, “Current Conceptions of Racism: A Critical Examination of Some Recent Social Philosophy,” *Journal of Social Philosophy* 28 (1997): 5–42; J. L. A. Garcia, “Philosophical Analysis and the Moral Concept of Racism,” *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 25 (1999): 1–32; and J. L. A. Garcia, “Three Sites for Racism: Social Structures, Valuings, and Vice,” in *Racism in Mind*, ed. Michael Levine and Tamas Pataki (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004), 35–55. For critiques emphasizing the importance of sociopolitical exploitation to racism, see Tommie Shelby, “Is Racism in the ‘Heart’?,” *Journal of Social Philosophy* 33 (2002): 411–20; and Charles Mills, “‘Heart’ Attack: A Critique of Jorge Garcia’s Volitional Conception of Racism,” *Journal of Ethics* 7 (2003): 29–62. Garcia construes character noncognitively and volitionally. As I explain in Sec. V, I assume a more psychologically holistic view of character.

3. Shannon Sullivan, *Revealing Whiteness: The Unconscious Habits of Racial Privilege* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006); Linda Martín Alcoff, *Visible Identities: Race Gender, and the Self* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 184–204; Terrance MacMullan, *The Habits of Whiteness: A Pragmatist Reconstruction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009); and Eddie Glaude, *Democracy in Black: How Race Still Enslaves the American Soul* (New York: Broadway, 2016), 51–70.

4. On how cultural tradition and historical narrative facilitate internalizing and understanding virtue and vice, see Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981); and Lorraine Code, *Epistemic Responsibility* (Hanover, NH: Brown University Press, 1987).

5. Lawrence Blum, “I’m Not a Racist, but . . .”: *The Moral Quandary of Race* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002). Blum defends a disjunctive account of racism.

are healthy insofar as they reflect, contribute to, exhibit, or stand in other suitable relations to the health of persons, things are racist insofar as racist persons would characteristically have, do, express, endorse, partake in, or stand in other suitable relations to them.<sup>6</sup> Fourth, being racist involves lacking moral virtues, like kindness or justice. We care about whether we are racist partly because we care about whether we are morally flawed and how our flaws poison relations with others.

However, there are also strong *prima facie* reasons to believe that racism is fundamentally sociopolitical.<sup>7</sup> First, the heart of racism—perhaps even of the very concept of race—is plausibly the racial supremacist distribution of political and civic rights, as well as social, cultural, and economic capital, implemented by state-sanctioned exploitation and violence.<sup>8</sup> This is a problem for moral vice accounts of racism because moral vices are logically independent of both highly contingent sociopolitical relations (such as racial supremacy) and beliefs about such relations.<sup>9</sup> Second, unlike moral vices, individual racism is not restricted to one sphere of life or opposed to only one moral virtue. Individual racism is in this respect unlike, say, cowardice (a failure, opposed to courage, in the sphere of risking personal harm in pursuit of a greater good) and irascibility (a failure, opposed to mild-manneredness, in the sphere of attitudes to personal insults and damages).<sup>10</sup> Indeed, it often involves cowardice and irascibility, as well as injustice, dishonesty, unfriendliness, stinginess, and ill-humoredness, among other moral vices that enable racial oppression. Third, analyzing racism in terms of moral vice plausibly mischaracterizes our concern about what might seem to be minor moral

6. Christopher Shields, *Order in Multiplicity: Homonymy in the Philosophy of Aristotle* (New York: Clarendon, 2003).

7. Kwame Ture [Stokely Carmichael] and Charles V. Hamilton, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation* (New York: Random House Vintage, 1967); Robert Blauner, *Racial Oppression in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972); Joe Feagin, *Systemic Racism: A Theory of Oppression* (New York: Routledge, 2006); Clevis Headley, "Philosophical Approaches to Racism: A Critique of the Individualistic Perspective," *Journal of Social Philosophy* 31 (2000): 223–57; and Tommie Shelby, "Race and Ethnicity, Race and Social Justice: Rawlsian Considerations," *Fordham Law Review* 72 (2004): 1697–1714.

8. Charles Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997); Louise Derman-Sparks and Carol Brunson Phillips, *Teaching/Learning Anti-racism: A Developmental Approach* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1997); Sally Haslanger, "Gender and Race: (What) Are They? (What) Do We Want Them to Be?," *Noûs* 34 (2000): 31–55; Sally Haslanger, "Racism, Ideology, and Social Movements," *Res Philosophica* 94 (2017): 1–22; and Paul Taylor, *Race: A Philosophical Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Malden, MA: Polity, 2013), 88–90. I sketch an account of racial supremacy in Sec. III. However, I do not provide or presuppose any particular account of race in this article. Rather, what follows is compatible with various accounts of race and/or racialized groups.

9. Headley, "Philosophical Approaches to Racism," 223, 244–45.

10. Martha Nussbaum, "Non-relative Virtues: An Aristotelian Approach," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 13 (1988): 32–53.

transgressions, like privately telling racist jokes. Such behaviors are bad not merely because they are unfriendly or because they disrespect or disregard their targets' personhood (though they may do that), but also and perhaps more centrally because and insofar as they reflect racial supremacist sociopolitical norms.<sup>11</sup> But it would be surprising if the central features in virtue of which an instance of racism is bad were inessential to its being an instance of racism. If racism is bad, then, plausibly, it is bad mainly because of what makes it racist.<sup>12</sup> So, there is reason to believe that racism is primarily a sociopolitical, not merely a moral, ill.

In short, there is a puzzle. It is plausible that racism is primarily psychological (i.e., character), but also that it is primarily sociopolitical (i.e., racial injustice or racial supremacy).

Rehabilitating the old idea that some virtues and vices are civic, not moral, resolves this puzzle.<sup>13</sup> All character develops from within social practices. But unlike moral character traits, which are dispositions that either are intrinsically morally good or make one fit to pursue moral aims, civic character traits are defined by the guiding sociopolitical values of particular communities. Each kind of civic virtue—e.g., democratic, oligarchic, aristocratic—comprises that set of moral and technical capabilities that renders their possessors fit for their roles under the relevant sociopolitical regime. So, good democratic citizens, say, have character traits—including toleration, judicial impartiality, respect for autonomy, and active sociopolitical participation—that would ill suit citizens of a monarchy. Louis XIV would send the American democratic hero Fannie Lou Hamer directly to the Bastille.

Racial supremacy is a sociopolitical system defined by racial supremacist sociopolitical values, and racism is its corresponding civic "virtue." (The scare quotes in this paragraph and below signify both that I reject

11. Indeed, when racist jokes are unfriendly or disrespectful, it is often because of the political content they express. Thus, people who deny the present-day existence of racial oppression are often perplexed by social pressures against what seem to them at most minor discourtesies, social pressures that enforce so-called political correctness.

12. For contrary views, see Blum, *"I'm Not a Racist, but . . ."*, chap. 1; and Tommie Shelby, "Racism, Moralism, and Social Criticism," *Du Bois Review* 11 (2014): 57–74, 70.

13. Blum examines civic virtue and civic identity in "Racial Virtues," in *Working Virtue: Virtue Ethics and Contemporary Moral Problems*, ed. R. Walker and P. Ivanhoe (New York: Clarendon, 2007), 225–50; "Race, National Ideals, and Civic Virtue," *Social Theory and Practice* 33 (2007): 533–56; and "Antiracist Moral Identities, or Iris Murdoch in South Africa," *South African Journal of Philosophy* 30 (2011): 440–51. But he does not claim that racism is civic vice.

On civic virtue, see Stephen Macedo, *Liberal Virtues: Citizenship, Virtue, and Community in Liberal Constitutionalism* (New York: Clarendon, 1990); Richard Dagger, *Civic Virtues: Rights, Citizenship, and Republican Liberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Robert Audi, "A Liberal Theory of Civic Virtue," *Social Philosophy and Policy* 15 (1998): 149–70; Philip Pettit, *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), chap. 8; and William A. Galston, "Pluralism and Civic Virtue," *Social Theory and Practice* 33 (2007): 625–35.

racial supremacist standards of civic virtue and that I remain agnostic about whether civic virtue must be consistent with moral virtue.) Being an “excellent” racial supremacist citizen involves having a character that would make one civically vicious according to racially egalitarian sociopolitical standards.<sup>14</sup> Racists in a racial supremacy are “good” citizens for such an unjust community, which requires that they be bad people.<sup>15</sup> For being in accord with racial supremacist norms—that is, having civic “virtue” in that context—requires having moral vices.

This account resolves the puzzle by making both character and sociopolitical norms fundamental to racism, albeit fundamental in different ways. Character is fundamental in that what is directly evaluated as racist is character, and all other racist things are racist insofar as, and because, they cause, are caused by, express, or are otherwise suitably related to racist character. However, the sociopolitical is also fundamental, since the standard against which character is judged as racist is the sociopolitical standard of racial supremacy, including especially racial supremacist conceptions of the sociopolitical values of equality, freedom, justice, and the common good. Marking this distinction allows us to integrate the genuine insights of the two competing accounts discussed above.<sup>16</sup>

To be clear, the truth of the civic trait account does not depend on the motivation I have just given for discussing it. Even if my puzzlement or my satisfaction with its supposed resolution is misguided, this account of racism merits consideration. Although it is distasteful to call racists “good citizens” (of racial supremacist communities), doing so encourages us to focus our inquiries about racism, and our anti-racist outrage and remedial efforts, on the sociopolitical values and structures that racists are habituated to endorse and maintain rather than merely on their moral vices.

14. In what follows I do not attempt to explain what makes racism unjust or vicious, nor do I here defend any theory of justice or civic virtue. Rather, I attempt merely to explain what makes something racist, and I deny that such an explanation requires an account of what makes racism unjust or immoral. I assume that any plausible theory of justice or civic virtue can offer some plausible account of the injustice or immorality of racism. For these reasons, the civic character account of racism does not define racism in terms of a corresponding civic virtue. I am grateful to Sally Haslanger and two other (anonymous) associate editors at *Ethics* for raising this methodological issue.

15. Citizenship in such a polity is not necessary for being racist, any more than citizenship in a monarchy is necessary for being a monarchist. Racial supremacist norms merely fix the meaning of “racism.” Moreover, the civic character account allows that victims of racism may include noncitizens.

16. So, I agree with Benjamin Mitchell-Yellin, who argues that we should transcend the dialectical gridlock between moral and political accounts of racism, which he characterizes thus: “The moral view claims that the analytical buck stops, ultimately, with individual attitudes and the political view claims that it stops with basic social institutions” (“A View of Racism: 2016 and America’s Original Sin,” *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy* 13 [2018]: 53–72, 65). But whereas Mitchell-Yellin eschews all explanatory or “analytic” primacy with respect to racism, I multiply bucks to stop.

Likewise, it encourages us to identify individual-level civic remedies that undermine institution-level racial supremacist exploitation and oppression and institution-level remedies that promote civic virtue.<sup>17</sup>

This civic-virtue-centered approach to racism parallels and complements recent and fruitful epistemic-virtue-centered approaches to understanding social injustice.<sup>18</sup> In epistemology, this sociopolitical “virtue turn” involves focusing on features of intellectual agents and the communities that produce and enable them; here I focus on features of civic agents in relation to their communities. Thus, conceptualizing racism as a civic (not moral) vice—and the bearer of that vice as an “excellent” member of a certain kind of civic community—demonstrates that virtue-centered approaches to racism need not be objectionably moralistic or individualistic.<sup>19</sup>

One of this article’s contributions, I hope, is bringing together the literatures on civic virtue and racial supremacy. So, in what follows, I first sketch accounts of civic character (Sec. II) and racial supremacy, identifying racism as the racial supremacist civic “virtue” (Sec. III). Adapting a familiar distinction from normative ethics, I then elaborate on the two ways in which something can be fundamental to racism and argue that both character and racial supremacy can be primary (in different senses) to racism (Sec. IV). I then defend this account’s focus on character (Sec. V) and identify reasons to prefer this account to Tommie Shelby’s somewhat similar political ideology account of racism (Sec. VI). I conclude with remarks about the illuminating power of the civic trait account (Sec. VII). Throughout, I focus on racism in the United States.<sup>20</sup>

## II. CIVIC VIRTUE

Civic virtue is traditionally understood as the disposition to prioritize public ends (or, the common good) over private or sectional ends.<sup>21</sup> Aristotle’s nautical analogy remains civic virtue’s most illuminating illustration:

17. Alex Madva, “A Plea for Anti-anti-individualism: How Oversimple Psychology Misleads Social Policy,” *Ergo* 3 (2016): 701–28. On how institutional design can foster civic virtue, see Stephen Macedo, “The Constitution, Civic Virtue, and Civil Society: Social Capital as Substantive Morality,” *Fordham Law Review* 69 (2000): 1573–93.

18. Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); and José Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and Resistant Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

19. For such concerns about Garcia’s account, see Mills, “‘Heart’ Attack.”

20. On the historical role of racial supremacy vis-à-vis US civic ideals, see Rogers M. Smith, *Civic Ideals: Conflicting Visions of Citizenship in U.S. History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997).

21. Shelley Burt, “The Good Citizen’s Psyche: On the Psychology of Civic Virtue,” *Polity* 23 (1990): 23–38; and Bert van den Brink, “Civic Virtue,” in *The International Encyclopedia of Ethics*, ed. Hugh LaFollette (Oxford: Blackwell, 2013), 779–86.

Just as a sailor is one of a number of members of a community, so, we say, is a citizen. And though sailors differ in their capacities (for one is an oarsman, another a captain, another a lookout, and others have other sorts of titles), it is clear both that the most exact account of the virtue of each sort of sailor will be peculiar to him, and similarly that there will also be some common account that fits them all. For the safety of the voyage is a task of all of them, since this is what each of the sailors strives for. In the same way, then, the citizens too, even though they are dissimilar, have the safety of the community as their task. But the community is the constitution. Hence the virtue of a citizen must be suited to his constitution. Consequently, if indeed there are several kinds of constitution, it is clear that there cannot be a single virtue that is the virtue—the complete virtue—of a good citizen. But the good man, we say, does express a single virtue: the complete one. Evidently, then, it is possible for someone to be a good citizen without having acquired the virtue expressed by a good man. (*Politics* 3.4.1276b19–35)<sup>22</sup>

Civic virtues are multifarious (3.4.1277a6–11), for different kinds of communities set different public ends; different constitutions have different offices to fill and different roles for citizens to play; within each community are various jobs, which the community shapes and partly defines; and, finally, citizens differ in personal and social capacities, and so in what they can do for their community.<sup>23</sup> Nonetheless, they are all, as citizens, tasked with defending and advancing the community, including especially the projects of their state's constitution.<sup>24</sup> Having civic virtue involves being disposed in one's particular civic roles to carry out such civic mandates excellently.

Since many possible constitutions are practically incompatible, good citizens under different constitutions will have different civic virtues. But completely good people all share the same set of moral virtues. For having moral virtue is, following Aristotle, exercising one's rational and reason-sensitive practical capacities in accordance with the internal standards of those capacities. In an ideal city, the good man and the good citizen are the same; in a nonideal city, they are not (Aristotle, *Politics* 3.5.1278a40–b3). For one might be disposed to excellently carry out the mandates of a nonideal constitution without being disposed to excellently exercise one's practical capacities generally. So, excellent citizens might not be excellent people. One can clearly carry out or enforce an unjust system of education or property rights, for instance, without possessing the moral

22. Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. C. D. C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1998).

23. Jean Roberts, "Excellences of the Citizen and of the Individual," in *A Companion to Aristotle*, ed. G. Anagnostopoulos (Oxford: Blackwell, 2009), 555–65, esp. 557–58.

24. This is not to deny that noncitizens—including permanent residents, visa holders, and undocumented immigrants—may advance the state's projects.



virtue of justice. Indeed, it is difficult to see how a good person could carry out such unjust projects.<sup>25</sup>

In Aristotle's view, the virtue of citizens is to protect their community, and the community is its constitution (*Politics* 3.3.1276b1–12).<sup>26</sup> In a democracy, for example, the virtue of citizens is protecting democracy. I apply this framework to racism, which I analyze as a disposition to protect racial supremacy. In doing so, however, I diverge from several of Aristotle's substantive moral and political views, such as political naturalism and the rejection of democracy.

I also diverge from his apparent view that the relevant communities are distinguished solely by features of their governing states (i.e., "constitutions"), such as the criteria for holding state office. I define the relevant communities, somewhat stipulatively, as all of the essential—and constitutive—features of sociopolitical systems. Thus, they include not just the state but also cultural and economic institutions, as well as classifications of individuals into social kinds.<sup>27</sup> This conception of sociopolitical communities, as well as the conception of racial supremacy discussed shortly, draws heavily on Charles Mills's characterization of White supremacy as a sociopolitical system.<sup>28</sup> As Mills notes, this expanded conceptualization of the political realm is inspired by, and consistent with, feminist claims that the political domain extends beyond state power and violence, and even beyond the public sphere, and includes social practices as subject to political critique. It similarly follows Marxist claims that the political domain encompasses, in addition to state activities, economic and

25. David Keyt ("The Good Man and the Upright Citizen in Aristotle's *Ethics* and *Politics*," *Social Philosophy and Policy* 24 [2007]: 220–40) argues that, in Aristotle's view, morally good people and merely good citizens may sometimes act differently, such as when morally good people refuse to educate children in accordance with the false conceptions of equality and freedom of their state's deviant constitution. However, see Roberts, "Excellences of the Citizen."

26. Note that preserving the constitution is not equivalent to preserving the status quo. In Aristotle's view, justice tends to preserve cities. Thus, insofar as the status quo endangers the city, preserving the constitution may require making it more just. See Roberts, "Excellences of the Citizen," 557, 561–63.

27. Indeed, a sociopolitical system may conflict with the state's constitution and even with its citizens' conception of it. Citizens of a racial supremacy, e.g., might believe (falsely) that they live under a racially egalitarian democracy.

28. Mills emphasizes that, besides its juridico-political dimensions, White supremacy has economic, cultural, cognitive-evaluative, somatic, and social ontological dimensions. My account of racism is a model of the cognitive-evaluative dimension of racial supremacy. See Mills, *Racial Contract*; Charles Mills, "White Supremacy," in *Blackwell Companions to Philosophy: A Companion to African-American Philosophy*, ed. Tommy L. Lott and John P. Pittman (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 269–81; Charles Mills, "White Supremacy as Sociopolitical System: A Philosophical Perspective," in *White Out: The Continuing Significance of Racism*, ed. Ashley Doane and Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (New York: Routledge, 2003), 35–48; and Charles Mills, "Racial Exploitation," in *Black Rights/White Wrongs: The Critique of Racial Liberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 113–35.



cultural activities that are properly understood only by positing social kinds ("classes").

I now turn to specifying the defining values of the sociopolitical community for which racist citizens are suited.

### III. RACISM AS RACIAL SUPREMACIST CIVIC "VIRTUE"

Racial supremacy is a sociopolitical form. Its defining project is domination and exploitation, construed broadly to include outright exclusion and extermination, with adverse impacts on racial groups that differ from that of the ruling class.<sup>29</sup> Racial supremacist political values are conceptualized accordingly, perhaps as post hoc rationalizations: the common good is conceptualized in terms of the interests of the racialized ruling class, conceptions of freedom center on the liberty rights of this class, political equality is conceived primarily as a relation among members of this class, and the scope of justice is understood as significantly or entirely restricted to this class.

A racial supremacist state, comprising or serving those who benefit most from the domination, recognizes (or organizes the population into) a set of racial groups, R1, R2, R3, and so on, such that nearly all members of the governing and capital-owning classes of society count as R1s. (Such organization may, as in the United States, include forced importation of peoples.) R1s grant themselves political and legal rights and privileges that they withhold from other racial groups, including rights to exploit or plunder members of other groups. Such a hierarchy is racial, rather than, say, class based, because racialization enables either the very fact of exploitation or a higher degree of exploitation than would otherwise be possible.<sup>30</sup> Again, state-sanctioned violence is customary for achieving these goals.<sup>31</sup> R1s typically protect their legal right to transmit to their descendants the resulting ill-gotten gains, even (or especially) if their legal rights to plunder are curtailed.

To be clear, such domination is not merely economic, or always behavioral. Domination includes noneconomic inequalitarian and undemocratic relations between members of different racial groups.<sup>32</sup> Racially

29. As mentioned in note 8, the following is compatible with various accounts of race and/or racialized groups. For a useful discussion of civic ostracism, see David Haekwon Kim and Ronald R. Sundstrom, "Xenophobia and Racism," *Critical Philosophy of Race* 2 (2014): 20–45.

30. Mills, "Racial Exploitation," 122–23.

31. Myisha Cherry, "State Racism, State Violence, and Vulnerable Solidarity," in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy and Race*, ed. Naomi Zack (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 352–62.

32. Elizabeth Anderson, "What Is the Point of Equality?," *Ethics* 109 (1999): 287–337; and Christopher Lebron, "Equality from a Human Point of View," *Critical Philosophy of Race* 2 (2014): 125–59.

stigmatizing and disrespectful attitudes, say, directly constitute racial domination, even if these attitudes are not expressed publicly. Moreover, even with behavior, not all facilitation of, or conformity to, racial supremacy is causal. A legislator, for example, might indeed be causally related to racial supremacy (they shore it up). But a comedian who casually uses racial slurs might (also) be noncausally related to racial supremacy (they express its characteristic evaluative perspective).<sup>33</sup>

There are many types of racial supremacy, including types that map onto more familiar constitutional forms. Such types depend on (roughly) the distribution of political and legal rights and sociopolitical roles among R1s. In racial supremacist (or “*herrenvolk*”) democracies, R1s have equal political and civil rights and equality of opportunity, while R2s and R3s have lesser status. In racial supremacist monarchies or oligarchies, though, such rights and opportunities are distributed differentially, even among R1s.<sup>34</sup>

The civic “virtue” relative to racial supremacy is the cognitive, conative, and behavioral disposition to conform to norms of racial supremacy. It involves cognitive and conative attitudes—including intentions, emotions, desires, and beliefs—that rationally reflect judgments endorsing racial supremacist conceptions of the common good, freedom, equality, and justice. It thus disposes one to excellently facilitate racial domination in whatever social roles one performs and with whatever personal capacities one has. Racism is this civic “virtue.”

This account of racism has considerable explanatory power. It explains the many degrees and varieties of racism. As with all virtues, the threshold for possessing the full civic “virtue” of racism is plausibly set at the overachiever’s exemplary level. Moreover, it is traditional, and plausible, to claim that fully virtuous action—that is, action done in the way characteristic of the virtuous person—requires that one (i) acts knowingly, (ii) acts for reasons that one is aware of, and (iii) (roughly) chooses these actions because they are virtuous.<sup>35</sup> The first requirement, applied to the civic “virtue” of racism, excludes from being fully racist what is done out of ignorance, error, or inadvertence. Things done unintentionally, such as some instances of racial insensitivity or discomfort, are thus plausibly not fully racist actions or expressions of racism (though, as I

33. Elizabeth Camp, “Slurring Perspectives,” *Analytic Philosophy* 54 (2013): 330–49.

34. Racial supremacy is also compatible with sociopolitical forms that restrict full community membership along other lines, such as class, gender, or species. See Carole Pateman and Charles Mills, *Contract and Domination* (Malden, MA: Polity, 2007); and Sue Donaldson and Will Kymlicka, *Zoopolis: A Political Theory of Animal Rights* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

35. This claim draws on parts of Aristotle’s famous account of the necessary agent-conditions of virtuous action in *Nicomachean Ethics* 2.4.1105a30–33. (I omit discussion of the condition that one acts from a firm state of character.)

explain below, they may still be racist). The second requirement entails that actions produced without awareness of the racial supremacist bearing of one's reasons are not fully racist, just as generous acts done without consciousness of the generosity-related reasons for doing them are not done generously. The third condition entails that fully racist actions must be chosen because they are racist. This excludes from being fully racist some racially unjust or insensitive activity, such as what is chosen exclusively for reasons of avarice.

Nonetheless, those who are not fully racist sometimes act, think, feel, or desire as the fully racist characteristically do, and, contrary to some theorists, the threshold for such activity to be characteristically racist may be quite low.<sup>36</sup> Just as, for example, the threshold for an action being generous may be low enough that even stingy persons occasionally meet it, the threshold for an action being racist may be low enough that even sincere self-proclaimed racial egalitarians occasionally meet it.

Furthermore, any member of the polity can be fully racist, provided that their character rationally reflects racial supremacist sociopolitical values. Thus, even a powerless R1 bigot can be racist,<sup>37</sup> and likewise with respect to merely acting in the way that fully racist people characteristically act. For example, R3s will act in a characteristically racist way if they help R1s to dominate R2s and/or fellow R3s.<sup>38</sup>

However, occupants of different civic roles instantiate racism differently. For what counts as racism varies with one's civic role, just as what counts as a sailor's nautical virtue depends on their role in securing a safe voyage. Racist parents are disposed to help children acquire habits of affection and aversion that express or facilitate racial domination. Racist educators are disposed to help students grasp or develop racial concepts and refine their racial understanding of the world, by attending to certain truths while ignoring others, and by learning sophisticated

36. Blum, "I'm Not a Racist, but . . .," chap. 1; Elizabeth Anderson, *The Imperative of Integration* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 48; and, for a critique with which I am sympathetic, Michael Hardimon, "Should We Narrow the Scope of 'Racism' to Accommodate White Sensitivities?," *Critical Philosophy of Race* 7 (2019): 223–46. To clarify, the civic vice account does not entail any particular placement of the threshold for racism, or even that racism is a threshold concept. Thus, the civic vice theorist is not particularly vulnerable to the charge of conceptual inflation (or deflation). But, although resolving these matters requires independent treatment, the account does recast the threshold issue, perhaps making it more tractable.

37. Garcia, "Heart of Racism," 13.

38. R3s who aim to dominate and plunder R1s can also be said to be racist, though not in the conventional sense for that polity. Here, the phrase "reverse racism" has a place. However, it would be morally obscene to call R3s who aim merely to end racial supremacy by rectifying and repairing historical plunder "reverse racists"—a usage of the phrase that is prevalent in the contemporary United States.

racial myths that condition belief and emotion. Racist realtors are disposed to help racially segregate residential areas or ensure differential access to quality housing (and other real property) in one area. Racist employers are disposed to help to maintain hierarchies in financial, human, and social capital through hiring, task assignment, promotion, firing, and wage discrimination. Racist laborers are disposed to harass, refuse to mentor, or lobby against the hiring of non-RIs. Racist media producers are disposed to help establish or reinforce stereotypes and ideologies that express or maintain racial hierarchy. And so on.

Being racist involves, though is not defined by, having moral vices—including injustice and malevolence, cowardice and stinginess, unfriendliness and untrustworthiness, and cruelty—that typically express or facilitate racial sociopolitical domination. Social roles in racial supremacies normalize the exercise of these moral vices. Thus, where racism is civic “virtue,” complete moral virtue requires civic “vice.” Opposition to racism is a refusal to implement or endorse racial supremacist values. So, such opposition is primarily a civic activity, even if it also has a moral justification and motivation. The famous slogan of the anti-racist journal *Race Traitor* well articulates this moral requirement and alludes to racism’s sociopolitical nature: “Treason to whiteness is loyalty to humanity.”<sup>39</sup>

As this slogan also suggests, having a character suited for a racial supremacy is not the end of the story, politically, but in some sense merely the beginning. Just as cowards can disavow their cowardice and someone with an “authoritarian personality” can transfer their allegiance to a democracy, racists can traitorously disavow their racism and ally themselves with racially egalitarian sociopolitical communities. Such transferences of allegiance might be unstable or imperfect, since they are the declarations, after all, of people with racist dispositions. And racist dispositions present obstacles for effective anti-racist civic activity. Still, these disavowals of “anti-racist racists” have political importance. (Indeed, I suspect that much public discussion of racism and many accusations of, or speculations about, public figures’ racism are really, instead, about these public figures’ allegiances to or avowals of racial supremacy.) If, as Mills argues, the United States remains a White supremacy, then such disavowals seem to be as good a place to start as any.

As I discuss in Section V.B, this account thus highlights the value of civic actions and civil institutions that support social movements for racial egalitarianism. I now return to the puzzle from Section I to explain how the civic trait account of racism solves it and to introduce distinctions that, I believe, clarify inquiry about racism more generally.

39. Noel Ignatiev and John Garvey, “Abolish the White Race—by Any Means Necessary,” in *Race Traitor*, ed. Noel Ignatiev and John Garvey (New York: Routledge, 1996), 9–14, 10.

## IV. TWO KINDS OF PRIMACY

Moral vice accounts make character conceptually primary and fundamental to racism, while political accounts make racial supremacy (or racial injustice) conceptually primary and fundamental. However, character and racial supremacy can both be primary, if we distinguish an account's *primary evaluative focus* from its *primary evaluative standard*. While the primary evaluative focus of the civic trait account is psychological (i.e., character), its primary evaluative standard is sociopolitical (i.e., racial supremacy). In this section, I discuss these two kinds of primacy and suggest that this distinction is useful for taxonomizing accounts of racism.<sup>40</sup>

In general, the primary evaluative standard of an account of some evaluative or normative concept, *C*, provides the fundamental explanation of what makes *C* things *C*—it is the ultimate standard against which things are to be evaluated as being *C*. On the other hand, the primary evaluative focus specifies the kind of object that is to be directly evaluated against the primary evaluative standard in our assessments of what is *C*. If things other than the primary evaluative focus can be *C*, then they are to be evaluated as *C* in a secondary or indirect way, by reference to the primary evaluative focus.

The distinction is familiar from debates in normative ethics.<sup>41</sup> For example, while rule, act, character, and global utilitarians agree that utility, or happiness, is the primary (and sole) evaluative standard, they disagree about whether rules, acts, or characters are the primary evaluative focus of normative (or evaluative) judgments. That is, they differ over the type of object that should be directly evaluated against the standard of utility in assessing what is right (or best). As figure 1 illustrates, according to rule utilitarianism, happiness is the primary evaluative standard and rules are the primary evaluative focus; rules are directly evaluated as happiness promoting (or not), and optimal rules are (roughly) those that, when followed, tend to maximize net total happiness. Acts, in turn, are right just when, and because, they accord with these optimal rules. So, acts (and other possible objects of assessment, like motives or entire lives) are evaluated in a secondary or indirect way, by reference to optimal rules.

40. Note that these are logically independent of a third kind, which Frederick Douglass mentions in this article's epigraph: the primary *causal* source of racism. Also worth distinguishing is the causal significance of racism, relative to other social (or natural) processes, for explaining particular facts or events. In this article I discuss conceptual, not causal, primacy.

41. Shelly Kagan, *Normative Ethics* (New York: Westview, 1997); and Shelly Kagan, "Evaluative Focal Points," in *Morality, Rules and Consequences*, ed. Brad Hooker, Elinor Mason, and Dale Miller (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), 134–53—the inspiration for my figures. Although the following illustration cites utilitarianism, similar distinctions are also, of course, commonly drawn with respect to other forms of consequentialism, as well as nonconsequentialist normative theories.

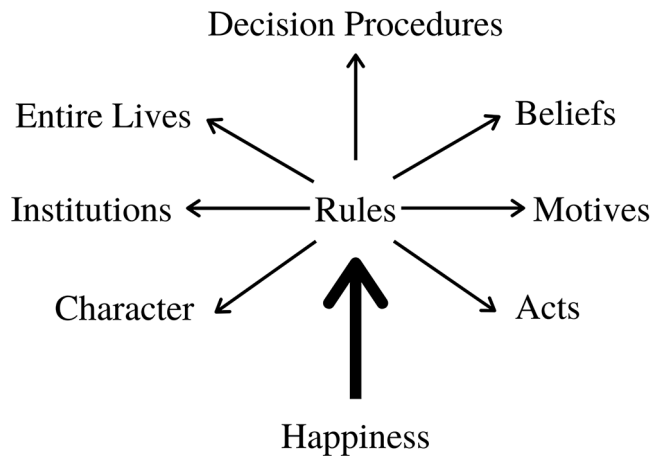


FIG. 1.—Rule utilitarianism

By contrast, according to act utilitarianism, acts are right insofar as, and because, they maximize net total happiness (see fig. 2). On this view, acts (not rules) are directly or primarily evaluated against the relevant standard, while rules (and other objects) are evaluated indirectly or secondarily (roughly, in terms of whether instituting them promotes right acts).

Again, according to character utilitarianism, character is evaluated directly or primarily: character is virtuous just when, and because, it tends to maximize net total happiness (see fig. 3). Acts and rules, in turn, are

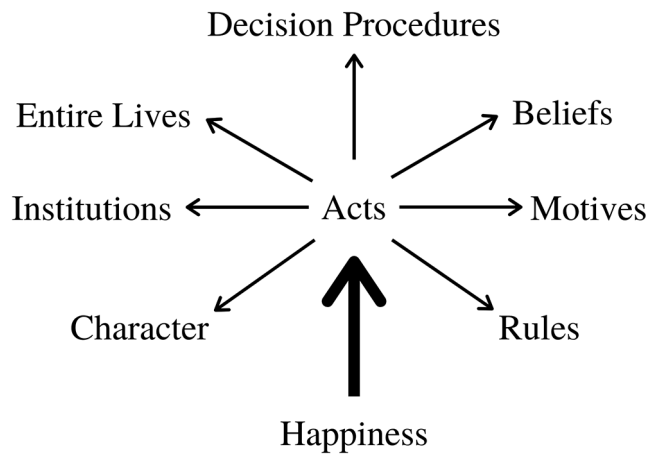


FIG. 2.—Act utilitarianism

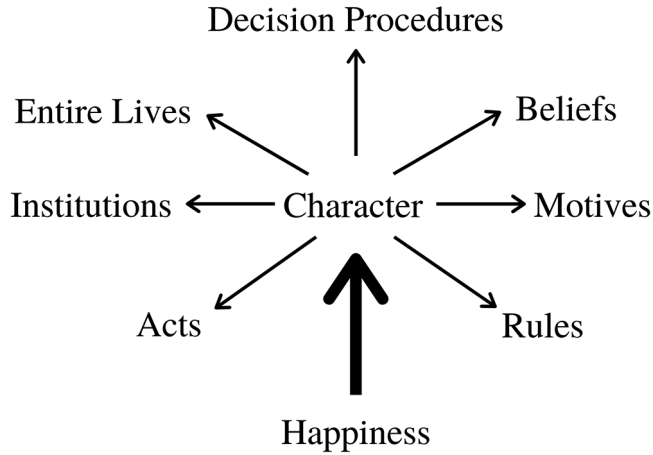


FIG. 3.—Character utilitarianism

right insofar as they express, maintain, bring about, or stand in other suitable relations to these virtuous character traits (such as being recommended or endorsed by those who have such character traits). On this view, then, both acts and rules are evaluated indirectly.

By contrast, according to global utilitarianism, all objects are evaluated directly against the standard of utility and none are evaluated indirectly in assessing rightness (see fig. 4).<sup>42</sup>

Crucially, theorists who agree about the evaluative focus often disagree about the evaluative standard. Rule utilitarians, for instance, disagree with other rule theorists, such as rule contractarians who deny that utility provides the sole moral evaluative standard (see figs. 1 and 5).

Likewise, the primary evaluative standard of an account of racism provides the fundamental explanation of what makes racist things racist, while the primary evaluative focus of an account of racism concerns which objects are directly racist. The civic account of racism agrees with institutional and structural accounts that the primary standard against which something is evaluated as racist is sociopolitical (see figs. 6 and 7, the latter of which leaves unspecified the precise sociopolitical standard used).

However, the civic character account agrees with moral character accounts (see fig. 8, which leaves unspecified the precise moral standard used) that only character is directly racist. Actions, motives, beliefs, and even institutions are racist indirectly or secondarily, insofar as and because they are suitably related to the character trait of racism. Character

42. Philip Pettit and Michael Smith, "Global Consequentialism," in *Morality, Rules and Consequences*, ed. Brad Hooker, Elinor Mason, and Dale Miller (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), 121–33.



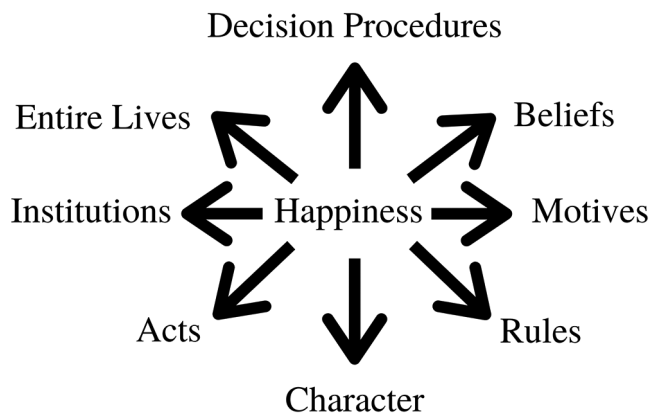


FIG. 4.—Global utilitarianism

accounts reject competing accounts' focus on acts,<sup>43</sup> beliefs,<sup>44</sup> attitudes (like hostility or indifference),<sup>45</sup> noncognitive volitional states (like desires and wishes),<sup>46</sup> and institutions,<sup>47</sup> as well as global accounts that eschew any primary evaluative focus.<sup>48</sup> In Section V, I defend this character focus.

Although moral vice accounts of racism correctly focus on character, they misidentify the standard that makes racist character racist. Aristotelian moral vice accounts of racism, for instance, identify personal ill will based on racial considerations as the evaluative standard of racism. Civic character accounts need not deny that ill will based on race is necessary or sufficient for racism. They merely deny that this moral quality, rather than a sociopolitical one, explains why instances of racism are racist.

So, just as the distinction between primary evaluative standards and primary evaluative foci shows that utilitarian theories and virtue theories of normative ethics are compatible (since a utilitarian virtue theory is possible), it also shows the compatibility of sociopolitical theories and vice theories of racism (since a civic vice theory is possible).

43. Michael Philips, "Racist Acts and Racist Humor," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 14 (1984): 75–96.

44. Kwame Anthony Appiah, "Racisms," *Anatomy of Racism*, ed. David Theo Goldberg (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), 3–17.

45. John Arthur, *Race, Equality, and the Burdens of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 14.

46. Garcia, "Heart of Racism," 6–7, 12–13.

47. Headley, "Philosophical Approaches to Racism."

48. Joshua Glasgow, "Racism as Disrespect," *Ethics* 120 (2009): 64–93.

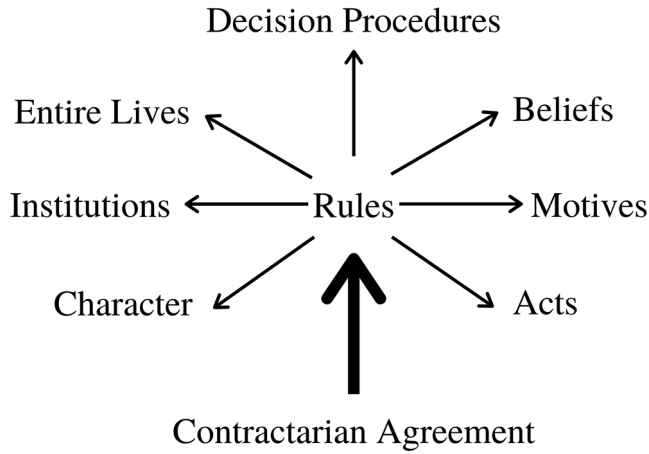


FIG. 5.—Rule contractarianism

I have said that indirectly racist objects are indirectly racist because they cause, are caused by, express, or are otherwise suitably related to racist character. Thus, there is no one substantive “indirectness” relation (represented in the figures by thin arrows); rather, like health, racism is a core-dependent homonym. Suitable relations to civic character include expressive relations and relations of endorsement (e.g., an attitude being racist because it expresses racial condescension; a joke being racist

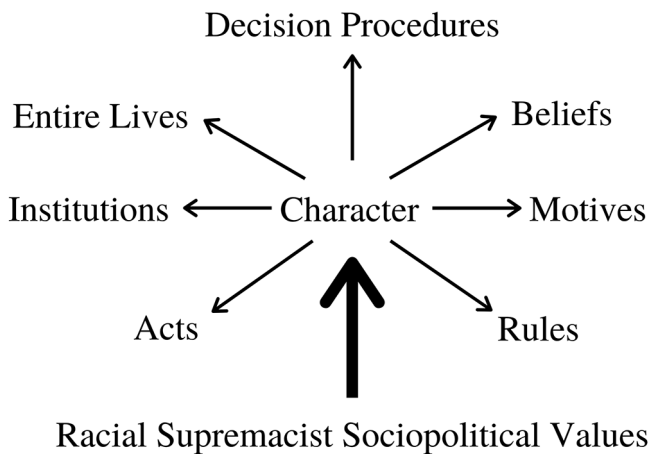


FIG. 6.—Civic character account of racism

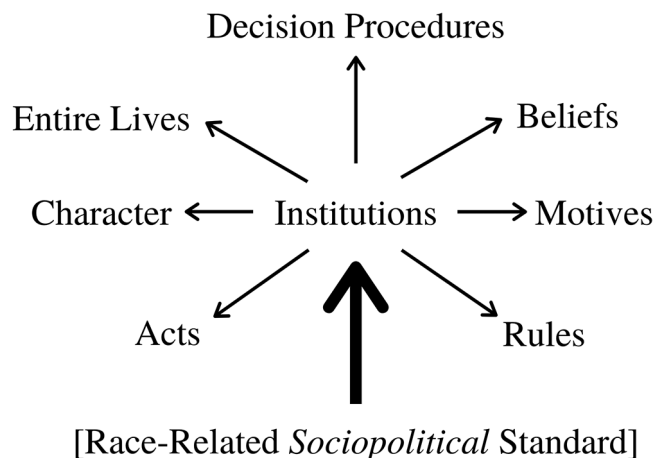


FIG. 7.—Institutional account of racism

because racists qua racists characteristically find it funny<sup>49</sup>). This marks a departure from some accounts, like Garcia's moral character account, according to which indirectness relations are always causal. (Act utilitarianism also typically employs causal indirectness relations. By contrast, rule utilitarianism's indirectness relation is typically noncausal, namely, rule-accordance.)

Finally, the thick arrows in the figures represent the role that the evaluative focus plays with respect to the standard of evaluation. The role is the respect in which the focus is evaluated against the standard.<sup>50</sup> Unlike character utilitarianism, according to which character is evaluated in the causal role of tending to maximize happiness, the civic character account evaluates character in the noncausal role of rationally reflecting racial supremacist sociopolitical values. Thus, as I discuss in Section V.B, this account of civic virtue is not reductively instrumentalist. Civic virtues, on my view, are not merely those character traits that tend to cause or sustain sociopolitical systems. Rather, civic virtues are traits that rationally reflect certain conceptions of sociopolitical values. What such rational reflection amounts to in any given case depends in part on the relevant civic role, as discussed in Section II. A character that would be racist for a teacher, say, might differ from what would be racist for a police officer. This role dependency, I argued, explains much of the variety across kinds

49. The qualifier "qua racist" clarifies that jokes that everyone (including racists as such) finds funny need not be racist. Similar qualifications apply throughout the article. I am grateful to an anonymous associate editor at *Ethics* for bringing the point to my attention.

50. Toby Ord, "How to Be a Consequentialist about Everything" (unpublished manuscript).

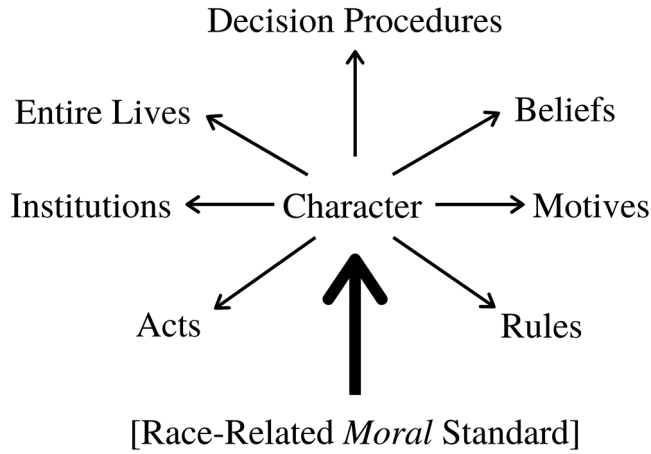


FIG. 8.—Moral character account of racism

of racism, and so the civic vice account's ability to track these differences is an advantage of the account. In general, though, civic character is racist insofar as, and because, it rationally reflects racial supremacist conceptions of the civic values of equality, freedom, justice, and the common good. A racist employs, if not also explicitly endorses, these values in regulating their reasons-responsive attitudes.

By demonstrating that many of the reasons that moral character theorists commonly give for focusing on character are consistent with many of the reasons that political theorists commonly give for employing a sociopolitical evaluative standard, the civic character account solves the primacy puzzle. These reasons constitute a *prima facie* argument for the civic character account. Furthermore, the civic character account avoids common objections to the evaluative standard that moral character theorists employ, as well as objections to the primary evaluative focus of political theorists. So, the civic character account is dialectically well placed with respect to traditional moral and political accounts of racism. It should be viewed, alongside these accounts, as a serious contender.

## V. WHY FOCUS ON CHARACTER?

In Section I, I offered several *prima facie* reasons to focus an account of racism on character: (i) racists tend to exhibit a wide variety of distinctive psychological states; (ii) their distinctive dispositions are, like character traits, the result of habituation in a cultural tradition; (iii) centering the account on character plausibly explains the diversity of types of racism; and (iv) concerns about whether we or others are racist often involve concerns about having bad character. However, also plausible is the weaker

view that while individual racism may be the civic character trait described here, individuals are not (or not the only) directly racist things. Two versions of this weaker view are worth considering here: first, that there is no primary evaluative focus (i.e., a “global” racial supremacy account; Sec. V.A); and second, that there is one primary evaluative focus, but it is social practices (or institutional structures), not character (Sec. V.B).<sup>51</sup>

First, I should clarify my assumptions about character. I assume that practical character includes dispositions to all types of activities that reflect judgments about practical reasons. Thus, character involves tendencies to have certain cognitive and conative states, tendencies to notice and act in certain ways, and even tendencies to have and use certain concepts.<sup>52</sup> I thus agree with Rachana Kamtekar’s claim that “the conception of character in virtue ethics is holistic and inclusive of how we reason: it is a person’s character as a whole (rather than isolated character traits) that explains her actions, and this character is a more-or-less consistent, more-or-less integrated, set of motivations, including the person’s desires, beliefs about the world, and ultimate goals and values.”<sup>53</sup> Cognitive and conative activities of all sorts may be marshaled to support a racial supremacy: forming intentions and desires, having emotions, holding beliefs, noticing certain things, remembering certain things, imagining certain things, and neglecting or failing to do any of these.

#### A. *Why Have Any Focus?*

Some philosophers claim that the primary evaluative focus of racism is always whatever object is evaluated as racist. Joshua Glasgow argues that accounts of racism that identify some location of racism (attitudes, behaviors, institutions, etc.) as fundamental “exclude from the domain of racism cases that occupy other locations but that are, it seems, intuitively classified as cases of racism.”<sup>54</sup> For instance, Glasgow argues that accounts that focus primarily on noncognitive attitudes such as hatred “cannot

51. Another possibility, as yet undeveloped in the literature, is that there are multiple primary evaluative foci. For instance, one might take the mutual dependence of individual agency and social structure (noted already in Plato, *Republic* 8, and, more recently, in Sally Haslanger, “Oppressions: Racial and Other,” in *Racism in Mind*, ed. Michael P. Levine and Tamas Pataki [Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004], 97–123, 122) to support a dual focus on individual character and social structure. On dual-focus theories, see Kagan, “Evaluative Focal Points.”

52. For an argument that attitudes and patterns of attention can reflect judgments about reasons, see Angela M. Smith, “Responsibility for Attitudes: Activity and Passivity in Mental Life,” *Ethics* 115 (2005): 236–71. On the reasons-responsiveness of concept possession and usage, see Rachel Fredericks, “Moral Responsibility for Concepts,” *European Journal of Philosophy* 26 (2018): 1381–97.

53. Rachana Kamtekar, “Situationism and Virtue Ethics on the Content of Our Character,” *Ethics* 114 (2004): 458–91, 460.

54. Glasgow, “Racism as Disrespect,” 80; see also Mitchell-Yellin, “View of Racism.”

accommodate nonattitudinal racist beliefs or behaviors,” such as benevolently paternalistic racist behavior.<sup>55</sup> Likewise, accounts that focus primarily on cognitive attitudes like belief cannot accommodate the racism of actions and noncognitive attitudes, such as “psychotic” racial hatred, that are unaccompanied by racist beliefs. Glasgow argues, then, that indirect accounts cannot explain all possible cases of racism—at least not without combining different locations disjunctively in an ad hoc manner.<sup>56</sup> Instead, Glasgow argues that racism, in any location, is disrespect “towards members of racialized group *R* as *Rs*” (see fig. 9).<sup>57</sup>

Is the civic character account vulnerable to Glasgow’s critique? If so, some racism cannot be explained in terms of the traits of character that rationally reflect racial supremacist values, which would be a theoretical “cost” of the civic trait account (though perhaps one worth paying, especially if there are independent grounds for regarding “racism” as polysemic). I obviously cannot attempt here to develop detailed explanations of all kinds of racism. However, in my view, the civic character account appears to explain the racism of jokes, beliefs, desires, emotions, actions, institutions, policies, and people, giving us reason to believe that this cost can be avoided. Although fully accounting for the racism of any of these things is beyond the scope of this article, and would require engaging with additional literature, let me sketch how the civic account might go about explaining the racism of jokes and of academic institutions.

Roughly, what makes some racist jokes racist is that racists qua racists find them funny—or, at least, that they are trying to be funny in creating or telling them. Slightly more accurately, a joke is racist just when and because it expresses the evaluative perspective latent in, or helps to inculcate, or stands in other suitable relations to the civic character trait fitting for citizens of a racial supremacy.

The racism of a university is a function of its traditional missions to, let us suppose, educate students and support research. If so, universities are racist, first, insofar as and because they teach intellectual and practical habits that tend to variously help students understand, overlook, or carry out tasks that express or enshrine racial supremacy. That is, racist universities help to inculcate and reinforce both the theoretical and the practical character traits that partly constitute this civic vice. Second, universities are racist insofar as, among other things, they provide institutional support for researchers who are disposed to be curious in ways that tend to express or support racial supremacies’ characteristic sociopolitical projects.

As these sketches suggest, the civic account does not require that all racist things express or reinforce hatred, contempt, or any other particular attitude. Certainly, psychological dispositions to racially targeted

55. Glasgow, “Racism as Disrespect,” 82.

56. *Ibid.*, 66, 69.

57. *Ibid.*, 81.

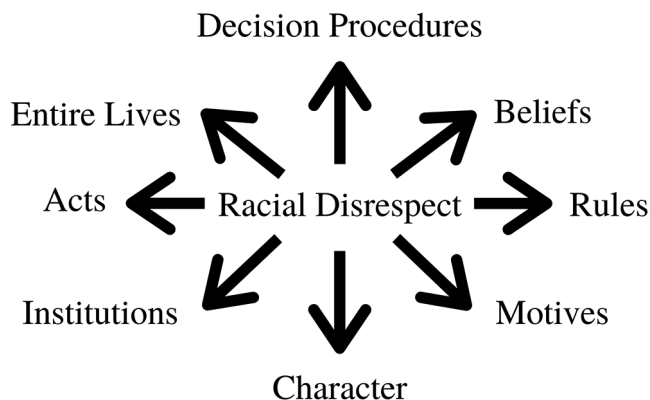


FIG. 9.—Global, moral disrespect account of racism

“benevolent” paternalism also reflect racial supremacist values. The same goes for other nonhateful (“cool”) racist beliefs or behaviors. Likewise, my account accommodates nondoxastic attitudes like “psychotic” hatred, which (insofar as they express anything) are surely one possible expression of racial supremacist civic character.

The civic account further avoids the globalist objection by rejecting the assumption that indirectly racist things are racist only because of their causal relations to what is directly racist. A racist thing can be racist merely because it reflects the values of racists, even if racists lack the power or opportunity to create or sustain it. So, it is no objection that something racist can be generated apart from racist character, or that racist character might fail to generate some racist thing.

Finally, the civic account is not ad hoc, because a focus on character unites emotions, beliefs, desires, and acts in a principled manner. These mental states, in my view, all rationally reflect evaluative judgments. A character-first approach is preferable to focusing on any subpart of character (or agency), for reasons similar to those often marshaled in the virtue epistemology and virtue ethics literature. Placing character first in the analysis enables a unified explanation of the various manifestations of racism.

#### *B. Why Not Focus Instead on Social Structures, Institutions, or Practices?*

Some philosophers accept that accounts of racism may have a primary focus of evaluation yet deny that character is the appropriate focus, especially given the sociopolitical standard of racism under consideration here.

Consider three arguments for focusing on structure rather than character.<sup>58</sup> First, I have claimed that character is racist insofar as and because it

58. I am grateful to Sally Haslanger and another (anonymous) associate editor at *Ethics* for bringing versions of these objections to my attention.



rationally reflects, and so fits one for, racial supremacy. Taking this claim at face value implies that sociopolitical structure (i.e., racial supremacy) is directly racist, and character only indirectly so. So, my labels notwithstanding, the primary evaluative focus of my account is structure, not character. (Denying this implication creates a worse problem: explanatory circularity. I claim that racist character is racist because of its relation to racial supremacy, and yet racial supremacy [being only indirectly racist] is racist because of its relation to racist character.)

Second, I have said that a person can be racist even if they make no causal contribution to racial supremacy. Moreover, it is plausible that a racial supremacy could endure owing to structural inertia even without individual racists.<sup>59</sup> So, if one's character can be causally isolated from racial supremacy, and if (as I believe) the main goal of anti-racism efforts is eliminating racial supremacy (and not minimizing individuals' racism), and if the evaluative focus should be whatever object primarily sustains racial supremacy, then there is reason to focus an account of racism on social structure rather than individual character. A third, related argument is that the major source of concern about racism and other racial wrongs is, plausibly, experiencing particular physical, psychological, economic, and dignitary harms. These harms are largely the product of social practices and not of individuals' character flaws. If the source of our concern about racism is not the character traits of racists but, rather, the social practice of racial supremacy, then, one might argue, the primary evaluative focus of racism should follow suit.

However, first, the fact that racist civic character is racist because of its relations to racial supremacy is not dispositive. "Racial supremacy" can refer either to a sociopolitical system or to the sociopolitical values and norms that such a system accords with. My claim that character is racist insofar as it reflects racial supremacy invokes the latter, more general, sense of the term. Racial supremacy, most generally, is an organizing principle or standard; on the civic vice account, it plays the same theoretical role with respect to racism that happiness (according to utilitarians) plays with respect to moral rightness (hence the extended analogy to utilitarianism in Sec. IV). Right acts being right because of their relation to happiness is consistent with acts being the primary evaluative focus. The same is true with respect to racist character and racial supremacy. The claim is not that civic character is racist because it sustains, creates, or results from racial supremacist sociopolitical systems; rather, it is that racist civic character itself has a racial supremacist form: a fully racist person endorses, and governs their mental activities and habits with, racial supremacist conceptions of sociopolitical values. Having such a character, in turn, fits

59. Haslanger, "Oppressions," 104; Glasgow, "Racism as Disrespect," 71–76.

one for living in a racial supremacist sociopolitical system. In short, racist character is racist because of its relation to racial supremacist values and not because of its relation to the racism of racial supremacist sociopolitical structures (or even to those structures themselves). For these reasons there is also no danger of explanatory circularity.

Second, causal facts about individual racism and racial supremacist social structures are also not dispositive. Some, like Garcia, do explain indirect racism (e.g., of political institutions) in terms of being the causal product of directly racist objects. But, for reasons given in Secs. IV and V.A, the civic account denies this causal requirement. So, facts about whether racist character tends to sustain racial supremacy (and/or vice versa) do not settle the question, which concerns what is conceptually—not causally—primary. Furthermore, such causal considerations do not generally determine evaluative focus. For example, rule utilitarians need not claim that socially established moral rules are especially causally important in promoting happiness. (And, indeed, even act utilitarians are perfectly free to agree with that claim.) Rather, rule utilitarians are best understood as defending a criterion of the rightness of acts (and of other objects).<sup>60</sup> The same is true, *mutatis mutandis*, in the case of racism and the civic account's focus on character.

Third, and relatedly, although the major source of our concern about racism might be harms caused by social practices and institutions, we nonetheless have reason to focus our account of racism on civic agency. For the primary evaluative focus is whatever produces an account of racism with adequate explanatory power and scope; as such, it is not a designation of paramount concern.<sup>61</sup> A civic character focus plausibly accommodates our strongest intuitions about what is racist and why. The explanatory power of the character-first approach provides a strong reason to focus on character.

However, even if accounts of racism should focus on what causally sustains racial supremacist social structures or on our paramount concern about racism, civic character would remain a plausible candidate. For civic virtue sustains sociopolitical communities. Philip Pettit identifies three reasons why institutional republics require widespread civic virtue, reasons that generalize to many nonstate social practices as well: civic virtue is necessary for (a) compliance and obedience to the law, (b) organization and articulation of the shared grievances of social groups whose

60. As Peter Railton puts it, "[rule utilitarianism's] appeal to rules in giving a criterion of the rightness of acts must not be confused with its according actual, shared rules—and their many benefits—a prominent place in moral life" ("How Thinking about Character and Utilitarianism Might Lead to Rethinking the Character of Utilitarianism," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 13 [1988]: 398–416, 399).

61. Again, following Railton: "The case of rule utilitarianism should make us wary of the idea that if one is concerned about X's, one should be an Xutilitarian" (*ibid.*, 400). For discussion of a competing criterion for determining the primary evaluative focus of accounts of racism, see Shelby, "Racism, Moralism, and Social Criticism," 63.

interests the government disregards, and (c) effective implementation of legal and other sanctioning.<sup>62</sup> The long and only somewhat successful history of struggles to institutionalize racial egalitarianism in the face of widespread White resistance strongly supports Pettit's analysis. It also supports the claim that racial supremacist civic character warrants our utmost concern. I conclude that there is ample reason to focus on character.

## VI. IS RACISM AN IDEOLOGY?

Racism is fundamentally a sociopolitical, or civic—and not a moral—phenomenon. Yet sociopolitical structure is not its primary evaluative focus. These claims are not unique to my account but also entailed by accounts of racism that center on ideology rather than civic character. How do these accounts differ, and what reasons (if any) are there for preferring the civic account?

I focus here on the work of Tommie Shelby, who argues that “racism is an ideology.”<sup>63</sup> The simplicity of this slogan notwithstanding, the ideology account is highly intricate. In lieu of a comprehensive critical discussion, this section has two limited aims: first, to illustrate how the distinctions introduced in Section IV—between the (a) primary evaluative focus, (b) primary standard of evaluation, (c) role of evaluative focus, and (d) suitable indirectness relations—usefully highlight logically independent dimensions of Shelby's account; and second, to argue that the civic account compares favorably against the ideology account.

The primary evaluative focus of the ideology account is what Shelby calls a “form of social consciousness” (or simply “form of consciousness”)—that is, a set of descriptive or normative beliefs and tacit judgments<sup>64</sup> that are (a) widely shared among social group members (and generally known to be so), (b) at least apparently mutually consistent, (c) reflected in the general outlook and self-conception of many group members, and (d) causally potent with respect to social action and institutions.<sup>65</sup> Forms of consciousness need not be ideological in any pejorative sense; as Shelby notes, political liberalism plausibly satisfies these criteria in the contemporary United States.

The primary evaluative standard of the ideology account is social injustice: “racism should, first and foremost, be understood as a problem of

62. Pettit, *Republicanism*, 246–51; see also 280 n. 1.

63. Shelby, “Racism, Moralism, and Social Criticism,” 66. For earlier ideology accounts, see Colette Guillaumin, *Racism, Sexism, Power and Ideology* (New York: Routledge, 1995); and William J. Wilson, *Power, Racism, and Privilege: Race Relations in Theoretical and Sociohistorical Perspectives* (New York: MacMillan, 1973).

64. Shelby often mentions only belief, yet he has noted (“Racism, Moralism, and Social Criticism,” 66) that tacit judgments are also included in the evaluative focus.

65. Tommie Shelby, “Ideology, Racism, and Critical Social Theory,” *Philosophical Forum* 34 (2003): 153–88, 158.

social injustice, where matters of basic liberty, the allocation [of] vital resources, access to educational and employment opportunities, and the rule of law are at stake.”<sup>66</sup> Forms of social consciousness are racist only when they play an “ideological” role in “*bring[ing] about or perpetuat[ing] unjust social relations*”<sup>67</sup>—by, for instance, enabling violations of John Rawls’s fair equality of opportunity principle. I shall not examine here Shelby’s defense of a Rawlsian political evaluative standard.<sup>68</sup> I focus instead on the distinctive ideological role that, Shelby argues, the evaluative focus plays in instances of racism.

Forms of social consciousness play an ideological role in enabling injustice just when they (i) are epistemically flawed in being “distorted, biased, or misleading representations of reality” (the epistemic claim),<sup>69</sup> (ii) establish or reinforce oppression in virtue of these epistemic flaws (the functional claim), and (iii) are widely held primarily because doing so serves noncognitive economic class-based material interests, and not because doing so is an epistemically rational response to epistemic considerations (the critical Marxist genetic claim). In particular, Shelby states,

Racial ideology works by attributing social meaning to visible physical traits, genealogy, and geographical origins (e.g., to skin color, lineage, and continental derivation), marking off some human populations as superior or normal and others as inferior or defective. The content of these beliefs and attitudes gives us reason to fear that those in their grip will likely treat others unjustly. The worry becomes cause for alarm and strong action when those with racist beliefs occupy positions of power, control the distribution of vital resources, administer the law, or determine access to important opportunities. In addition, because of long exposure to negative stereotypes, members of stigmatized racial groups often come to (implicitly) accept the validity of these stereotypes, which can create in them a negative self-image and a sense of inadequacy.<sup>70</sup>

These epistemically flawed race-related beliefs and implicit judgments illustrate the epistemic claim (condition (i)). Such propositional content makes ideology racist (rather than, say, classist).<sup>71</sup> Indeed, if race is not real, then all judgments about race are candidates for being ideological illusions. The causes for alarm that Shelby mentions (e.g., powerful people

66. Shelby, “Racism, Moralism, and Social Criticism,” 71.

67. *Ibid.*, 66; emphasis in the original.

68. For critical discussion, see Charles Mills, “Retrieving Rawls for Racial Justice? A Critique of Tommie Shelby,” *Critical Philosophy of Race* 1 (2013): 1–27; Shelby, “Race and Ethnicity”; and Tommie Shelby, “Racial Realities and Corrective Justice: A Reply to Charles Mills,” *Critical Philosophy of Race* 1 (2013): 145–62.

69. Shelby, “Ideology,” 166.

70. Shelby, “Racism, Moralism, and Social Criticism,” 71.

71. *Ibid.*, 70.

being motivated by racial forms of consciousness) illustrate the functional claim (condition (ii)). The critical Marxist genetic claim (condition (iii)) refers to the “false consciousness” that purportedly explains how epistemically flawed judgments can remain widespread even in the face of refutation. For instance, economic desperation—and aversion to confronting its true causes—might partly explain susceptibility to racial scapegoating. This false consciousness may in turn help to reinforce that very economic desperation. In short, the role that makes a form of consciousness ideological is its “contribut[ion] to establishing or stabilizing relations of oppression *in virtue of* its cognitive defect(s).”<sup>72</sup> I will call this role *ideological enablement*. On the ideology account, forms of consciousness are racist just when, and because, their racial content ideologically enables unjust social relations.

On the ideology account, only racial ideology—that is, forms of consciousness with racial content that ideologically enable unjust social relations—is directly racist. Yet, as with my account, there are numerous ways for something to be suitably related to the primary evaluative focus (here, forms of social consciousness) in a way that renders it indirectly racist. Speaking of ideology in general, Shelby notes that “speech acts and cultural products can be viewed as ideological insofar as they *represent, transmit, or reinforce* ideological beliefs.”<sup>73</sup> With respect to racial ideology in particular, Shelby suggests the following indirectness relations:

Someone who explicitly subscribes to a racist ideology is certainly a racist *person*, but so is someone who is disposed to act on racist assumptions though the person may not (fully) know that such assumptions shape his or her conduct and attitudes. A racist *action* is one undertaken because of the agent’s racist beliefs or one the agent rationalizes in terms of such beliefs. The propositional *content* of an ideology can be expressed in literature, jokes, symbols, popular culture, advertisements, and other media. An *institution* is racist if (1) its goals or policies are premised on or convey racist propositions or (2) its rules and regulations fail to be impartially and consistently applied because racial ideology has a pervasive (though perhaps unconscious) hold over its officials or functionaries (Shelby 2004). Indeed, a *society* can itself be racist if racial ideology is among the primary mechanisms through which the dominant group(s) maintains its dominance (Hall 1980).<sup>74</sup>

So, suitable indirectness relations include causal relations, in which ideology is the effect (e.g., ideology being transmitted or reinforced by cultural products) or the cause (e.g., ideology shaping or causing conduct

72. Shelby, “Ideology,” 174; emphasis in the original.

73. *Ibid.*, 158; my emphasis.

74. Shelby, “Racism, Moralism, and Social Criticism,” 67–68; emphasis in the original.

and attitudes), and intentional relations (e.g., representing, subscribing to, expressing, or conveying ideology).

Table 1 summarizes these four dimensions of the ideology account alongside the corresponding dimensions of the civic character account. Three differences merit comment. First, the ideology account, in comparison to the civic character account, focuses its evaluation on a more limited set of mental states, namely, beliefs and implicit judgments. This focus perhaps excludes behavioral and emotional habits. Since for my purposes it is unclear whether anything important turns on this difference, I omit further discussion of it.<sup>75</sup> Second, only on the ideology account does racism require widely shared judgments (i.e., a “form of consciousness”). The civic character account allows, rather, that racism may be rare or idiosyncratic. (To be clear, though, it makes no claim whatsoever about whether racism is actually rare or idiosyncratic.) Third, only on the ideology account is it a necessary or conceptual truth that racism involves false or otherwise distorted (i.e., ideological) judgments about racial groups and related social realities.<sup>76</sup> Although the existence of racial ideology might be useful, perhaps even sufficient, for maintaining racial supremacy, racial ideology is not, on my view, strictly necessary for racism.<sup>77</sup>

75. However, see Barbara J. Fields, “Slavery, Race and Ideology in the United States of America,” *New Left Review* 181 (1990): 95–118, 113, for reasons to believe that ideologies are behaviorally grounded dispositions, not sets of attitudes.

76. I take Shelby’s view to be that ideology is (in some way) necessary for racism. As he puts it, “My suggestion, in brief, is that we think of racism as fundamentally a type of *ideology*. . . . Treating ideology as the paradigmatic form of racism does not preclude regarding things other than beliefs as racist. It simply means . . . that we understand these other forms or expressions of racism in terms of ideology” (“Racism, Moralism, and Social Criticism,” 66, 67; emphasis in the original). However, in earlier work Shelby explicitly leaves open the question of whether ideology is necessary for racism: “I would recommend that we call a racial form of social consciousness ‘racist’ when—*though perhaps not only when*—it is ideological in this critical Marxist sense” (“Ideology,” 184; my emphasis). If ideological racism is merely a special case of racism, then the ideology account can consistently be subsumed under the civic vice account.

77. Shelby’s functional claim appears to entail that ideology is always motivationally efficacious, which leads to the surprising conclusion that racism could not possibly fail to establish or stabilize relations of oppression. However, if ideological beliefs may be motivationally inefficacious, then there is also reason to doubt that ideology is sufficient for full racism. Consider a society of reverse-akratic citizens who, like Huck Finn, endorse distorted judgments about racial groups but fail to act on them. Racist ideology permeates the society. However, everyone is always motivated to act against their own ideological judgments. So, to everyone’s apparent dismay, the society is structured along racial egalitarian principles. It is unclear to me whether these citizens are fully racist. It would be equally plausible, depending on the details, to interpret the society and its citizens as egalitarians in denial—just as a society comprising avowed egalitarians who, to their apparent dismay, structure the distribution of rights and goods hierarchically along racial lines is plausibly interpreted as racist in denial. The former society’s citizens have *de re* motivation for egalitarianism, despite what they say. Racial ideology only infects their *de dicto* attitudes, which does not suffice for being fully racist.

TABLE 1

COMPARISON OF THE CIVIC CHARACTER ACCOUNT  
AND THE IDEOLOGY ACCOUNT

Dimensions	Civic Character Account	Ideology Account
Primary evaluative focus	Character	Form of consciousness
Primary evaluative standard	Racial supremacist sociopolitical values	Race-based violations of Rawlsian justice as fairness
Role of primary evaluative focus	Rational reflection	Ideological enablement
Suitable indirectness relations	Various	Various

Shelby suggests that whether ideology is necessary for racism turns on whether widespread and distorting judgments are (or, at least, best illuminate) the fundamental conceptual and normative issue when it comes to matters involving race.<sup>78</sup> Yet, although there is much to agree with in the ideology account, it seems to me that racial supremacist character, not racial ideology, lies at the heart of racism and our concerns about race.

Building into the concept of racism that certain judgments are widespread may interfere with understanding, or articulating truths about, the origins of racism. According to the ideology account, racism requires some threshold of shared judgment. So, whether someone is racist depends on, among other things, how popular their judgments are. It follows that a person can become (or cease to be) racist during some interval of time without changing any of their judgments—provided that the popularity of their judgments passes the relevant threshold during that interval. This way of talking strikes me as unhelpful. Whether a person becomes racist should depend entirely on changes in the person, and not on changes in their social group. A similar point holds with respect to whether an action, a law, a joke, or an institution counts as racist. A law designed to encourage race-related contempt among citizens is racist regardless of the prevalence of racism. Indeed, an analysis of the concept of racism should allow that racism can be uncommon in some social group. This consideration provides a reason to prefer focusing our evaluation of racism on the character of a person (which is an intrinsic property of that person) rather than on forms of social consciousness.

There is also reason to doubt that the evaluative focus must play an epistemically distorting role. For there could be avowed racists who suffer no illusions about social reality or the injustice of their activities. Suppose that a White society kidnaps and enslaves Black people because it is most

78. Shelby, “Racism, Moralism, and Social Criticism,” 63.



convenient and profitable to do so, and not because of any racial hatred or animus, and subsequently organizes itself into the racial supremacist exploitative form I described at the beginning of Section III. These facts, it seems to me, suffice to establish the racism of the exploitation, even though ideology is absent. However, in discussing a similar case, Shelby argues instead that “this exploitative practice is racist because racist ideology is invoked to conceal the injustice, particularly from the exploiters themselves. . . . Perhaps [the exploiter] 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.”<sup>79</sup> As Shelby notes, many historians of New World slavery maintain that this was the case in the actual world.<sup>80</sup> Yet these historical considerations seem to me to highlight precisely the contingency, rather than the necessity, of racism being ideological. If being under the sway of egalitarian arguments was highly contingent, then likely so too was the need of exploiters to conceal their injustice from themselves.<sup>81</sup>

Imagine that, out of avarice or even merely a vicious desire for domination for domination’s sake, one racial group establishes political, economic, and social dominance over other racial groups in that community. Suppose that no member of the society is ideologically deceived—none even entertains the possibility that the dominant group, R1, is in any way superior to R2 or R3, except in contingently having superior social power. Perhaps these people simply exhibit what Derrick Bell calls “racial meanness,” that is, “that quality of racism that is the equivalent of ‘piling on’ in football or ‘kicking a man when he is down’ in street fighting. That is, both analogies acknowledge a struggle and that one side, though prevailing, is moved to humiliate the opponent, to inflict an unneeded blow to remove all doubt as to ‘who is boss.’”<sup>82</sup> Neither “piling on” nor “kicking

79. Shelby, “Is Racism in the ‘Heart’?,” 418.

80. Shelby cites Fields, “Slavery, Race and Ideology” at *ibid.*, 418.

81. Mitchell-Yellin (“View of Racism”) argues that such contingency is no objection to an account of racism, which should capture how the concept actually originated and developed. This claim raises metaphilosophical questions about the role of genealogy that I cannot evaluate here. Suffice it to say, and perhaps Mitchell-Yellin would agree, that an account of racism should accommodate naked and open domination-motivated racism, a phenomenon which hardly seems restricted to merely possible worlds.

82. Derrick Bell, “Meanness as Racial Ideology,” in *The Derrick Bell Reader*, ed. Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 339–44, 343. Although Bell uses “ideology” in this article’s title, and while he does mention White oscillation between solidarity with Blacks in a crisis and subordination of Blacks in normal periods, racial meanness does not necessarily involve such irrationality or any distorted beliefs concerning the nature or social reality of race. For related discussion of the desire to dominate, see Mitchell-Yellin, “View of Racism.”

a man when he is down” requires having false or distorted beliefs about racial groups. Rather, these actions may express unsophisticated counter-ethical motivations, such as cruelty. Suppose that the exploiters are conscious of their cruelty and know their actions and social practices to be unjust. (While perhaps all action is done under the guise of the good, I deny that it is done under the guise of the just.) It seems to me fitting to nonetheless call them racist.

One might object that where race is incidental to exploitation, there may be economic exploitation and injustice but not racial supremacy or racism. Furthermore, one might object that without racist ideology there cannot be said to be racial groupings at all. I agree that avarice or cruelty, rather than racial animus, might cause exploitation of the kind described above. However, race need not be incidental to this exploitation, even if racial ideology is absent. Rather, as Shelby himself suggests in the passage quoted above, the mere categorization of individuals on the basis of “visible physical traits, genealogy, and geographical origins” can play a crucial role in stabilizing unjust social practices—say, by enabling citizens to better segregate and isolate the exploited.<sup>83</sup> Such isolation, in turn, may reduce the likelihood of political solidarity among the exploited members of the variously racialized members of the exploited classes, further stabilizing the social practice. Where racial hierarchy enables and furthers exploitation, such exploitation is racist—fully racist, if knowingly chosen for reasons that accord with racial supremacist conceptions of the common good, freedom, equality, and justice—even if exploiters do not avail themselves of the fig leaf of racial ideology.

A transition from the ideological status quo to the transparently vicious society described above would hardly amount to an elimination of racism. So, while ideology has been instrumental in establishing and maintaining actual racial supremacy, there is reason to doubt that ideology is necessary for racism.<sup>84</sup>

## VII. WHY WE SHOULD CARE ABOUT CIVIC CHARACTER

It is important to care about civic character in addition to moral vice and structural injustice. Racist civic character is the form of a significant

83. Shelby, “Racism, Moralism, and Social Criticism,” 71.

84. Thus, I agree with Haslanger’s claim that ideological rationalizations are “not an essential part of what enables or motivates” the unjust practices that they rationalize (“Racism, Ideology, and Social Movements,” 16). In her view, “racism. . . is constituted by an interconnected web of unjust social *practices* that unjustly disadvantage certain groups, such as residential segregation, police brutality, biased hiring and wage inequity, and educational disadvantage” (16–17; emphasis in the original). Although I broadly agree with this claim, I call this web “racial supremacy” and reserve “racism” for the property of being suitably related to the civic character trait described in this article. This terminological difference enables reference to the various degrees of racism (including the possible lack thereof) in individuals.

amount of moral vice in the modern and contemporary eras. Believing that racism is mere unkindness, hatred, or disrespect on the basis of race—without understanding how these moral failings rationally reflect racial supremacist sociopolitical values—is like believing that buildings are mere brick and mortar without understanding how these materials are arranged so as to constitute or support a building’s form. Likewise, racist civic character helps to sustain structural racial injustice. Learning only that racism is a social structure is like learning about the structural design of buildings but not which materials would constitute or support such edifices and how they do so. Inculcating opposition to racism merely by encouraging universal kindness and respect, without discussing racial supremacy—or, conversely, by discussing racial supremacy but not the character traits that endorse, express, and sustain it—seems doomed to fail. While different purposes might require emphasizing different levels of analysis, civic character should not be neglected in our thinking about racism.

The civic character account also illuminates the patriotic conviction with which avowed racists often regard their racial supremacist values. Such convictions track the fact that racism has been, and in some version continues to be, a principal civic “virtue” of the United States. As Frederick Douglass suggests in this article’s epigraph, vast sociopolitical efforts over many generations contributed to the formation of racist character. Avowed racists look to US political and social history and see confirmation of the fittingness of their attitudes. Anti-racist initiatives thus run counter not only to the moral vices of many citizens but also to many of the civic ideals underlying much of the past and present sociopolitical structure of their country. Anti-racist civic efforts are often best conceptualized, then, as a part of transitional justice: replacing racial supremacist national projects with anti-racist projects about which one might feel pride.<sup>85</sup>

For these reasons, I endorse the tradition that recommends redirecting some anti-racist attention away from the moral flaws of scoundrels and toward oppressive aspects of our shared civic life. Although character should be the primary focus of our evaluation of racism, we must also attend closely to the sociopolitical standards that make character racist. To echo the conclusion of Section V, anti-racists should develop and exercise civic habits in themselves and others—including habits of participation in social movements for (a) widespread compliance with, and obedience to, racially egalitarian laws and social norms; (b) the organization and articulation of the shared grievances of racial groups whose interests the community disregards; and (c) effective implementation of formal and informal sanctioning. And so our primary response to racism should be not to moralize but to civilize.

85. For discussion of the fittingness and value of anti-racist racial pride, see Jeremy Fischer, “Racial Pride in the Mode of Frederick Douglass,” *Critical Philosophy of Race* 9 (2021): 71–101.