

# THE EQUIANO PROJECT

## COLOURBLINDNESS

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### INTRODUCTION

The notion of colourblindness has received negative press lately, satirised by the sarcastic trope of an out-of-touch person saying “actually, I don’t see colour”.

Instead, race consciousness, the view that the interests of ethnic minorities will be advanced best by focusing on their racial or ethnic identities, has become the dominant approach to matters of race and racial discrimination.

The colourblind alternative was more popular in previous decades, most successfully deployed during the American Civil Rights movement of the mid-20th century.

Colourblindness does not deny the current significance of race but envisions a future in which race is virtually meaningless compared to our individual and common humanity.

Moreover, colourblindness argues that race consciousness leads to bad policy decisions that do not help our societies.

### CULTURAL COLOURBLINDNESS

Colourblindness exists on at least two levels: the cultural and the political. Rather than viewing our race as central to our identities, the colourblind position encourages us to think of ourselves as, jointly, unique individuals and members of a single human race.

Just as people generally do not view their hair or eye colour as central to who they are, so colourblindness holds the same for race. It is our common humanity that constitutes our moral identities rather than any specific racial or ethnic identity.

By contrast, the race consciousness position holds that race is a meaningful and unavoidable aspect of our identities, especially so for ethnic minorities who are seen as victims of discrimination by majority ‘white’ cultures and populations.

Proponents of colourblindness emphasise the socially constructed notion of race and its weak scientific foundations. Racial categories were developed to organise and justify the existence of the European Empires and Transatlantic slave



trade. They have changed their meaning over time to suit the interests of different economic and political factions, including now being central to much 'progressive' or left-wing politics.

But to continue using racial categories is to use an unscientific schema explicitly designed to divide us. It is demonstrable that our notions of race are malleable—why not modify them in ways that minimises their significance? You do not get rid of racism while emphasising racial differences.

The colourblind position sees an essential nihilism in the doctrine of race consciousness. The separation of humanity into discrete groups implies there are no moral principles shared by all humans. This is a zero-sum view of the world in which racial groups are doomed to struggle against each other forevermore. The proponents of the colourblind principle hold that such a position ensures the continued racialisation of society—much like previous generations of actual racists had done. Race consciousness comes at the cost of maintaining racial divisions and the likelihood of racial conflict.

As a cultural value, colourblindness is the insistence that we do not imbue race with significance, be that positive or negative. This is not a watered-down version of abandoning race—the version that is criticised for allowing white majority populations to be uninterested in the problems of some ethnic minority groups, in which “I don't see colour” means “I don't care about you.”. Race abolitionism is the hard but vital work—which we have done much of already—of seeing our fellow humans as kin regardless of phenotypical differences.

Being in favour of a colourblind society does not entail that we avoid acknowledging the significance of the current experiences of ethnic groups. It is, however, to think about a future in which our ethnic differences are as unimportant as differences in hair colour. It is to think about new identities in which our in-group is multiracial. We can both talk about how race affects people's lives and seek to abandon the concept—indeed, it is precisely due to evidence of the former that you might wish to do the latter.

Genuine colourblindness is perhaps the most radical option we have on the table. It involves overturning long-standing taxonomic schema of how we think about





humanity. As such, it does come under critique from conservative critics. Colourblindness can seem to imply that we should be aiming for a postracial society in which cultural differences between groups are ironed out and we are brought together in a single human community. This raises the possibility of homogenising our cultures with unique traditions being lost. But, this doesn't have to be the case.

Cultural colourblindness is criticised by current anti-racist campaigners on the left for failing to address the 'problem' of 'whiteness'. To anyone not immersed in critical race theory, this is done in a contradictory fashion. Black racial consciousness is viewed as a positive development: 'black' being an identity developed in response to conditions of oppression. 'Whiteness', by contrast, is viewed as a social construct that legitimises oppression. The negative effects of 'white supremacy' will be reduced the more that white people come to realise that their white identities are the problem. The danger of getting majority racial groups to think in racial terms as the basis of politics, however, should be clear.

## LEGAL OR POLICY COLOURBLINDNESS

The second level that colourblindness is discussed is that of public policy and whether we want our governments to adopt policies that factor race and ethnicity into decision-making. The colourblind position holds that race or ethnicity should not be a factor because this involves a misidentification of social problems and an inaccurate and wasteful set of social prescriptions. The criterion for support is need, not race. By contrast, race conscious critics maintain that racial or ethnic disparities will only disappear if racial preferences are used. In its political form, race consciousness has the goal of garnering the racial group in question more status, more power and more resources.

The critics of policy colourblindness assert it encourages "laissez-faire racism," or the ignoring the existence of past and current racial disparities. If we don't pay attention to race, we will ignore, say, how most ethnic minorities in the UK have worse economic outcomes than the white majority. Such critics also stress that our institutions should mirror the racial makeup of our society. Diversity is a social good in its own right. It will lead to additional beneficial effects, such as making businesses more sensitive to their consumers (think of the sudden appearance of dark skin-coloured plasters). The policy proposal in both cases is positive discrimination in favour of racial or ethnic minorities.

Defenders of colourblindness reject entirely the charge of encouraging “laissez-faire racism,” but do argue that race qua race should not be the criterion for policy intervention. As the black American social commentator Shelby Steele put it, “there are ... no races that need help; only individuals, citizens”. It is our status as a victim rather than our membership of a specific racial or ethnic group that warrants support. Targeted help for the poor would still mean that racial or ethnic minorities received help, at the same time as helping the disadvantaged amongst the majority white population.

Racial categories are a clumsy criterion for working out who to help, not least because they ignored the unequal distribution of advantages and disadvantages within groups. Positive discrimination that aids all black Americans, because they’re black and regardless of their economic standing, is unfair against poor whites and too generous to rich blacks. It also creates a perverse incentive for people to emphasise their race in order to access greater material resources, entrenching racial divisions further. It is also wasteful: prosperous middle-class ethnic minority people do not need help, and those resources could be better spent on aiding those disadvantaged people of all ethnicities who do.

The defenders of political colourblindness also stress that it benefits from avoiding the patronising message that ethnic minorities lack agency and are powerless to better themselves. This has become especially prominent in recent years as anti-racist identity politics has increasingly depicted minority groups as helpless victims of overwhelming systems of white oppression. Many bristle at this characterisation of their lives. The black American economist Thomas Sowell’s *Ethnic America* demonstrated the ability of discriminated-against racial groups to advance their socioeconomic standing profoundly in twentieth-century America.

The extent to which positive discrimination tries to undo the consequences of group differences is the extent to which it is unfair. Colourblind critics of positive discrimination note that the latter is predicated on the false belief that we should equal outcomes amongst discrete groups. Disparate outcomes between racial and ethnic groups is taken as evidence of racial discrimination. The rebuttal is that this denies the role of group differences—average age, family size, geographical location, study habits etc. We could remove all the racism in the world and, for as long as there were different groups, there would be different group outcomes. At this point we have a choice: Either unfairly penalise successful groups to ensure equality of outcome, or remedy the specific reasons why specific groups have lower outcomes with the probable knock-on effect of weakening group cultural difference.

Most significantly, colourblindness is the value most in line with the principles of liberal democracies. These principles include belief in the equality of all humans, the existence of innate human rights, the government’s role to defend those rights and the idea that power is held by the people who consent to be ruled by the government. All these values are undermined by race conscious policies that view societies as made up of various racial blocs who negotiate their incommensurate interests at arm’s length with each other and which recommends that governments redistribute wealth and opportunities on the basis of race.

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