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ABSTRACT
To establish the claim that racism is an ideology that consists of having morally impermissible attitudes towards people in virtue of their racialised identities, Appiah claims that a (false) belief in race is not automatically morally wrong. This paper examines what is involved in believing in races and shows that believing in races is in itself morally problematic as it involves stereotyping that undermines agency.

I agree with Kwame Anthony Appiah's two central claims: I agree that racism is an ideology that 'leads people to have negative attitudes and false beliefs about people of their own and other races' (2024, 12); and I also agree that 'the fundamental wrong in racism is the oppression of one racial group to the advantage of another' (2024, 12). However, in establishing these claims, Appiah claims that 'if a belief in races can be a purely intellectual error and not a moral one, and racism *is* a moral error, then racism must be more than a belief in races' (2024; original emphasis). In this paper, I argue against the consequent that racism *must* be more than a belief in races by challenging the first antecedent that a belief in races is a purely intellectual error.[1]

One desideratum for an adequate account of racism is that 'it should help us understand not just that racism is wrong but *why* racism is wrong' (2024, 5; original emphasis). Since racism 'has something to do

with attitudes and behavior that are in response to people's actual or supposed race', the second desideratum for an adequate account of racism is that it 'presupposes a belief in races' (2024, 5). However, Appiah argues that the problem with racism can't be 'just the thought that you can classify human beings into a small set of mutually exclusive groups on the basis of genes or some other biological feature that people have because they belong to groups of common ancestry' (2024, 7). After all, 'having a false belief is not in itself automatically morally wrong' (2024, 5). If I falsely believe that Rafael Nadal is a soccer player, I don't seem to be doing anything *morally* wrong. It may be unjustified or unreasonable, but these epistemic or intellectual errors are not moral errors. So the fact that I have a false belief does not entail that I have made a *moral* error.[2]

However, not all beliefs are the same. Indeed, there are some beliefs that have moral content. Some of these beliefs may be such that merely believing in them amounts to making moral errors. Consider beliefs held by bigots. I take it that many who are, say, homophobic, believe that homosexuality is deviant and have a range of negative attitudes towards those who identify as – or those who are perceived as – lesbian, gay, or bisexual. Many who hold these beliefs have morally problematic attitudes: they may believe, for instance, that gay people have various character flaws, or are somehow less than straight people. These beliefs involve disrespecting and showing contempt for gay people which are morally loaded attitudes. Arguably, that someone disrespects or has contempt for another person based solely on (their perception of) that person's sexual orientation is morally problematic.[3]

At this point, one might interject thus: suppose it's true that believing in a false moral claim is in itself a moral error. How can this help establish that believing in races is a moral error? After all, a belief in race is believing that you can classify human beings into groups based on biological features. Unlike homophobic beliefs, a belief in races does not seem to have any *moral* content. Indeed, I think this is Appiah's thought: a belief in race itself is not a normative claim even though it has moral *consequences*. Moreover, plausibly, having a false belief that has moral consequences is not sufficient for having made a moral error. Suppose Andrew falsely believes that certain vaccinations are linked to autism spectrum

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[2]Indeed, depending on what it takes for something to be an epistemic error, some cases of believing in falsities may not even be epistemically wrong.

[3]Indeed, there is recent, but growing, literature on doxastic wronging. See, *inter alia*, Rima Basu and Mark Shroeder (2019).

disorder. This belief is likely to lead to other beliefs and actions that are morally problematic: he might publicise this claim to a wide range of people, knowingly citing fraudulent and misleading scientific data resulting in many others refraining from vaccinating their children and thereby increasing the risks of various preventable diseases.[4] Andrew makes many moral errors, but these moral errors —though causally contributable to the false belief about vaccinations— do not make it the case that the false belief is itself a moral error. To see this, imagine someone who has the same belief as Andrew but does not act on it: they do not have children and so the issue of whether or not to vaccinate their children does not arise, and they do not try to persuade others (including those who have children) of their belief. We may think that while they make an epistemic error, they have not made a moral error.

However, it is important to note that although a belief in race does not seem to have moral content, 'the real intellectual error' in the belief in races is a belief in 'racialism'. Racialism, according to Appiah, is the claim that

> there are inherited racial essences which determine and explain not just obvious physical traits – like skin color and hair and the shape of the eyes or the nose – but other non-physical traits, including, in particular, *moral*, *behavioral* and *intellectual* ones. (2024, 8; original emphasis)

Hence, the rest of the paper is devoted to examining whether belief in racialism is itself a moral error.

Believing in racialism

Racialism, unlike racism, is a claim that has explicit normative content. To see whether believing in racialism is always a moral error, I explore what we have to be like, including what commitments we must have, to believe in racialism. That is, I want to focus on what is involved in believing in racial essences. This will allow us to decide whether a belief in racialism is like the false belief that vaccinations cause autism, or whether it is more like the false and homophobic belief that, say, people in lesbian relationships should not have the same moral, social, or legal entitlements as those in heterosexual relationships. If believing in racialism is like the latter belief, then to believe in racialism is to make a moral error.

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[4]I am referring to Andrew Wakefield who manipulated patient data and misreported results in the since retracted paper in the *Lancet* (Wakefield et al. 1998). He is regarded as the originator of the false link between vaccines and autism (Hotez 2018).

As Appiah notes, a belief in racialism is a belief in racial essences: some natural property that is present in 'all and only the members of the race and explains not just their physical but their *moral* and intellectual character' (2024, 8; emphasis added). This belief involves judging that an individual has a particular kind of trait in virtue of their race. Here is one easy – but ultimately unsuccessful – argument for the claim that a belief in racialism is always morally problematic:

(1) If you believe in racial essences, you believe that one race is superior to at least one other race.
(2) If you believe that one race is superior to another, you also believe that members of the superior group deserve better treatment than members of the other group(s).
(3) Believing that someone deserves worse treatment than another solely by virtue of their racial identity is a moral error.
(4) Therefore, believing in racial essences is a moral error.

To support (3), we might note that believing that someone deserves a particular kind of treatment because of their race is similar to believing that someone in a lesbian relationship deserves worse treatment than someone in a heterosexual relationship. That is, believing that someone deserves worse treatment than another because of their race is in itself morally problematic (unlike the belief that some vaccines cause autism).

However, I think this is too quick. Although the belief in races and racial essences has led many to believe that one racial group is superior to other groups, this belief about (physical, intellectual, and moral) superiority is not *entailed* by the belief in racial essences. That is, I think we can reject (1): we can imagine a possible world where people believe in racialism, much like us, but there are no hierarchies. Suppose there are three racial groups in this possible world and suppose that it is generally believed that Group A is particularly honest and that members of that group are more likely to be tactless of other groups than members; Group B is believed to be neither particularly honest nor tactless but is believed to be brave and perhaps prone to foolhardiness; and Group C is renowned for their kindness, even if it often leads to inadequate attention to oneself. Perhaps the fact that we can imagine such a world shows that a belief in racialism need not result in a belief that one race is superior to another. Of course, we also have to suppose that, in this possible world, people value honesty, bravery, and kindness equally (or think that they are incommensurate) and disvalue tactlessness, foolhardiness, and

(impermissible) self-effacement or self-deprecation equally (or think that they are incommensurable).[5]

I grant, for the purposes of this paper, that a belief in racial essences does not *entail* a belief in the superiority of one race over another. That is, I do not take the above argument to be sound because I do not take (1) to be true. However, there is another argument for the claim that a belief in racial essences is automatically morally wrong that I think is more promising. Recall that to believe in racial essences is to believe that an individual has some traits in virtue of their race (among other things, perhaps). Appiah admits that racialism has the morally bad *effect* of stereotyping: 'not paying attention to the individual person in front of you and assessing how you treat them on the basis of their own character and behavior' (2024, 9–10). I, of course, agree that stereotyping is morally wrong. However, I want to challenge the claim that this is a mere *effect* or a consequence of believing in racialism. Rather, stereotyping is a *corollary* of believing in racialism.

When one believes in racialism, one believes that an individual has a particular trait or acts in a particular way in virtue of their race. This means that a racialist believes that a trait or a piece of behaviour is determined by an individual's race and not a cultivated feature or a chosen action. A racialist believes, by definition, that there are certain phenotypical features that are evidence of racial essences *and* that these racial essences include traits about people's personality, level of intelligence, and moral character. That is, a racialist is committed to the claim that certain traits or tendencies are regarded as *intrinsic* features of particular races. Plausibly, this commitment *is* a commitment to there being race-based stereotypes.[6] I agree with Appiah that stereotyping is a moral error that can often result in another moral error, one of 'treating people in a way that they don't deserve to be treated' (2024, 10). However, even if a racialist can avoid *treating* people differently (as well as avoid believing that some racialised group is superior to another), they cannot avoid believing in racial essences, or stereotypes. But if believing in racial essences is believing in stereotypes, then a racialist makes the moral error of stereotyping.[7] As Appiah

[5]How near this world is to ours depends on facts about our psychology that we are holding fixed and how plausible it is that beings like us can believe in racial essences without believing that some traits exhibited by one racial group are superior to those displayed by another group.

[6]Another way of putting this is to say that a racialist is committed to falsely essentialising. Or, we can appeal to what George Yancy calls 'fixed teleology' (2008, 852). Elsewhere, I have argued that these ways of unpacking stereotyping reveal that one moral badness of stereotyping is that it undermines an individual's agency 'by prioritising non-chosen, non-agential features over an agent's choices and actions' (Webster 2021b, 361).

accepts that to stereotype is to make a moral error, he should accept that believing in races is intiself a moral error since believing in races involves believing in racial essences.

Objection: too much racism?

If believing in racialism s morally wrong, maybe one might worry that too many things are racist. In accordance with one of the other desiderata for an adequate account of racism, we want to make sure that there are 'some core things that are racist and not just wrong but seriously wrong' (2024, 5). Whether this is a good desideratum depends on what is meant by 'core'. I, of course, agree that there are some paradigmatic examples of racism, such as segregation. However, if racism is an ideology and an ideology is a system of beliefs that oppress members of some groups, many cases that might seem trivial, or at least less paradigmatic, would count as a part of the oppressive system, hence deserving the name 'racism'. I think this, in fact, bolsters the claim that racism is an ideology: it can make sense of *all* cases of racism ranging from violence and death to various forms of (blatant and subtle) discrimination, which leads to uneven distribution of, and inequitable access to, resources.[8] Moreover, thinking of racism as an ideology can help to count subtler cases of racism *as racism*. As a Korean-New Zealander, I have often encountered the latter kind of racism: new acquaintances are likely to have follow-up questions to my response that I'm from New Zealand (Webster 2021a, 537); and fellow patrons at restaurants often mistake me for a server (Webster 2021b, 371).

I think it is a virtue to regard racism as an ideology that all of these cases are cases of racism.[9] In addition, that all of these cases are cases of racism does neither mean that we cannot differentiate morally between different cases of racism. Plausibly, racism that results in death is more morally wrong than racism that results in being mistaken for a server rather than a patron. But this is compatible with the claim that both are cases of racism. It is also compatible with the claim that a

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[7]One might object that stereotyping is different from believing in a stereotype: the former involves a certain kind of treatment whereas the latter does not. However, many philosophers who write on stereotypes hold that to stereotype is to believe certain generics about a group of people (see, *inter alia*, Sarah-Jane Leslie (2017) and Erin Beeghly (2021)).

[8]This includes not only financial resources, but also other important goods, such as housing, health, and education.

[9]Moreover, this virtue of the view that racism is an ideology is something that Appiah can and should accept.

belief in racialism is morally problematic because it is disrespectful, since disrespect can result in more significant moral errors as well as less serious moral errors. So although my argument may multiply cases of racism, I don't think it does so unnecessarily.

In sum, I argued that a belief in races is morally problematic. To arrive at this conclusion, we need not think that a belief in races entails a belief that one race is superior to another. However, when we realise that to believe in races is to believe in racial essences, we can see that stereotyping is a corollary – rather than a mere consequence – of believing in races.

Disclosure statement

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