Negrophobia and Reasonable Racism

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Once a thief is caught, a whole string of crimes if often solved. A single psychological phenomenon can explain a host of persistent social problems. A few entrenched moral and conceptual errors can spawn a vast array of social injustices. Identifying such a phenomenon and exposing such errors has been a major objective of this book.

Our analysis of stereotypes, for example, focused on the role of the unconscious in perpetuating the Black tax, especially in the courtroom. Unconscious mental habits about stereotyped groups also help explain a variety of discriminatory behaviors in other settings, from employment discrimination to biased police enforcement. Moreover, understanding stereotypes may even provide insight into why many Blacks do poorly on standardized tests. Claude Steele, a Stanford social psychologist, has
identified the phenomenon of “stereotype vulnerability” as a hidden psychological tax on Black test takers that tends to drag down their performance. Steele gave two groups of Black and White Stanford students the same test involving difficult questions from the Graduate Record Exam. Before the test, one group was told that the exercise was meant only to examine “psychological factors involved in solving verbal problems,” while the other group was told that the exercise was “a genuine test of your verbal abilities and limitations.” The Blacks who thought they were merely solving verbal problems scored the same as the Whites (who performed equally in both situations). But the group of Black students saddled with the extra burden of believing that the exercise measured their intelligence scored significantly below all the other students. Additional experiments show that stereotype vulnerability can drag down the performance of women who believe a given math test shows “gender differences.” Steele theorizes that students’ efforts not to confirm the stereotype causes them to work too quickly or inefficiently. Thus, understanding stereotypes sheds light on internal and external sources of the Black Tax.

Our analysis of stereotypes and the ubiquity of unconscious discrimination also bears on the affirmative action debate. Affirmative action is routinely characterized as a remedy for past discrimination. The experimental findings we discussed, however, demonstrate that discrimination against Blacks is prevalent here and now. Wherever social judgments about Blacks are made (including in job interviews and corporate boardrooms), there is a demonstrable tendency unconsciously to discriminate. It is pervasive present discrimination against Blacks, not past discrimination alone, that justifies affirmative efforts at inclusion.
We also discussed a popular conceptual error responsible for a long string of muddled moral and legal arguments: the notion of “rational discrimination” against Blacks. The rot at the core of this fashionable notion consists in its failure to recognize the intimate relationship between factual judgments and value judgments. Before someone acts on a factual judgment, he or she must first weigh the costs of error inherent in that judgment. Assessing the costs of error and balancing them against the benefits of “rational discrimination” ineluctably turns on value judgments. Given the costs of error in racial generalizations, the Bayesian’s attempt to justify racial discrimination purely by means of arithmetic is wrongheaded.

A number of economists have recently donned the mantle of the “Intelligent Bayesian,” asserting that we must tolerate a certain amount of “rational racial discrimination” in the name of market efficiency. Following the modus operandi of the Bayesians we discussed, these “rational utility maximizing” Bayesians would have us drain the discussion of racial discrimination of any normative content, focusing single-mindedly on whether such discrimination marginally promotes economic efficiency. In American history, excuses for discriminating against Blacks have often popped up like the heads of Hydra—lop off one excuse and two grow in its place. In Greek mythology, the only way to keep the Hydra-headed beast from growing back two heads for each one cut off was to cauterize each neck after severing its head. Hopefully, arguments like those developed in chapter 2 will help cauterize the “rational discrimination” neck that seems so eager to sprout more visor-wearing, number-crunching heads.

Another theme running throughout this book has been the fallacious tendency to equate the typical with the reasonable. A
tangled string of crimes can be traced to this thief. Its rap sheet includes the glorification of, and unthinking obeisance to, “common sense”; the blind deference of courts to scientific orthodoxy; the theory that courts should merely observe rather than define what is “reasonable”; the belief that the law should seek only to accommodate rather than actively channel human behavior; and the hypocritical defense of our current approaches to blame and punishment. Reasonable Racists, nice Nazis, and gentlemen slavers were seen to be this fallacy’s logical extensions; complacency, supine acquiescence to “authority,” and avoidance of critical self-examination, its hallmarks.

As the Procrustean bed metaphor suggested, intolerance and ethnocentrism also motivate people to equate the reasonable with the typical. There is a tendency among dominant group members to attempt to flatten diversity and difference into mirror-smooth pure ego, to convert competing perspectives to allegiance to a single absolute truth that reflects only the dominant group’s ideals, beliefs, and attitudes. Doubt is the devil, from this missionary mindset; blind faith, the highest virtue. Because acknowledging the validity of other points of view contradicts absolutism, inclusive movements like multiculturalism are demonized.

Doubt may give your dinner a funny taste, as they say, but it’s the absence of doubt that goes out and kills. It is the absence of doubt that lies behind suicide bombings, slave auctions, and extermination camps. And, as we discussed in the chapter on blame and punishment, it is the absence of doubt about our ability to divine a wrongdoer’s “true character” (especially a wrongdoer who was brutalized as a child, which studies show many violent criminals to have been) that lies behind our eager-
ness to hang, shoot, and lethally inject, at ever younger ages, in the name of justice.

One can easily grow weary—even fatalistic—contemplating the seemingly intractable problems of racial justice. Early in this now elderly century, W. E. B. Du Bois prophesied, in his monumental book, *The Souls of Black Folk*, that “[t]he problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line,—the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea.” Over ninety years later, race continues to be an American obsession, and racial discrimination continues to pervade every aspect of the American experience. The “problem of the color-line” seems destined to plague another century.

A hopeful voice, speaking from a long-ago captivity, has echoed through these pages, however. A major premise of this book has been that there has been significant progress in race relations since the publication of *Souls of Black Folk*—the percentage of Americans who personally accept and endorse the Black stereotype has decreased. Most Americans aspire to be fair, democratic, and nonprejudiced. Nevertheless, as well-learned sets of associations, stereotypes continue to be well established in the memories of all Americans. Thus, we are all prone to falling into the discrimination habit, especially in unguarded moments. Resisting the habit requires intensive race-consciousness: relentlessly confronting and interrogating our responses to Blacks and other stereotyped groups. Race-consciousness, of course, is no panacea for the “problem of the color-line,” but it must play a central role in our determined efforts to find solutions.

Racism and racial discrimination are blights on the glory of American democracy. They wither hopes, dreams, and ambi-
tions of millions of Americans. Left unchecked, they pose the greatest internal threat to this nation’s peace and prosperity. To remove them, we must first expose them, not allowing them to hide behind the calculators and pocket protectors of “rational discriminators” or beneath the robes of judges and senators. Then we must gain deeper insights into our unconscious, habitual responses to stereotyped groups, finding ways to break bad habits and answer the call of what Abraham Lincoln called the “higher angels of our nature.”