

VULNERABILITY: 0

EMPATHY: 2

TRUTH: 14

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A Case for Color Blindness

CODED TOTAL: 16

I want to do a quick exercise. Close your eyes. I want you to picture your best friend. Think about what specifically you love about them. What trait makes them them? Now open your eyes. I don't know what each of you came up with, but I'm pretty sure I know what you didn't come up with. I'm pretty sure none of you thought, "What makes Jim Jim is the fact that he's six-foot-two and a redhead." I'm guessing you chose their inner qualities, their sense of humor, their generosity, their intelligence, qualities they would have no matter what they looked like.

There's one more quality I'm pretty sure you didn't choose. Their race. Of all the things you could list about somebody, their race is just about the least interesting you can name, right down there with height and hair color. Sure, race can be good source material for jokes at a comedy club, but in the real world, a person's race doesn't tell you whether they're kind or selfish, whether their beliefs are right or wrong, whether they'll become your best friend or your worst enemy.

But over the past ten years, our societies have become more and more fixated on racial identity. We've all been invited to reflect on our inner whiteness or inner Blackness, as if these racial essences define who we are.

Meanwhile, American society has experienced the greatest crisis in race relations in a generation. Gallup has been asking Americans how they feel about race relations, and this chart is the result. So as you can see, between 2001 and 2013, most Americans felt good about race relations. Then both lines take a nosedive. It's no exaggeration to call this one of the greatest crises of our time. And clearly we need new ways of thinking about race if we're going to reverse this trend.

So today I'm going to offer an old idea, but it's an idea that's been widely misunderstood. You've probably heard it before, it's called color blindness. What do I mean by color blindness? After all, we all see race. We can't help it. And what's more, race can influence how we're treated and how we treat other people. So in that sense, nobody is truly colorblind. But to interpret the word colorblind so literally is to misunderstand it.

Colorblind is a word like warmhearted. It uses a physical metaphor to capture an abstract idea. To call someone warmhearted isn't to talk about the temperature of their heart but about the kindness of their soul. And similarly, to advocate for color blindness is not to pretend you don't notice race. It's to support a principle that we should try our best to treat people without regard to race, both in our personal lives and in our public policy.

And you might be thinking, what's so controversial about that? Well, the fact is the philosophy of color blindness is under attack. Critics say that it's naive or that we're not yet ready for it as a society or even that it's white supremacy in disguise. And many people agree with these feelings. For example, a few years ago, a young adult fantasy author came under pressure to halt the release of her new book. Why? Because the marketing blurb for the book went like

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this: "In a world where the princess is the monster, oppression is blind to skin color, and good and evil exist in shades of gray ..." Now that one sentence clause about oppression being blind to skin color, describing a fantasy world, mind you, was enough to provoke an online backlash.

E Now, part of this reaction to color blindness is actually a fault of its advocates. People will say things like, "I don't see color" as a way of expressing support for color blindness. But this phrase is guaranteed to produce confusion because you do see color, right? I think we should all get rid of this phrase and replace it with what we really mean to say, which is, "I try to treat people without regard to race."

Now, that said, most of the pushback to color blindness comes from critics who misrepresent it as somehow a conservative idea. Now, this could not be further from the truth. The philosophy of color blindness does not come from conservatives. It actually comes from the radical wing of the antislavery movement in the 19th century. The earliest mentions of color blindness come from Wendell Phillips, who was the president of the American Anti-Slavery Society and a man whose nickname was "abolition's golden trumpet." He believed in immediate full equality for Black Americans. And in 1865, he called for the creation of a "government colorblind," by which he meant the permanent end of all laws that mention race.

What about the other critiques of color blindness? Wouldn't color blindness render us unable to fight racism? Wouldn't it mean getting rid of policies like affirmative action that benefit people of color?

I believe that eliminating race-based policies does not equal eliminating policies meant to reduce inequality. It simply means that those policies should be executed on the basis of class instead of race.

Why class over race? I'll give two reasons. First because class is almost always a better proxy for true disadvantage than race. Imagine we picked ten Americans at random. And our task is to sort them from least privileged on one end to most privileged on the other. Now, there's no direct measure of privilege, so we have to choose a proxy measure. My claim here is that lining them up by income or wealth would get us closer to achieving that task than simply lining people up by race. That's what I mean when I say that class is usually a better proxy for disadvantage than race.

E And the second reason is that class-based policies tend to be more popular and less controversial because they don't penalize anyone for immutable biological traits. Think of policies like need-based financial aid or the earned-income tax credit. These are policies that address inequality without anyone having to feel the sting of racial discrimination.

I want to give you an example of a disastrous race-based policy. It was called the Restaurant Revitalization Fund. Over 70,000 restaurants closed in 2020 due to the pandemic, and this fund allocated 29 billion dollars to help these restaurants. But for the first three weeks of the program, only people of color, women and veterans could apply. So soon after it began, white male restaurant owners sued, alleging discrimination. A judge ruled in their favor, and the

program was stopped. But by that time, two thirds of the money was already gone. And it wasn't just white men that got discriminated against in this policy. Around 3,000 women and people of color were promised money before the judge stopped the program and then unpromised that money just after. And the remaining 10 billion then went to white men who had initially been put at the back of the line. So the net result of this policy was a double dose of discrimination. Initially, thousands of white men were discriminated against and then thousands of women and people of color were discriminated against. And it's a virtual guarantee that there are people out there who lost their restaurant in both of those camps because they were the wrong skin color. Can anyone really argue that a colorblind program wouldn't have produced better results for everybody?

So I just gave an example of a disastrous race-based policy. Now, I want to give you an example of a colorblind policy that has worked quite well. America has been struggling with the issue of racial bias in policing for a very long time. And a solution to one aspect of this problem is to issue tickets using traffic cameras instead of human beings. Cops can be racially biased, consciously or not, but traffic cameras, red light cameras and speeding cameras can't. So you would think anyone interested in reducing racial bias in policing would support these traffic cameras. But you'd be wrong. Some have opposed them on the grounds that they don't yield statistically equal ticketing rates by race, and they remain illegal in many US states.

So here's an example where the philosophy of color blindness cuts through confusion like a knife. If we're guided by color blindness, our goal should be to eliminate bias from systems that affect people's lives wherever possible, not to manufacture statistically equal outcomes by any means necessary.

So my talk has been focused on America, but my message is really for any key decision maker at any institution anywhere in the world. If you care about fighting racism, embrace color blindness. Support class-based policies. Create colorblind processes in your own world. If you're a professor, grade your students' papers blind to their names. Think creatively about how to apply color blindness to your life.

Color blindness is the best principle by which to govern a multiracial, multiethnic democracy. It's the best way to lower the temperature of tribal conflict in the long run. And if we wait for the moment when society is ready for it, we'll be waiting forever.

Thank you.

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