



I'm Not a Racist, But . . . : The Moral Quandary of Race

By Lawrence Blum

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Not all racial incidents are racist incidents, Lawrence Blum says. "We need a more varied and nuanced moral vocabulary for talking about the arena of race. We should not be faced with a choice of 'racism' or nothing." Use of the word "racism" is pervasive: An article about the NAACP's criticism of television networks for casting too few "minority" actors in lead roles asks, "Is television a racist institution?" A white girl in Virginia says it is racist for her African-American teacher to wear African attire.

Blum argues that a growing tendency to castigate as "racism" everything that goes wrong in the racial domain reduces the term's power to evoke moral outrage. In *"I'm Not a Racist, But . . ."*, Blum develops a historically grounded account of racism as the deeply morally-charged notion it has become. He addresses the question whether people of color can be racist, defines types of racism, and identifies debased and inappropriate usages of the term. Though racial insensitivity, racial anxiety, racial ignorance and racial injustice are, in his view, not "racism," they are racial ills that should elicit moral concern.

Blum argues that "race" itself, even when not serving distinct racial malfeasance, is a morally destructive idea, implying moral distance and unequal worth. History and genetic science reveal both the avoidability and the falsity of the idea of race. Blum argues that we can give up the idea of race, but must recognize that racial groups' historical and social experience has been shaped by having been treated as if they were races.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Media, politicians, social and political groups and individuals use the term "racism" casually and inaccurately, thereby stripping the concept of its meaning, argues Lawrence Blum in *I'm Not a Racist, But . . . : The Moral Quandary of Race*. Not all interracial difficulties involve racism, he contends, but society does not have the vocabulary to discuss racial overtones with greater subtlety. Thus people and institutions fearful of being called racist feel defensive when racial issues are raised, perpetuating the status quo of race relations. Blum (Moral Perception and Particularity), professor of philosophy and of liberal arts and education at the University of Massachusetts, Boston, asserts that only "certain especially serious moral failings and violations" merit the designation "racism." Discussing various scholarly perspectives on the construction of racial categories, Blum calls for a balance between "ridding ourselves of the myth of race" and understanding the role of race in social inequality and in history.

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From [Booklist](#)

The term *racism* has been so overused that it is in danger of losing its moral significance, according to philosophy professor Blum, who argues for clearer, more precise use of the word and related terminology. Blum examines related concepts and terms --institutional racism, personal racism, racist, racist beliefs--and their interplay as he explores the moral implications of racism on a multiplicity of levels. A section on "colorblindness" is especially enlightening, given the often-contradictory use of the concept. The author surveys the history of the concept of race and its associated development with the enslavement of Africans. While he argues that "race," as we generally use that term, does not exist, racialized groups as socially constructed do, with import and consequences often associated with that term. Blum recognizes the ideal of abandoning use of the concept of race, but also acknowledges the practical need to remedy wrongs of the past and present. This is a very thoughtful work on a sensitive subject, a good and practical work for all readers interested in race relations. *Vernon Ford*

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Review

"Discussing various scholarly perspectives on the construction of racial categories, Blum calls for a balance between 'ridding ourselves of the myth of race' and understanding the role of race in social inequality and in history."?Publishers Weekly

"This is a very thoughtful work on a sensitive subject, a good and practical work for all readers interested in race relations."?Booklist

"In his informative treatment of the concept of racism, Lawrence Blum is most concerned with the dangers

of over-appropriation. He fears that the accusation 'racist' is now used so casually and widely that it is in danger of losing its power to shame. . . . His is a book that can help untangle many of the individual issues that racism raises and is a most important contribution to the growing field of applied educational and social philosophy."*?Teachers College Record*

"Few topics are in such desperate need of clear analysis as the subject of race. . . . In this concise volume, Blum brings the precision of a moral philosopher to bear on this perennial American dilemma, with generally helpful results. . . . A fresh and important contribution to applied social philosophy, recommended for general readers, upper-division undergraduates, graduate students, and faculty."*?Choice*

"Blum's thoughts support his main argument: that calm, reasoned deliberation about injustices can give us the moral vocabulary we need to do better as a society."*?Boston Review*

"This is a useful reference for anyone who wishes to think intelligently about the problem of race."*?MultiCultural Review*

"This book combines clarity and compassion to an extraordinary degree, while surveying in an accessible way a vast range of thinking about race. It will be enormously useful to teachers, at both high school and college levels; it will advance the debate among those who think about race; but above all, its wide diffusion will benefit all of us as citizens of a racialized society."*?Kwame Anthony Appiah, Carswell Professor of Afro-American Studies and of Philosophy, Harvard University*

"In *'I'm Not A Racist, But . . .'* Lawrence Blum offers answers for our time about what race is, who is a racist, and ways for people to talk about the racialized features of our society without falling into name-calling or defensiveness. With exemplary moral and analytic clarity, Blum offers educators, students, lawyers, judges, leaders, and citizens tools for building a nation of equality, comity, and respect for each person."*?Martha Minow, Harvard University Law School*

"Following the findings of modern science, Blum holds that (biological) races do not exist, but racialized populations do, as a consequence of the Western world's subordinating and inferiorizing other peoples as well as some of their own populations. He insightfully examines and interprets contemporary attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs about race in the United States and argues that 'race' is fundamentally a moral problem. In confronting this problem, Blum challenges us to recognize and distinguish the varied

manifestations of this racialized world view, from extreme racism to racial insensitivity and ignorance, which carry different moral valences. An excellent, thought-provoking book, with powerful messages, that should be widely read."?Audrey Smedley, Virginia Commonwealth University

"This much-needed book challenges the idea that justice in a historically racist society can be achieved through a policy of race neutrality alone. Lawrence Blum shows the many ways in which racism involves more than just individual attitudes and discusses the concepts of race and racism in a philosophically insightful way. *'I'm Not a Racist, But . . .'* is a most important contribution to the growing field of applied social philosophy."?Walter Feinberg, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign

"With an impressive combination of moral acuteness, precision of reasoning, and wide-ranging empirical knowledge, Lawrence Blum, a fine philosopher, dissects our concepts of race and racism. He argues that 'racism' has all too frequently been a catch-all label for people and conduct of many different types, and that we will gain as a society if we make many more careful distinctions; between actions and traits of character, between the acts of dominant groups and reactive actions of subordinated groups, and above all, between racism, a morally grave failing involving inferiorization or animosity, and other moral failings, such as racial insensitivity, race-related ignorance, and deficient appreciation of individuality. Written in a lively, clear, and accessible style, Blum's book makes a major contribution toward a style of politics that rejects mere epithets and slogans in favor of thoughtful deliberation about shared problems."?Martha Nussbaum, Ernst Freud Professor of Law and Ethics, The University of Chicago

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