

PHILOSOPHY AND THE PROBLEM OF RACISM: CRITICAL REFLECTION ON THE METAPHYSICAL DISTINCTION BETWEEN SUBSTANCE AND ACCIDENT

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Abstract

This article examines the contributions of philosophy in combating the problem of racism in the world with particular reference to the metaphysical distinction between substance and accident. There are racial groups in the world, and people of the same race share similar physical characteristics. The problem of racism is one of the major problems bedeviling the world. The fundamental questions are: Can the problem of racism in the world be solved? Has philosophy any solution to offer in this regard? Can the metaphysical distinction between substance and accident be instrumental in addressing the problem of racism in the world? Does the metaphysical concept of substance portray the fact of common essence of all human beings in the world irrespective of races or racial affiliations? This article employs basically analytical and hermeneutical methods of philosophical investigation. It argues that philosophy has an indispensable role to play in this regard, and such can be realized through a critical reflection on the metaphysical distinction between substance and accident. Substance is the essence of a being or what makes a being what it is, while accidents are the attributes that inhere in a substance. We are essentially and fundamentally rational human beings. That one is white or dark in skin colour, tall or short in height, from this racial group or the other, are all accidents. This article argues that race or racial group is accidental and not essential or substantial to our existence as human beings in the world. Attention to this would enable us rise above racism and seek for what unites us as human and rational beings in the world. Clinging to race is like leaving the substance and pursuing the shadow. This article maintains that if one pays less attention to racial group which is accidental and not essential to one's being, global integration as well as peaceful co-existence between different people in the world can be achieved to a reasonable extent.

Keywords: Philosophy, Racism, Metaphysics, Substance, Accident

Introduction

Philosophy is basically a speculative discipline that reflects critically on every aspect of reality. No aspect of reality is excluded from philosophical investigation. It formulates as well as furnishes people with ideas that can enable them function effectively in the society, and thus improves human condition of existence in the universe. Philosophical ideas can be applied to different aspects of human endeavour. Through such application, philosophy contributes its quota towards human holistic development and well-being. Among such areas in which philosophical ideas can be applied to improve human condition of existence in the world is in the issue of 'Racism'. Hence, this article examines the contributions of philosophy in combating the problem of racism in the world from the perspective

of the metaphysical distinction between ‘Substance’ and ‘Accident’. The problem of racism is one of the major problems bedeviling human beings in the world. Racism cannot exist without human beings. This is as a result of the fact that it is human beings that make distinctions based on racial groups and characteristics. The basic questions are: What is racism? Is it possible to address the problem of racism in the world? What can philosophy offer in this regard? Can the metaphysical distinction between substance and accident be instrumental in addressing the problem of racism in the world? What is substance in Metaphysics? What is accident? What is the implication of the metaphysical distinction between substance and accident? How would the distinction between substance and accident contribute in combating the problem of racism in the world? These and other related questions would be given serious attention in this article.

This article is partitioned into five sections. The first section analyzes the concept of racism and the problems associated with racism in the world. The second section discusses the contributions of Philosophy in combating the problem of racism in the world. The third section examines the metaphysical concepts of substance and accident as well as the relationship between them. The fourth section reflects on the metaphysical distinction between substance and accident vis-à-vis the problem of racism in the world. The fifth section focuses on the evaluation and conclusion of the article.

The Concept of Racism

Racism is one of the major problems in the world today, and many people have suffered as a result of it. Racism has to do with undue attachment to one’s race, and regarding people of other races as inferior. Obviously, a proper understanding of the concept of racism ought to start from an analysis of the concept of ‘race’. This stems from the fact that there cannot be racism without the idea of ‘race’. The term ‘race’ has been described by many scholars in varied but related ways. According to Lawrence D. Bobo and Cybelle Fox:

We conceive of race , or more broadly ethnoracial distinctions, as historically contingent social constructions...Although such categorization may invoke consideration of physical and biological markers such as hair texture, skin tone and color, and other observable markers, neither these indicia nor deep primordial imperatives give ethnoracial categories their social significance.¹

Race has to do with the grouping of human beings in the world, and such grouping is based on physical and social characteristics. People from the same race share the same physical and social characteristics. These unique physical and social characteristics distinguish people of a particular race from those of other race or races. The emphasis on racial distinction seems to be more on social distinction than physical distinction. Thus, people from the same race have similar social orientation. Frances Henry has similar description of race, and thus argues that what gives rise to racism is not just biological difference, but fundamentally social

construction. From this perspective, racism becomes a social construct. In his words:

Race is conceived as a biological, genetically determined concept. However, this scientific concept has been increasingly challenged. First, it has been argued that the continued use of the term 'race' exacerbates the problems of racism. As a result, some African Americans want to substitute colour or 'colourism' because skin colour is the most obvious sign of difference. Second, others challenge race from the perspective of the increased 'hybridity' (Bhabha, 1994) or racial mixing brought about by increasing globalization and the migration of people. In this context, identity becomes very subjective especially because racism denies such people their white parentage or heritage. Since mixed race persons are defined by their darker skin colour not their ethnicity the concept of 'race' loses much of its validity. Lastly, the most important challenge to the use of the concept of race is, however that it is not biological difference as such that creates racism but its social construction.²

Frances Henry sees racism as a social construct and downplays the impact of biological factors. Obviously, biological factors ought to be put into serious consideration in this regard. Hence, James Michael conceives race from the perspective of biological characteristics. A race, for him, is a group of people that share the same biological characteristics which manifest itself in shared physical characteristics. Thus, people of different races have different physical characteristics such as hair texture, skin colour, eye colour etc. The concept of, for him, is based on five criteria: (a) Race has biological foundation (b) Members of a particular race share the same biological characteristics that are unique to them.(c) The biological foundation of race is inheritable and genealogical. (d) Each race's geographic origin (Africa, Europe, Asia, North and South America) is identifiable through genealogical investigation.(e) The inherited biological foundation of race manifests itself basically in physical characteristics like hair texture, skin colour, eye shape etc. as well as behavioural characteristics like delinquency or intelligence.³ James Michael emphasizes the biological foundation of race which gives rise to unique physical characteristics. The researcher quite agrees with James Michael. This is as a result of the fact that racial grouping is rooted on biological factors.

There seems to be basically four races in the world, though some scholars identify many more racial distinctions within the four basic races in the world. The four basic races are: Caucasian (white), Black (African), Yellow (Asian), and Red (Native American).⁴ Be that as it may, the basic issue is not whether there are only four basic races or that there are many more races in the world, but that there exist racial distinctions in the world as well as discriminations based on such racial distinctions. This is the fundamental issue in racism.

Racism has to do with inclination to one's race and conceiving people of other races to be inferior to one's race. According to Lawrence D. Bobo and Cybelle Fox: "We conceive of racism as a set of institutional conditions of group inequality and an ideology of racial domination, in which the latter is characterized by a set of beliefs holding that the subordinate racial group is biologically or culturally inferior to the dominant racial group."⁵ Racism is deeply rooted in the conception that a particular race or group of people is superior and better than others. Hence, preferential treatment ought to be given to the superior race. It goes along with the feeling of superiority complex. Elaborating on this further, Audrey Smedley states:

Racism, also called **racialism**, any action, practice, or belief that reflects the racial worldview—the ideology that humans may be divided into separate and exclusive biological entities called "races"; that there is a causal link between inherited physical traits and traits of personality, intellect, morality, and other cultural and behavioral features; and that some races are innately superior to others. Since the late 20th century the notion of biological race has been recognized as a cultural invention, entirely without scientific basis.⁶

Racism had constituted and still constitutes serious problem in the world. This is as a result of the fact that some people have actually suffered because of it. The discrimination and maltreatment some have received on account of racism call for serious and urgent attention.

Problems Associated with Racism in The World

Racism is a very serious problem in the world, though it was more rampant and more pronounced in the earlier centuries. However, there are still remarkable traces of racism in the contemporary society. Some people, especially the black race, have suffered from discriminations on account of race. According to Muyiwa Falaiye as cited by Solomon Omatsola Azumurana: "the black skin is still a badge of contempt in the world today as it has been for nearly 200 years."⁷ This underscores the fact that black race is always the object of racial discrimination. Commenting on the alienation of the African American in the United States of America, Solomon Omatsola Azumurana notes that "...the skin colour of the black man does not make him acceptable to the whites, and leaves him at the bottom of the social hierarchy in America."⁸ It is obvious that the black race has suffered terribly as a result of race.

There are many instances of racism in the world history. Nazi racism spearheaded by Adolf Hitler is a vivid and concrete example of racism in the world. Adolf Hitler believed strongly in the superiority of the 'Germanic race' (Aryan master race). Obviously, some people suffered terribly as a result of his racial inclination as well as racial superiority complex. He and other Nazi leaders looked down on the Jewish people on account of race, and insisted very vehemently on Germany's prerogative to govern the other races which they considered to be inferior races.

This necessitated maltreatment of people of other races, with the strong conviction that such people were naturally inferior, and as such did not deserve equal treatment with the people of the superior race. Also, racism seems to be at the core of North American slavery and western European imperialism in the 18th century. In the words of Audrey Smedley:

Racism was at the heart of North American slavery and the colonization and empire-building activities of western Europeans, especially in the 18th century. The idea of race was invented to magnify the differences between people of European origin and those of African descent whose ancestors had been involuntarily enslaved and transported to the Americas. By characterizing Africans and their African American descendants as lesser human beings, the proponents of slavery attempted to justify and maintain the system of exploitation while portraying the United States as a bastion and champion of human freedom, with human rights, democratic institutions, unlimited opportunities, and equality. The contradiction between slavery and the ideology of human equality, accompanying a philosophy of human freedom and dignity, seemed to demand the dehumanization of those enslaved.⁹

Another instance of Racism in the world was the Apartheid Policy in South Africa that encouraged discrimination and segregation as a result of difference in skin colour. The Apartheid policy was actually based on the assumption of the superiority of the white race which promoted the suppression of the black race in South Africa.

There are many other instances of racism in the world, but the ones mentioned above are considered quite enough to substantiate the point this article wants to put across. It is sad to note that many people have suffered terribly in this world due to racism. Hence, there are many problems associated with racism such as hatred, maltreatment, slavery, xenophobia, denial of human right, murder, segregation, oppression, suppression, genocide etc. It is obvious from the above discourse that there are many problems associated with racism. Hence, there is need to address the problem of racism in the world.

□ **Philosophy and the Problem of Racism in the World**

The basic question is this: How can philosophy be instrumental in addressing the problem of racism in the world? In other words, what is the contribution of philosophy in combating the problem of racism in the world? Fundamentally, philosophy is a speculative discipline that investigates critically into every aspect of reality, and subjects such to rational scrutiny. It is an indisputable fact that philosophy sharpens one's rationality and enables one to think critically and rationally. Through reflective and critical inquiry, philosophy seeks to understand the basic nature of reality. Thus, it asks fundamental questions about reality. Such fundamental questions are very necessary in unraveling the true nature of reality.

Through rational investigation, philosophy has furnished the human race with useful ideas that have improved human condition of existence in the universe. It has formulated and is still formulating ideas that enable man function effectively in the society. This extends to all domains of human life such as political, social, moral, educational and scientific domains. Hence, the importance of philosophy in human life can never be over-emphasized.

With regard to the problem of racism in the world, the role of philosophy is quite remarkable and outstanding. It is the argument of this study that philosophy has much to contribute in combating the problem of racism in the world. The practice of racism is based on false assumption and belief of superiority on account of skin colour. Philosophy enables one to subject one's beliefs as well as assumptions to rational scrutiny. Epistemology, which is a branch of philosophy, is a rational investigation into the status and validity of knowledge. Obviously, Knowledge has to do with truth and certainty. In such search for truth and certainty, there is need to question our beliefs and assumptions. Some beliefs and assumptions are as a result of spontaneous convictions which have not been questioned. Thus, Ben O. Ebo argues that "the purpose of theory of knowledge is to inquire into the rational grounds and ultimate reasons of our "spontaneous convictions by a critical examination."¹⁰ Through such, philosophy clarifies our beliefs and frees us from unhealthy beliefs and assumptions. It enables one to know that some beliefs and assumptions are baseless, and among such is the issue of racism.

It seems to the researcher that racism is as a result of ignorance of the metaphysical distinction between substance and accidents. Thus, this study examines the contributions of philosophy in combating the problem of racism in the world through an analysis of the metaphysical distinction between substance and accidents. Such distinction would be of immense help in addressing the ignorance associated with the practice of racism in the world. Before the researcher delves into this, there is need to examine the metaphysical concepts of 'substance' and 'accidents.'

The Metaphysical Concepts of 'Substance' and 'Accident'

Substance is a metaphysical concept, and it is always distinguished from accidents or predicates. Substance has to do with the essence of a being, which makes such being what it is. It pertains to the nature of a being. Analyzing Aristotle's concept of substance, Innocent I. Asouzu states that "...the substance or essence belongs to real character of being."¹¹ He used substance and essence interchangeably. It then implies that substance is the essence of a being. Panteleon Iroegbu also equates substance with the essence of a being, and argues thus: "The primary reality in a being is its essence. Therefore, substance is essence."¹² Describing then what 'essence' is all about, he states: "Essence is, in one sense, that by which a thing is what it is. It is that which a thing is before it took concrete actual existence. It is potency to being."¹³ It is in substance that accidents exist. Thus, accidents cannot exist without substance because accidents have no objective existence without the

substance in which they inhere. Analyzing Aristotle's and John Locke's concepts of substance, Panayot Butchvaron states:

Substance, as defined by Aristotle in the *Categories*, that which is neither predicable ("sayable") of anything nor present in anything as an aspect or property of it. The examples he gives are an individual man and an individual horse. We can predicate *being a horse* of something but not a horse: nor is a horse in something else. He also held that only substances can remain self-identical through a change. All other things are accidents of substances and exist only as aspects, properties, or relations of substances, or kinds of substances, which Aristotle called secondary substances. An example of an accident would be the color of an individual man, and an example of a secondary substance would be his being a man. For Locke, a substance is that part of an individual thing in which its properties inhere. Since we can observe, indeed know, only a thing's properties, its substance is unknowable.¹⁴

John Locke took agnostic position in the attempt to explain what substance is all about. Be that as it may, substance pertains to the nature or essence of a being. Thus, the accidents of a being may change without the substance changing. Substance is quite different from accidents.

From the analysis of the concept of substance above, it is obvious that an accident does not have an independent existence. It could be said to be an attribute or predicate of a substance. Innocent I. Asouzu describes it as "fragmentary structures of reality."¹⁵ This implies that it is not the essence of reality. Jack Macintosh has similar description of an accident. In his words:

The term 'accident' in philosophy has two main uses, both stemming from Aristotle. In the first, an accident is a quality which is not essential to the kind of thing (or in later philosophies, to the individual) in question. 'Being musical' is accidental to Socrates, 'being rational' and 'being an animal' are not. Which qualities, if any, are essential or non-accidental is a controversial matter in contemporary philosophy. In the second main use, the term 'accident' is a way of allowing chance and causality to coexist...¹⁶

It is obvious from the quotation above that the concept of accident that is used in this article is the first one in which an accident is seen as that which is not essential to a being. What is essential to human beings is basically 'humanity' which presupposes rationality. Thus, human beings are 'rational animals'. Other attributes of human beings such as height, weight, colour etc belong to the category of accidents. Steven J. Wagner has almost the same description of accident. He describes it thus:

...a feature or property of a substance (e.g., an organism or an artifact) without which the substance could still exist. According to a common essentialist view of persons, Socrates' size, color, and integrity are among his accidents, while his humanity is not. For Descartes, thinking is the essence of the soul, while any particular thought a soul entertains is an accident.¹⁷

From the above perspective, an accident is nothing but a property of a substance. Analyzing further what accident is all about and of course in agreement with Steven J. Wagner, Luigi Bogliolo states: "The problems of the *accident* (this is the classical name of the property inherent to the existent in the *proper sense*) from the Latin "accidere"—that is, almost "occur", "reach across", "come over" *to that which exists...*"¹⁸ Certainly, Luigi Bogliolo's description of an accident is not different from the descriptions of other scholars as articulated above. What is common is that an accident is just a feature or property or characteristic of a substance because it can only exist in the substance. This is the sense in which accident ought to be understood in this study.

The Relationship between Substance And Accident

From the discussions on the metaphysical concepts of substance and accident, it is obvious that an accident does not have an independent existence, but can only exist in the substance. Some scholars have tried to articulate the relationship between substance and accident. While analyzing Aristotle's idea of substance and accidents, Joseph Omoregbe brings out very clearly the relationship between substance and accidents thus:

As opposed to accident, substance is anything which exists by itself, any individual thing which exists on its own. Accident, however, does not exist on its own, but always in a substance. Colour, for example, does not exist on its own or by itself but always in something other than itself and it makes no difference to the nature of the substance in which it exists.¹⁹

This demonstrates the fact that substance is quite different from accident, though accident exists in substance and does not exist independently. On his own part, Panteleon Iroegbu articulates the relationship between substance and accidents. He notes that substance such as *rose* exists in itself whereas accident such as the colour *red* exists in the substance *rose* and cannot exist in itself. Furthermore, the accident is supported in existence by the substance which underlies it. Substance is the fundamental principle and primary reality as well as the essence of a being in which the accident lies.²⁰ It then becomes very clear that substance is more basic than accident. Thus, it is primary, while accident is secondary. This is as a result of the fact that accidents cannot exist without substance. Besides, the non-existence of the substance entails the non-existence of the accidents. In the attempt to distinguish between substance and accident, Luigi Bogliolo argues that substance

exists in the proper sense, while accident exists in the improper and imperfect sense. Articulating further their peculiarities, he states:

Therefore, what does *substance* mean? We can qualify it in many ways and with varied expressions. *The substance is the existent*: insofar as it realizes its own being; insofar as it has its own consistency; insofar as it has subsistence; insofar as it has a relative autonomy in being; insofar as it is in itself (St. Thomas also says: for itself); insofar as its being is not directly supported by anything but itself; insofar as it has a sum of proper values not referring to others, etc. One could prolong this litany of characteristics. Now, it is not difficult, almost by contraposition, to qualify the accident as the being: that does not have its own being; that does not exist in itself and by itself, but in another and for another; that does not have autonomy in being; that does not have its own consistency and subsistence; that does not exist as a whole standing by itself. Instead, it *exists*—indeed, *in-exists* (*exists-in*) in the substance and for the substance. Therefore, the accident is a being in the improper and imperfect sense: it is *ens entis* (being of being). The substance is *inseity* and *perseity*. The accident is *in-aliety*. (Luigi Bogliolo, *Metaphysics*.²¹)

At this point of discussion in this article, it is obvious that substance is more fundamental than accident with regard to every being.

Metaphysical Distinction between Substance and Accident Vis-À-Vis the Problem of Racism in the World

The previous section of this study made a remarkable distinction between substance and accident. Some may argue that the metaphysical distinction between substance and accident could be the basis for racism. This stems from the argument that racism emphasizes the distinction between different groups of people in the world, just as philosophy emphasizes the distinction between substance and accident. However, this article argues and insists that the metaphysical distinction between substance and accident could be of immense help in combating the problem of racism in the world. In the expression of Luigi Bogliolo as articulated above, substance exists in the proper sense, while accident exists in improper sense. Also, the primacy of substance over accident has been established in this study, because it is in substance that accident inheres. From the distinction between substance and accident, it is obvious that racial characteristics belong to the domain of accidents. Racism emphasizes skin colour which is accidental to one's being. Skin colour is only a physical characteristic which makes no essential difference to the substance of the being. One's racial characteristics are not in any way one's essence as a human being, but belong to the category of accidents. Awareness of this is very necessary in combating the problem of racism in the world. J. O. Ejikemeuwa Ndubisi posited similar

argument in his attempt to address philosophically the problem of ethnicity in Nigeria. In his words:

Our knowledge of substance and accidents in metaphysics (a branch of philosophy) shows that every human person shares one substance – the humanity of the human person. The humanness of the Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba, Efik or Ijaw is not lesser or higher than the humanness of the Fulani, Tiv, Idoma, Esan or Egede as the case may be. We all share one humanity. The fact that one is an Igbo, Yoruba or Hausa is simply accidental to the being of the individual person. In this regard therefore, the study of philosophy will certainly play a vital role to unite Nigeria together. It will help Nigerians to realize the existential fact that there is no essential difference among all the ethnic groups in Nigeria.²²

The researcher completely agrees with J. O. Ejikemeuwa Ndubisi on this issue, though he focused on the issue of ethnicity in Nigeria. Obviously, racism and ethnicity are not the same, but both of them belong to the domain of accidents. One remains a human and a rational being all through life, but many other things in the person's life may change. The basic question is this: A person's humanity and a person's racial group, which one is more fundamental, and which one should be given prior consideration as well as attention? Certainly, those who are inclined to racism may attach undue importance to one's physical characteristics. It is the argument of this paper that the definition that comes from one's essence as human and rational being is more primary and more fundamental than the one that comes from one's racial characteristics. Thus, one's race is accidental and not substantial or essential to one's being as a human as well as rational being. It has been consistently established in this study that substance is more fundamental than accident, though both of them exist together in any entity. Thus, it should be given prior consideration and attention. One's humanity is more fundamental and should be given prior consideration and attention than one's racial group. It is human being that is susceptible to other attributes such as colour, height, weight, religion, etc. It is our humanity that fundamentally defines us as human beings. Physical attributes distinguish us from one another or one group of people from another, and they vary from one person to the other or from one group of people to another. But these physical attributes cannot define us essentially as 'beings' in the world. In the world today, the reverse is completely the case for some people prize racial characteristics more than common human essence. Such people give serious attention to racial distinction at the expense of our common humanity. This explains why many people have suffered terribly in the world as a result of racism. This is a real case of misplacement of priority and value.

Evaluation and Conclusion

This study has made sincere effort to examine the metaphysical distinction between substance and accident in relation to the problem of racism in the world, and through such distinction and subsequent juxtaposition, this study demonstrates

the fact that philosophy plays a remarkable role in combating the problem of racism in the world. It is obvious from the discourse that the adverse effects of racism are quite enormous. Many people have suffered maltreatments on account of racism in the world, and many have actually lost their lives as a result of that. The metaphysical distinction between substance and accident in this study has made it very clear that substance is more fundamental than accidents which do not have independent existence. Racial groupings and characteristics belong to the category of accidents as demonstrated already in this study. The question is this: Why should we sacrifice that which is essential and fundamental to our existence in the world on the altar of that which is secondary and accidental to our being? This calls for serious re-evaluation of our values and priorities in life. The point to be noted is that race and racial characteristics cannot exist without human beings. The fact that we are human beings makes it possible for us to be identified with one racial group or the other. However, it must be noted that skin colour and other physical characteristics as well as social status are accidental and not essential to our existence as human beings in the world.

Human beings in the different parts of the world should pay more attention to our common essence that unites us as human beings than to racial groupings that divide as well as destroy us. Inclination to one's race or racism has not been of any help to humanity. Rather, the negative effects associated with it are quite alarming. The time has come for us to rise above racism and focus on our common essence as human beings with dignity and respect. For peace and unity to exist in the world, we have to see ourselves as human beings occupying different geographical entities. Rising beyond racism in the world is not impossibility as some people would think. It is just a matter of mind-set as well as value re-orientation. Non-racial approach to issues and life in general would engender integration and unity among human beings in the different parts of the world.

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