

RACISTS CAN BELIEVE some pretty odd things.

I'm not talking about the completely out-of-left field, lunatic-fringe racists who might believe that God deems that white people have dominion over black people, or that there is a Jewish conspiracy to take over the world.

I'm talking about your run-of-the-mill racist who believes that skin colour, eye shape, hair texture and so on are reliable markers for determining who has what capacities, and who is deserving of different treatment or levels of respect. This belief is fundamental to at least many brands of racism; patently false, it seems an odd thing to believe.

Yet we ought to respect racists as rational agents, as doing so will be conducive to building a racially just society. We could ask of the 'run-of-the-mill' racist mentioned above: "Why would someone believe such a thing?" It could of course be that his belief is based on ignorance. If that is so, then given more information – evidence that his belief is false – a racist ought to give it up. And perhaps some would do just that.

But many would not. Many would turn out to be (as Lewis Gordon calls them) 'stubborn racists'. Stubborn racists do not give up their racist beliefs despite having been presented with evidence and argument that would seem to require them to do so.

presented with evidence and argument that would seem to require them to do so.

Kwame Anthony Appiah, head of Harvard University's Committee on African Studies and a longtime commentator on matters of 'race', puts this stubbornness down to a "cognitive incapacity" – the stubborn racist's hanging on to a demonstrably false belief is the result of a flaw in his rational apparatus. What

is interesting about this 'cognitive incapacity' is that it appears as "systematically distorted rationality". Racists are often more than capable of forming rational beliefs based on evidence in other areas of their lives, yet these rational abilities are truncated specifically when it comes to evidence to do with race (Appiah, "Racisms," in David Theo Goldberg, ed, *Anatomy of Racism*, 1990).

Having identified the cognitive incapacity at the heart of

Treating racists as inherently deficient is a failure on our part to respect

much racism, and the poor prospects for leading someone out of their prejudice, Appiah goes on to claim: "[T]o the extent that their prejudices are really not subject to any kind of rational control, we may wonder whether it is right to treat such people as morally responsible for the acts their racial prejudice motivates, or morally reprehensible for holding the views to which their prejudice leads them. ... Racial prejudice ... may threaten an agent's autonomy, making it appropriate to treat or train rather than to reason with them."

The message here is that, having discovered that someone is racially prejudiced, we reach a point where reasoning can go no further. Appiah believes we can reason with the racist about how he ought to behave given that he is prejudiced.

We can demonstrate to him that he is prejudiced, that he suffers from a rational disability, and so needs to be careful about how he conducts himself. Much as we would advise someone prone to fainting not to drive a car, we would advise a racist not to get involved in, say, the drafting of policies with racial implications. However, the prospects of reasoning him out of his prejudice are dim. With respect to his beliefs about race, we are to treat him as not being a rational agent.

What are we to make of Appiah's "cognitive incapacity" claim? It can be tempting to view an opponent – especially one in debates as volatile as those concerning race – to just be a bit thick. There is a need to posit a fundamental difference between the two of you, because doing so allows the comfort of confidence in your belief ("Sure it has been

'Respecting the Racist'



If racists are 'rational',
minds can change

Many argue that racists are cognitively incapable of changing their racialistic views. But, argues philosopher **Tom Martin**, in most cases they can be talked out of their prejudice – and to not try to do so amounts to "denying others their full humanity"...

objected to, but only by stupid people") and no further need to engage with your opponent ("What, after all, would be the point?"). While no doubt many racists are quite stupid, it is certainly not the case that they all are. As we have seen, stubborn racists can often appear to be very intelligent in other areas of their lives.

I believe that there is great danger in attributing racism to cognitive incapacity. First, because such a diagnosis tends to

their humanity and their possibilities for change.

put an end to dialogue and, if we are to hope for a racially just society, we must hold open the possibility that our opponents can be won over. Treating racists as inherently deficient is a failure on our part to respect their humanity and their possibilities for change.

We should not be too quick to give up the possibility of reasoning someone out of his prejudice. We ought not, in fighting racism, to fall into the racist trap of denying others their full humanity.

Second, and more importantly, it doesn't strike me as an accurate portrayal of the situation. As we have seen, the purported 'incapacity' appears as a matter of 'systematically distorted rationality'.

Stubborn racists seem unable to take *certain sorts of evidence* into account with respect to *certain sorts of beliefs* – in this case, evidence that conflicts with racist beliefs. That it is so systematic tips us off to the fact that there is something more going on here than a fundamental 'cognitive incapacity'.

Ignorance is certainly involved here, but it is not 'ignorance' in the sense of 'absence of pertinent information'. Rather it is an active 'ignoring' – a specifically targeted refusal to accept or take into account pertinent information.

Demonstrably false beliefs held by an otherwise mentally healthy racist may well be a matter of irrationality. Appiah says as much. My disagreement with him regards the nature of this irrationality. For Appiah it is a 'cognitive incapacity'. While for him this incapacity can at times be seen as being to the political or economic advantage of the racist – a fact



instincts, of his responsibilities, of solitariness, of change, of society, and the world – of everything except the Jews. He is a coward who does not want to admit his cowardice to himself".

Thus racism is an approach to deep human concerns. It is by no means the only approach to these concerns, and it is

Racism is motivated and based, in the end, on choice – choices of certain goals and choices regarding the methods used in achieving those goals. Racists are and should be held morally accountable for their beliefs.

certainly not one that should be taken. Understanding racism in this way enables us to see it as having a rationale, and in so doing identify viable methods for combating it.

Racism is motivated and based, in the end, on choice – choices of certain goals and choices regarding the methods used in achieving those goals. Racists are and should be held morally accountable for their beliefs.

This requires us to continue to respect racists as rational agents. This does not mean that we respect their beliefs – racist beliefs are despicable – but it does mean that we respect racists' potential for change. We need to 'go that extra mile' in understanding the bases of racism and continuing the dialogue in light of this, rather than dismissing racists as irremediably sick.

THOMAS MARTIN is a lecturer in the Department of Philosophy, Rhodes University, Grahamstown, South Africa. He is currently working on a book on Sartrean understandings of racism and sexism, entitled *Oppression and the Human Condition* (to be published by Rowman and Littlefield).

which may be used in an attempt to dislodge the racist's prejudice – often it is not (and even if it is it may be of no use) and so we should treat the racist as cognitively disabled. In my view we should see racial prejudice as fundamentally motivated, and that the motivations run much deeper than Appiah allows.

What could motivate someone to adopt an irrational belief? Jean-Paul Sartre claimed that racists attain a particular kind of identity and world-view through their racism. By believing in racial essences (that certain capacities, character traits and moral worth can be predetermined by purported racial characteristics) – not just the essences of other races, but of one's own as well – the racist is able to see himself as the holder of a particular social role, particular rights and a particular destiny which enables him to, in a sense, relax. He can escape from the struggle, ambiguities and responsibilities inherent in dealing with real people in real situations, by instead dealing with himself and others on the level of clear-cut stereotypes (Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew*, 1948).

Sartre claims that such a move on the part of racists is really a matter of cowardice, motivated by a fear of humanity, one's own and that of others, and all that entails. Sartre wrote, in reference to French anti-Semitism, that the anti-Semite is "a man who is afraid. Not of the Jews, to be sure, but of himself, of his own consciousness, of his liberty, of his