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**How best to understand racism**

ASK THE PHILOSOPHER: Tim Scouthommassane | October 31, 2009

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**Do you have to be black, or a member of a minority ethnic group, to understand racism?**

WHAT US Supreme Court justice Potter Stewart famously said about obscenity may well be said of racism: "I know it when I see it." At one level, there is nothing hard at all to understand about racism. If we are to be judged, let it be done according to the content of our character and the quality of our deeds; leave our ethnic origin or skin colour out of it.

But, as with so many things, there can be a gap between theory and practice. For all that any reasonable person will endorse a value of non-discrimination, not everyone is arguably capable of appreciating the humiliation involved in racism.

According to some theorists of identity, there can be limits to one's social understanding. Where someone has not experienced the nastiness of racism first-hand, it can be easy to dismiss complaints about bigotry as claims for special treatment. To understand racism may require seeing things through a different pair of eyes or walking in someone else's shoes.

This is because we do not live our lives unencumbered by particular identities. For example, there are practical consequences of being born to, say, English rather than Egyptian parents. Although it can never determine our fate, our historical identity can have profound implications on how we experience the world.

There can be occasions, though, where there is a "misrecognition" of identity. Philosopher Charles Taylor explains it the following way.

Where society mirrors back to someone "a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves", that person can end up adopting this as the true reflection of their worth. This is the crux of racism: it can diminish a person's dignity and self-respect.

Such reasoning is perhaps behind some of the recent eye-catching experiments that have been conducted on race and identity. In his newly released film *Schwarz auf Weiss* (Black on White), German journalist Gunter Wallraff covers himself in dark brown make-up and dons an afro wig to "find out what it's like to be black in Germany".

In a more comical vein, John Safran recently did some "blackfacing", taking to Chicago's streets pretending to be black on ABC television's *John Safran's Race Relations*.

However, it seems vacuous to conclude that comprehending racism as a white person is possible only through such extreme efforts of impersonation. As some of the violence directed against Indian students in Australia reveals, racism is not confined to attempts by dominant majorities to impose their social power over minorities; it can often be a case of minority on minority.

Equally, there can be cases where majorities themselves are subjected to forms of prejudice by minorities. No group can claim a monopoly over being a victim.

The real test of whether one gets racism is not, then, whether one belongs to a minority group. Rather, it concerns whether one understands that not being treated with equal respect and decency can have effects other than mere trivial offence. Whether we are white, black, brown or yellow, we should all be able to recognise the harm of racism.

Readers are invited to suggest subjects for future pondering. The email address: [philosophercolumn@gmail.com](mailto:philosophercolumn@gmail.com)

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