The Making of a Discriminatory Ism

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Abstract

Purpose: The millennia long struggles of various oppressed groups have over time illuminated widespread social injustices, organically leading to the recognition of yet further injustices captured by the umbrella of discriminatory isms, such as racism, sexism, classism, ableism, anti-Semitism, ageism, heterosexism, and many others. In recent years, the debate has become increasingly fierce, polarized, and even physically violent.

Approach: One of the premises of the present work is that in part, the aforementioned unconstructive behaviours are a result of the different understandings of what constitutes an ism and the lack of a thoughtful consideration of this issue in the mainstream social debate as much as in the academic literature.

Findings: I present evidence for this, and critique the dominant lines of thought in this realm showing them all to fall short of both the fundamental philosophical as well practical desiderata in how isms *ought* to be understood.

Originality: I propose an alternative which does not suffer from the same weakness: one based on the denial of *equivalence of sentience.* I show how the adoption of this understanding leads to constructive ways of addressing isms effected injustice.

Keywords: social groups, sexual discrimination, sex and gender issues, racial discrimination, psychology, individual perception.

1 Introduction

Recent decades have seen an unprecedented increase of awareness of and interest in the concepts of equality and discrimination, reflecting and corroborating Singer's idea of 'expanding circles' of compassion (Singer, 1985). This trend is observed both in the academic published literature (Ocampo et al., 2003), as well as in everyday life and popular culture (De Choudhury et al., 2016). Indeed, hardly a day passes (if any does) without a well-known person of influence, be it a politician[1], a politician[2], a politician[3], a celebrity, an academic[4], or an entire institution (Hardeman et al., 2018) being accused of one discriminative (I use this qualifier to highlight that in the present article I am not talking about artistic movements, say) ism or another: sexism, antisemitism, ageism, racism, etc. While there is a general consensus that isms are undesirable — indeed, this is inherent in the nature of the specific concepts under the ism umbrella (noting that under the notion of isms I subsume their synonyms, such as homophobia as a synonym for heterosexism, as well as 'phobias' without corresponding ism equivalents, such as Russophobia) — such accusations nevertheless almost invariably end up polarizing the society as there is disagreement whether a specific statement does imply

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[1] "Most Americans think Trump's tweets are racist and un-American, poll shows", The Independent, 18 Jul 2019

[2] "Boris Johnson called a 'racist' as his past remarks are read out in Commons", Sky News, 21 June 2019

[3] "Anti-Semitism: May and Corbyn clash over anti-racism records", BBC News, 17 Jul 2019

[4] "Cambridge academic Noah Carl sacked over 'racist' study", The Times, 1 May 2019

an ism or not, or indeed whether a particular ism is a meaningful one at all. In part this disagreement is a consequence of the oft-made implicit assumption that the aforementioned concepts are self-explanatory, and that hence there has been little in terms of nuanced analysis or what constitutes an ism; what are the sufficient and what the necessary conditions? In the present work I challenge the current conceptions and propose a different view which is philosophically principled and better grounded, and which could facilitate a more dispassionate and productive debate.

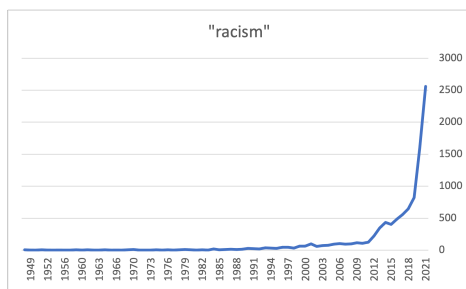## 2 Contemporary philosophical stances regarding isms

Considering that the focus of the present article is on the very meaning of the notion of isms, right at the start I would like to preface my argument by explaining what I am and what I am *not* trying to achieve herein. In particular, I am *not* arguing that the definition I put forward is *the correct one* and that those I challenge are in some sense *wrong*. Indeed, this would be a meaningless claim, a *contradictio in adjecto*, as the central question is that of defining a notion, and a definition in this context cannot be 'wrong'; it is what we agree it to be. Inverting our labels for what we usually refer to as 'apples' and 'oranges' would not result in any conflict *per se*. Rather, it would be a rather pointless exercise, for there would be no new insight or the potential of one, and nothing substantial would change. Hence, the question

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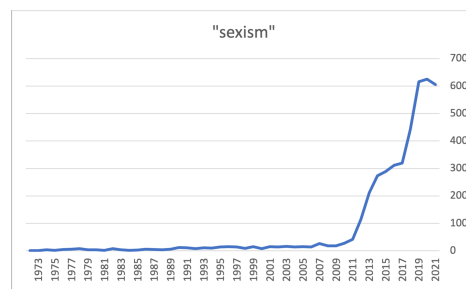at the crux of the debate is what definition would be *instrumentally most useful* rather than 'correct'.

Defining isms could be reasonably expected to be a straightforward task considering the swathe of research on sexism, ageism, ableism, racism, etc., particularly in recent years (see Figure 1). Yet, this seemingly simple task itself already presents a problem: much research on various isms does not even touch upon this issue, others are satisfied with a rather superficial treatment thereof, whereas the rest reveals a remarkable degree of diversity of how isms are understood (Calder-Dawe and Gavey, 2016; Doane, 2006; Williams, 1985). Moreover, the few authors that do pursue the challenge of understanding more precisely what constitutes an ism, do so in an unnecessary restrictive way by focusing on specific isms, such as Schmid (1996) whose attention is purely on racism. By failing to consider the broader principles that underlie all isms, analyses of this kind miss on observing certain important points which I highlight in the present article, and are often drawn towards superficially attractive but ultimately confounding factors.

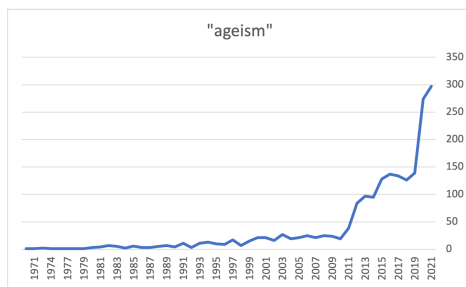## 2.1 Does a lack of knowledge make an ism?

Though his attention is specifically on racism, Schmid's categorization of different definitions thereof (Schmid, 1996), which, *mutatis mutandis*, can be readily extended to apply to all isms, provides a good framework for my criticisms of the existing lines of thought. Schmid (1996) firstly recognizes what he terms 'behavioural' definitions. Consider the following representative and
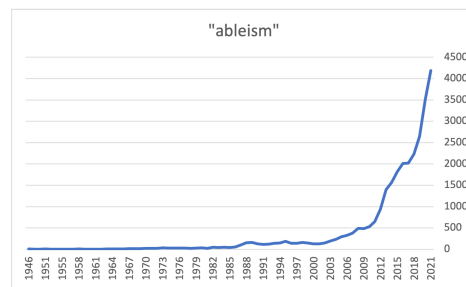
Figure 1: Number of publications retrieved by PubMed using search terms (a) 'racism', (b) 'sexism', (c) 'ageism', and (d) 'ableism'.

widely adopted one, in this case referring to sexism specifically:

"Sexism is judging people by their sex when sex doesn't matter.",

usually attributed to Caroline Bird who used it in her famous 1968 speech (Bird, 1968), though the definition can be traced further back (Shapiro, 1985) (equivalent definitions of other isms are also ubiquitous, e.g. of racism (Campbell, 2012) or ageism (Okun and Ayalon, 2022)). It can be expressed in more general terms as:

"<ATTRIBUTE>ism is judging people by their <ATTRIBUTE> when <ATTRIBUTE> doesn't matter."

where <ATTRIBUTE> is an amoral attribute that can be associated with a person (sex, age, race, ethnicity, etc.). Bird's definition is in its essence identical to another frequently encountered formulation attributed to Singer (1974) and which can be paraphrased as "the failure to give equal consideration, based on the fact of [OA: e.g.] race."

The popularity of the behavioural definition witnesses its broad appeal (Frye, 1983; Doane, 2006; Branco et al., 2019; Arandjelović, 2023a) and indeed, I concede that at first sight it is appealing. However, it does not take much to see that it suffers from many weaknesses. Schmid criticises it on two grounds. The first of these is that this kind of "prejudice" may have "an empirical basis", i.e. one "need not believe that this [OA: group difference] is due to their race alone... But so far as ... experience is concerned, race is a valid indicator, and he will continue to operate on the basis of this prejudice, until his

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experience proves different." (again, I am asking the reader to abstract the argument from racism Scmidt focuses on, to isms in general). Note right at the outset that Schmid is inconsistent: he terms the differential treatment of two groups as "prejudicial" despite recognizing its empirical basis which is by its very nature observation and data driven and thus inherently *not* prejudicial. This is not to say that an empirical observation of this kind is necessarily correct, far from it. Human handling of statistical information at the crux of inductive inference is notoriously flawed: it is affected by confounds (Grimes and Schulz, 2002), it is insufficiently observant of sample sizes (McShane et al., 2013), it is uncontrolled in terms of sampling (Silverman, 1992), etc. But apart from his *a priori* rejection of what could empirically prove to be a correct basis for discrimination (n.b. herein I use the term in a value neutral fashion), I am in agreement with Schmid that what the behaviour definition points to ought not be called racism. To strengthen this argument and set up ground for subsequent analysis, I will shortly offer an alternative, more rigorous argument which does not suffer from the flaws I just noted.

Schmid's second objection to the behavioural definition is that this kind of "prejudice" may be "based on a feature of human nature which may run so deep, and be so universal, that to call it 'racist' would be to weaken the moral weight of the word". This objection I reject strongly. Whether a particular trait which we can reflect on cognitively and interpret within a moral framework, is deeply ingrained and universal or not is entirely beside the point in this context (which is not to say that how we treat the asso-

ciated behaviours should not take the potentially neurophysiological innate predispositions into account; if this is the case and if so how our treatment of individuals exhibiting an ism may be affected is outside the scope of the present consideration) (Arandjelović, 2022). Recognizing the possibly deeply ingrained tendencies that we may have and which we may judge as morally unacceptable upon such reflection and as our ethical notions evolve, develop, and change as a consequence, is crucial in combating them. The awareness of such potential moral stumbling blocks allows us to override them, if not instinctively, then consciously, and yes, behaviourally. Indeed, Schmidt implicitly recognizes this weakness of his objection when he fails to level the same criticism against another group of definitions of (rac)ism, namely the 'cognitive' one, which he is broadly sympathetic towards (though in the end he rejects them too). I shall return to this shortly; for now, I wish to tackle the behavioural definition with more rigour than Schmid.

So, why *should* we reject the behavioural definition of isms? Consider Bird's quote and the use of the word 'judge'. It is not at all clear what it means to judge somebody in this context. For example, let us ask if one is right to 'judge' that a man is more likely to be able to lift a 100kg box off the floor than a woman. If a man's and a woman's full allometric and physiological characteristics are known then their sex indeed does not matter in this context (Kanehisa et al., 1994; Bishop et al., 1987). In statistical jargon, there is conditional independence between the 'successful lift' and

the 'person's sex':

$$Pr(\text{LIFT}|\text{SEX}, \text{ALLOMETRY}) = Pr(\text{LIFT}|\text{ALLOMETRY}) \qquad (1)$$

A woman 185cm tall, with a body mass of 90kg making a successful lift would be a better bet than a 155cm tall man with a body mass of 55kg. However, if the question is understood as whether a man or a woman, of whom we known nothing more than their sex, is more likely to complete the aforementioned task, it is a simple matter of statistics, physiology, and anatomy to see that the odds are on the man's side (Lindle et al., 1997; Kanehisa et al., 1994; Kent-Braun and Ng, 1999). The correct interpretation of this judgement is not that one's bet should be on the man because he is a man *per se*, but rather that in this case sex is statistically informative of other personal characteristics which *do* inherently affect the odds, i.e. one's sex allows us to predict the characteristics which effect relevant differentiation as regards the person's suitability for the task. Going back to Bird's definition of sexism, we see that although proximally, that is directly, sex 'does not matter', distally, that is indirectly, it *does* matter. *Exempla multiplicanda.*

This dispassionate statistical framing of the problem of selecting between two individuals, can be readily abstracted so that it can be applied more generally. I would like to tie this with a number of very influential recent studies, highly cited in the academic literature and widely featured in the mainstream media, which claim to offer indisputable evidence of widespread isms – sex-

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ism, racism, etc. In particular, I am referring to the works such as those of Bertrand and Mullainathan (2004), and Riach and Rich (2006) which follow the same methodological theme which can be broadly summarized as follows: potential employers are sent matched CVs of made-up applicants, identical in all aspects except for one salient piece of information, explicitly or implicitly suggesting a difference in sex (e.g. the person's name being 'John' vs 'Joan') or ethnicity (e.g. the person's name being 'Emily' vs 'Lakisha'). The claimed proverbial smoking gun evidence provided by these studies stems from the systematic differences in the outcomes of such matched applications. Indeed, the title of the article by Bertrand and Mullainathan (2004) makes this point directly and succinctly: "Are Emily and Greg more employable than Lakisha and Jamal? A field experiment on labor market discrimination".

In light of the previous discussion, the reader may already be able to see the flaw behind the conclusions drawn here: few, and indeed I would go as far as to say nobody with any degree of credibility, would disagree that neither sex nor ethnicity *per se* affect equally qualified candidates' ability to perform jobs of the kind examined in the aforementioned studies. However, this does not mean that these attributes do not allow for a statistical prediction of job performance. Let us dissect this with more formality, following the approach I introduced before. At first, consider the situation in which all that is known about a job applicant is, say, their sex. Somebody claiming that a differential

outcome of job applications in this situation is sexist, is claiming that:

$$Pr(\text{JOB\_PERFORMANCE}|\text{MALE}) =$$

$$Pr(\text{JOB\_PERFORMANCE}|\text{FEMALE}) \quad (2)$$

across the domain of JOB_PERFORMANCE. Considering the vast amount of evidence on the differences between male and female brains (Frederikse et al., 1999), innate language abilities (Schlaepfer et al., 1995), and, as noted previously, physical differences which are even more obvious, this would be a rather nonsensical claim. Existing societal influences which either create or amplify group differences, add yet further reasons to reject the claim formalized by Equation (2). This is so even if they are themselves unfair, as an employer is faced with a choice as it *is* rather than as it *ought to be* in some counterfactual, ideal reality. Lest my point be misunderstood, I will stress again that, as always, we are talking about *population level* differences, i.e. the claim is inherently about the *distributions* of characteristics over the relevant populations (Joel, 2011).

An at first sight seemingly promising challenge to this argument may be seen to lie in the observation that applicants for a specific job are not randomly drawn from the respective populations; rather, individuals self-select and invest their time in applying only when they believe that their competence level is competitive. However, rather than weakening the argument I laid out, this restriction only strengthens it: a focus on the high end of the

normal distribution can amplify the statistical difference and in no case makes it vanish entirely. I would like to illustrate this with a simple exercise. Consider two normal distributions, with equal means of 0.0, and variances of 4.0 and 9.0 (i.e. standard deviations of 2.0 and 3.0): $\mathcal{N}(0.0, 4.0)$ and $\mathcal{N}(0.0, 9.0)$. These can be understood as modelling two populations, with the latter exhibiting heavier tails (both in the positive and the negative directions, as often found in various comparisons of the abilities of the two sexes (Wai et al., 2010; Lakin, 2013)). The probability that a randomly drawn sample from the second distribution will be greater than a randomly drawn sample from the first distribution is 0.5. In other words, given no other information that group membership, there is no reason to prefer a candidate from one group over the other. Next, let us restrict the random draws to the parts of the distributions corresponding to above average sample values, which can be understood as modelling the selection process which admits only above average qualified candidates. Then, the probability that a randomly drawn sample from the second distribution will be greater than a randomly drawn sample from the first distribution becomes ≈ 0.626, increasing the preference odds ratio from 1:1 to 1.67:1. In other words, this preselection creates a rational basis for the preference for the group with the higher variance, all else being the same. This trend continues as the preselection process is made more stringent. If only samples from the parts of the distributions corresponding to sample values greater than 1.0 (respectively merely one half and one third the standard deviations above the average for the two groups),

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the probability is increased yet further, to ≈ 0.641, i.e. greater stringency of the preselection should *increase* rather than decrease the preference for the latter group's candidates (odds ratio 1:79:1).

One's performance at a certain prospective task, as something that happens in the future, is inherently not something that is directly measurable or knowable with absolutely certainty: it is something that must be inductively and probabilistically inferred. In the job selection process this is done by means of various measurable *proxy* variables, such as one's educational attainment, prior work experience, references, interview performance, etc. My analysis provides a more considered, theoretically rigorous basis for the observation made by Pinker (2005) that:

> "Decisions that have to made with finite time and resources, and which have high costs for certain kinds of errors, must use some trait as a basis for judging a person. And that necessarily judges the person according to a stereotype."

A possible attack on the argument I laid out, which does not deny the statistical indubitability of the underlying argument itself, is that individuals exhibiting an ism *start* from erroneous (*a priori*) models of ability, i.e. they may think that, say, groups' abilities in a certain realm are characterized by different distributions than they really are. This objection can be rejected on multiple grounds. Firstly, it raises the question of where this *a priori* bias comes from. It too had to be learnt. Hence, the objection does nothing to challenge the essence of my argument, but merely pushes the question one

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step back whereby the *a priori* bias becomes an *a posteriori* conclusion (as before, potentially erroneous) of data and experience driven conclusions. Secondly, the stated objection implicitly adopts an ethically dangerous stance for it assumes some higher arbiter imposing oracle like objective knowledge, taking individuals' cognitive as well as instrumental agency away from them. Who should this arbiter be (Gigerenzer, 2018)? Who has the right to decide this? Should individuals be required to keep up to date with the latest research on the differences between all possible groups (Cooper et al., 2021; Arandjelović, 2021) and be legally (to say nothing of socially) liable for transgressions from the prescribed 'truth', 'truth' which is fluid both by virtue of its empirical nature and sociopolitical influences which themselves suffer from biases (Gigerenzer, 2018)? What is to be done in cases where no research on the relevant group differences exist? Basic liberal values speak loudly in favour of rejecting this option and hence the definition of isms on the basis of an individual's knowledge, flawed as this knowledge may be.

The second definition of racism that Schmid (1996) discusses and which he terms the 'cognitive approach', namely:

> "unequal consideration, out of a belief in the inferiority of another race",

differs little in essence from the behavioural one I have just discussed. It too focuses on beliefs regarding the superiority of one group with respect to another in terms of *objective traits*, such as intelligence, morality, etc. (Schmid gives as an example Aristotle's belief in certain peoples being 'natural slaves',

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innately incapable of the normative human life of self-government and rational judgement), and the individual's beliefs' degree of coherence with the objective truth concerning these. Hence, *argumentum a pari*, this definition too can be rejected on the basis of essentially the same arguments I have laid out.

The last definition discussed by Schmid (1996), and indeed the one he endorses, is different in spirit, and I consider it next.

2.2 Does the motive make an ism?

The third and the last basis for a definition of racism (which, as hereto, we can readily generalize to isms as a whole) considered by Schmid (1996) focuses not on the external and the observable, but rather on the unobservable subjective: one's *motivation*. Schmid (1996) adopts the words of Carmichael and Hamilton (1967) according to whom racism is:

> "...the infliction of unequal consideration, motivated by the desire
> to dominate, based on race alone".

For my analysis of this definition I find it useful to start with an example given by Schmid (1996) and his reflections on it:

> "Even people who are not racists indulge in such actions [OA:
> which put down the other race] on occasion:
>
> > A white woman, Mrs Smith, has to brake hard for a
> > black driver who did not put on his turn signal. She

shouts out of her window at him while driving past,

'You damn nigger!'

In using that epithet, Mrs Smith is mentally trying to harm the other driver, calling him by the very name that most denigrates him – that implies his innate inferiority – that she believes is most insulting to his pride. As such it is a paradigmatic racist act: not the failure to share a good but the deliberate infliction of a harm (or at least the intent of that) and the intended imposition of racially-based subordination."

It is not difficult to see that Schmid (1996) overreaches in his conclusions here, specifically in the claim of "the intended imposition of racially-based subordination." All that one can conclude from the hypothetical example is given is as follows:

- Mrs Smith is angered by the behaviour of the driver.

- In an attempt to vent out her anger, Mrs Smith desires to punish the driver by causing him harm.

- Believing that the driver will be emotionally harmed by a racial slur, she calls him a nigger.

While not admirable, all of the actions by Mrs Smith are entirely rational and well-founded, and none imply her belief in any form of racial superiority. The insult chosen may not in the least be based on *her* beliefs about race,

but rather her judgement about the cognitive and psychological responses of the person she intends to harm. Interestingly, this flaw of his argument is implicitly recognized by Schmid (1996) who prefaces the example by stating that "Even people who are not racists indulge in such actions on occasion". If this is his *definition* of racism then how can somebody whose behaviour conforms to it not be racist? Clearly, this is inconsistent.

What the definition of Carmichael and Hamilton (1967) conceals is the fundamental competitiveness of living organisms (or rather, the genes they carry, which is what gives rise to reciprocal or altruistic behaviour on the level of individuals (Dawkins and Davis, 2017)). In humans, owing to their intelligence and their highly social nature, this competitiveness exhibits itself in most varied and complex ways, though in the end it comes down to sexual competition, that is the competition to propagate genes. To see why the definition of racism as "the desire to dominate, based on race alone" is little more than a superficially appealing red herring, consider the following example:

> Imagine a white person who grew up without exposure to humans (one may recall the case of Marina Chapman (Chapman and James, 2013)) and who thus has no understanding of the notion of race. Next, imagine telling that person that she can gain a competitive edge in the highly competitive modern society over certain individuals, individuals with darker skin (which she is told means that they are of a different 'race'), by making them

feel bad about themselves through the use of the word 'nigger'. While this may not be an admirable thing, hurting others, the person does so.

Clearly, the situation satisfies the conditions set out by Carmichael and Hamilton (1967), of domination based on race alone. Yet, it is difficult to justify how this person could be called racist; she has no beliefs about race whatsoever. Rather, this behaviour can be readily understood as a form of hypostatizing Nietzsche's 'will to power' ('Wille zur Macht'), no different from the demand for equality taken as a foundational principle (Köllen, 2020).

2.3   Summary

Fundamentally, the mistake that Schmid and many others commit in their analysis lies in the formulation of the central question thereof as 'what *is* racism?', treating (rac)ism as objective, intelligible, and existent in what could be described as virtually neo-Platonic sense, rather than as 'what *ought* to be understood as (rac)ism?', i.e. acknowledging that the notion is a human construct and that we are at liberty to delineate, define, and redefine it using reason and reflection, with certain value based desiderata in mind; this I addressed earlier in more detail in the present section.

3   So, what *is* an ism?

At this point the reader, hopefully following the discussion presented in the previous section persuaded of my argument, could be forgiven for thinking that if none of the behaviours described before constitute an ism, I must be denying the meaningfulness, that is the very existence, of the concept of an ism itself. I would like to reassure such a reader that this is not the case. Rather, I am suggesting that an ism should be constituted not with reference to one's beliefs regarding the observable, material reality but rather with a focus on extra-scientific, philosophical attitudes as I shall explain shortly.

Even if my formal argument of the previous section is put aside, that one's knowledge, that is the correctness of one's beliefs as regards the reality, presumed objective, is not a sound basis for the constitution of an ism should be relatively obvious. It is hardly an ambitious claim that no individual's beliefs (my own included, it goes without saying) regarding reality can be fully correct. Does that mean that we are all ists of some form or another? Let me take this a step further and give a poignant example. Leaving aside my own judgement of the issue, there is little doubt that there is a substantial body of evidence suggesting that the intelligence of Jews is higher than that of other peoples (Lynn and Kanazawa, 2008; Lynn, 2004; Lynn and Longley, 2006). Whether this be correct or not, if it is, does that mean that the swathe of individuals who presently argue that there is no difference in intelligence across different races, and who consider themselves not merely not racist

but rather anti-racist, are actually racist themselves, falsely lowering the intellectual virtue of the Jewish community? I would suggest that this would be a rather bizarre claim.

To leave the reader in no doubt, let me list a few examples, many of which may be found offensive or otherwise objectionable by many, before I return to the main thread of my argument. I am indeed arguing that none of the following claims should be seen as racist, sexist, etc., *per se*:

- Women are less intelligent than men.

- Black people are less intelligent than white people.

- Homosexuals are likely to be child predators too.

- Disabled people make for a miserable company.

- Working class people are lazy and unintelligent.

In comparative examples, the same of course holds true if the two groups in a relation are swapped one for another (i.e. 'Men are less intelligent than women.', etc.).

Rather than rooting isms on epistemological or cognitive grounds, the origins of which do not inherently have a moral nature (rather, their moral significance emerges distally, from the consequences of actions they effect), or indeed motivational ones, wherein discriminative behaviour has an instrumental role being a means to an end rather than an end in its own right, I

argue that the basis of isms should instead be sought in the denial of *equivalence of sentience.* As I have argued previously, adopting the tenets which were in their rough form already recognized by Epicureans (Annas, 1987) and refined my many others subsequently, such as by Existentialists (Aho, 2014) amongst others (Frey, 1987; Arandjelović, 2023b), but extending it far further so as to exclude the previously necessary mystical, dogmatic, and heteronomous elements, the basis of our ethical reasoning should rest on the experience of sentient beings, that is, their ability to experience pleasure on the one hand and suffering on the other. To concretize this in the context of the problem considered herein, I argue that we should define an ism as the denial of the value of the sentient experience, or indeed of the experience itself, of a particular sentient group. Note that I do not say "of a particular human group", for this would be a needless restriction; as it stands, the definition I propose readily encompasses isms which extend to sentiences other than human, e.g. animal, extraterrestrial, or, in principle, artificially created ones. In this, the foundational principles underlying my proposal share much with those passionately and persuasively advocated by Schopenhauer (2009) whose morality too focuses on sentient experience and sympathy, and thus 'loving-kindness'.

With reference to the desiderata underlying our choice of a suitable definition of an ism I discussed in Section 2, the fundamental differences between the definition I advocate and those which pervade the existing academic literature can start to be appreciated by considering the practical consequences

of their adoption. In contrast to cognitive and knowledge based definitions which in and of themselves are amoral in nature and which can be addressed by equally amoral means — through education, the correction of various sources of bias in one's experiences or reasoning, etc. — my sentience based definition puts in the spotlight a much more sinister and less tangible, as well as inherently ethically committal belief; while the motivation based definition is also inherently ethically committal, as explained in Section 2.2 the specific ism which emerges from it is incidental to it, as is, further to theoretical arguments, evidenced by a large body of empirical evidence on the co-occurrence of different isms (Sidanius, 1993).

An example will serve well to illustrate how isms as understood this way are exhibited, and an insightful one is to be found in sports, specifically regarding historical racist attitudes in boxing. Following the Industrial Revolution and consequent to the seismic social shifts that it brought, the Victorian Era witnessed a landmark increase in leisure time and the manner this time is utilized. Sport in particular became not only a popular pastime among the imperial nations' elites, but also an essential part of a gentleman's education (Mallea, 1975). Sport and athleticism were seen not merely as healthy pursuits, but also a reflection of civilization and innately superior character. As Cook (1927) put it in his book "Character and Sportsmanship":

> "...the most deep-seated instinct of the English **race**" are "the **instincts** of sportsmanship and fair-play." [OA: all emphasis mine]

Hence, the racist views at the time initially all but entirely prohibited the engagement of blacks in sport. As the emancipation movement strengthened, black athletes slowly started making inroads in a variety of sports and, bluntly, giving the white aristocracy a run for their money (Brill, 2007). Instead of relinquishing the bizarre superiority belief, the response of the white aristocracy was to find refuge in the few sports where white supremacy was maintained by virtue of unequal opportunity (such as polo, boxing, cricket, etc.), but which was rather rationalized as being a consequence of the nobility of these sports — nobility of character which, of course, was innately beyond the reach of the 'inferior blacks'. Black athletes were dismissed as infantile, submissive, prone to cowardice, and lacking in the high-mindedness of spirit. Many challenges of blacks to the white boxers were summarily rejected on these grounds (Obi, 2009). Yet, when these barriers too started falling (usually by virtue of ill-thought-through attempts at proving white superiority once and for all) and black athletes started dominating the previously unchallenged whites (Headon, 2009), racism *still* refused to retreat: the success of the blacks was now marginalized by the rationalization that is a result of blacks' savagery, physical brutality, animal like instincts, etc. For example, following Jack Johnson's (black) 1910 overwhelming victory over Jim Jeffries (white), the Los Angeles Daily Times editorial read:

> "The white man's mental supremacy is fully established, and for
> the present cannot be taken from him... His superiority does not
> rest on any huge bulk of muscle, but on brain development that

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has weighed worlds and charmed the most subtle secrets from the
heart of nature."

I would like to draw the reader's attention to a few important facets
brought to light by the example I just gave. Firstly, note that although
at a point in time the racism displayed may appear as conforming to be-
havioural definition of racism discussed by Schmid (1996), considering that
black athletes were largely dismissed on the grounds of objective traits (e.g.
cowardice, submissiveness, etc.), that the nature of the phenomenon is differ-
ent can be appreciated by the ever-shifting goalposts: as soon as evidence to
the contrary is provided, the reasons given for racial supremacy are changed.
This shows that these reasons are not the true reasons for the discriminatory
behaviour at display, but are rather given as a pretence of a rational basis
which is in fact left wanting. The true reasons lie in the intangible beliefs
that my definition of isms brings to the fore; the blacks are simply seen as
inherently undeserving of the joys of victory, of competition and excitement,
of opportunity, of recognition, of success, of reward; their sentient experience
is marginalized. The elusiveness of racism as understood in this way is also
clear, for it is not rooted in a belief which can be challenged by objective
facts, this being inherent in the nature of the said belief. Rather, it is a be-
lief that has to be fought by philosophical arguments, by means of coherent
and well-founded moral frameworks. Yet, as observed in previous work, with
the rise of scientific thinking and the abandonment of religiosity, serious phi-
losophy has been largely marginalized in the public discourse (Arandjelović,

2021).

4   Conclusions

Despite the millennia of thought, debate, and struggle concerning the various forms of unfair discrimination, as well as the undoubtable progress made, the debate of various isms — racism, sexism, classism, ableism, anti-Semitism, ageism, heterosexism, and seemingly innumerable others — is not only not abating, but has in recent years only intensified. Despite this, a careful consideration of what actually constitutes an ism is woefully lacking, even in the published academic literature. My aim with the present article was to remedy this. In particular, I started out by clarifying the challenge itself (often poorly done in the existing literature), namely that it is not to seek the 'correct' definition of isms, which I explained would be but a nonsensical goal, a *contradictio in adjecto*, but rather to formulate a definition which is most insightful and instrumentally most useful in addressing the consequent ethical wrongs. From here, I turned my critique to the contemporary ways isms are understood, and in particular the discussion of these provided by Schmid (1996), whose work is one of the few to give this topic its due attention. My analysis explicated the weaknesses of the accepted thought and the existing definitions of isms which when examined carefully rest upon an amoral basis and fail to capture that which is the truly troubling source of the aforementioned world views. Hence, I proposed an alternative which draws from the

sentientist tradition and which sees the truly troubling aspect of isms as the diminishment, or even an outright denial, of the value of the sentient experience of certain groups. I further discussed the practical consequences of the proposed understanding and show how its adoption helps direct efforts in combating isms effected social injustice. In closing, my work motivates and calls for greater efforts by academics to explain and promote philosophical thought and education as a practically invaluable cognitive tool in the modern world, thus overturning its image as an impractical entertainment for the self-selected intellectual classes.

Declarations

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